

Extracts from an Old Diary

JOHN YEOMAN'S VISIT IN 1774

By 'BEORCHAM'

SEVERAL PEOPLE have asked for more information about John Yeoman, the central figure of one of the living tableaux at St. Peter's Church. Everybody, it seems, liked Honest John, enjoying a tankard of ale as he chatted about the sights of Berkhamsted and the folk he met during a brief stay in 1774.

If anyone finds it extraordinary that a Somerset man who was here for only six days should suddenly emerge as a local celebrity, I can only reply that William the Conqueror's call in 1066 probably did not last six hours! John deserves a place in our history books because his diary is so refreshing, revealing and entertaining. No resident—not even William Cowper, whose references to his home town are so sadly nostalgic—gives us such intimate glimpses of everyday local life. John Yeoman was a

young extrovert who enjoyed going to taverns, took long walks to places of interest, and candidly admitted to being bored when there was nothing to do. In the diary his use and misuse of capital letters is as curious as his spelling, but what he has to say is well worth reading.

FARMER AND POTTER

John Yeoman's visit to Berkhamsted would be unknown but for Mr. Macleod Yearsley, F.R.C.S., who edited and provided an excellent introduction to *The Diary of the Visits of John Yeoman to London in the years 1774 and 1777*, published by Watts & Co. in 1934. The diarist, Mr. Yearsley tells us, lived at Wanstrow, Somerset, where his ancestors had occupied the manor house for several generations. He was born in

1748, was both farmer and potter, married three times, and died in 1824.

John was still a bachelor when, at the age of 28, he started a long holiday on March 17, 1774. He spent the first night at Frome (supper and bed cost 10*d.*), the second night at Newbury (supper and bed, 1*s.* 2*d.*), and stayed a few days at Brentford before continuing to London.

On Tuesday, April 19, John and his cousin Betsy left London for Berkhamsted, the journey by stage coach (with a halt for breakfast at Stanmore) taking 6½ hours. It is a pity we do not know the names of the uncle and aunt with whom they stayed for six days.

FUN AND GAMES

On Wednesday, John and his uncle 'took a walk about the Town. Nothing more Remarkable happend till Tea, when we went to a Tavern by the Market place Where was half a Score Men Who I beleive delight Much in Drinking, Smoking in Particular, they are a Merry Sort of People I do veryly beleive. home, played three Games of Wisk and went to Bed for that Night.'

Thursday morning was unremarkable, but after dinner the visitors went to Broadway Farm to see Peter the Wild Boy. 'He is about five foot five Inches high, Well made, has neither his Beard nor hair cut, neither Can he Speak, so Ill leave you to guest what a Figure he cuts. his Iffegy [effigy] is to be Seen now att ye Strand in Wax Work in London, and have been had up to London before the King.' (This is the

only reference I have seen to Peter's inclusion in a waxworks show, but it is known he was shaved and dressed in the livery of the King's servants when taken to London by Royal command.)

THE LACEMAKERS

John and Betsy returned to Berkhamsted for tea and then went to Northchurch and 'took a walk up out of the Turnpk up on a hill to Vew the country, it is a very Hilly country and also chalky and fire flintes, no Stone. the Chief Manufacktory this place abounds with is Lacemaking, which is Made by all sorts of People, Rich & Poor, old & young, they have five or six dozen of Bobbins to Make one Lace.'

Friday, April 22, and again 'nothing Remarkable happend the forenoon of this day only my cousin and me Took Differants Walks about the Town, one to a Mill where they Make Paper the Same as the Covers of this Book'—a thin, stiff, mottled paper. The mill was almost certainly at Northchurch, owned by a paper-maker named Sumner. Next comes this tantalising entry: 'to the Methodist meeting.' This is the earliest reference I have ever seen to Methodism in Berkhamsted. John goes on to say that 'the People are So Countryfied as in any Town is I know. they will Stare att you as iff they had never seen no one before. My Uncle and me did go Sometimes to the Tavern Where we was sure to meet with half a score Men. Some was playing Cards, but they are Extreem Sober as to Cursting or such Like. home to Sup, after Played at cards. Went to Bed.'

SHOCKING BAD!

Saturday, and another morning not worth mentioning. But John 'took a walk about half a mile North of the Town to J. Roppa Esquir.' This was to Berkhamsted Place, then occupied by John Roper. At his uncle's home 'we are So Very Dull that I have Nothing I can set in my Journall.' However, after dinner the diarist went for a walk and noted that it was 'agreecable pleasant Country, Gentlements Seats in a Bundance.' Then, after tea, a visit to the Castle: 'I do beleive It Stands on Six Acres, With a Double Moat Round it the Outer and I

BEORCHAM *Continued from page 7.*

believe is Near a Mile Round. the castle was all Built of Small Flints, but they are Put So Firm together with Morter that it is Imposable to get it apart.'

On Sunday, after dinner, 'My Aunt and Cousen and Me went to North Church. the Parson was the worst that ever I heard but Upton Noble [a village near John's home in Somerset]. the clark was Shocking bad Indeed, they Sing the Same Tunes as we do but Very Bad, there was all the Parts. After Sarvice was over I went up and Joined with Them. I believe we Sung for an Hour and all the Tunes as we had, Such as the 8th, 105th, 108th, 34th, 47th. my Singing the four Parts made them Stare as they thought It was Imposable for one Man to do. they Said they Should be glad to have me Live in That Part of the World for to Learn them'.

RUSTIC FASHIONS

John then gives 'Some Particulars Relating to the Country People who live in these Parts. I have mentioned before That the Produce of the Country is Mostly corn, so Ill Leave the Reader to gest ye complection. they wear a Shepards Wite coat with a Handkechiff Round their Neck, And their Shoes are Plated all Round with Iron. even the Farmers themselves Wears them and In Short, Tho I say it & dare not say it, That the . . .' But this page of the diary is torn and we do not know what John hesitated to say. Perhaps he himself tore off some uncomplimentary remark.

On Monday, April 25, John rose at 6 o'clock and 'called my Cousen Betsy up to get Ready by the Time the Coach did come. my Uncle was Very uneasy and would vain have had us Stay longer, whether it was in his Heart or not God knows.

John returned to London for a few days and had no complaints of mornings when nothing happened. One has the impression that the visit to Berkhamsted was like the curate's egg, good in parts. He left London for his manor house in Somerset on Friday, May 6, 1774. The diary includes a few pages devoted to another visit to London in 1777, but there is no evidence that John again came to Berkhamsted. Perhaps he was not sure whether he would have been welcomed by his uncle and aunt. It is more likely that he had no desire to endure another series of those boring, uneventful mornings.