

# THE BOWMEN OF BERKHAMSTED

By 'BEORCHAM'

BUT FOR HEAVY RAIN, more would have been heard about the Berkhamsted Bowmen's contribution to the Festival of Berkhamsted.

It was hoped to give lessons in archery on two successive evenings, followed by a demonstration shoot the following day, but after a successful 'first night', rain stopped play. The bowmen then decided to try again the following Sunday afternoon, and did so in fair weather, but time was too short to give much publicity to the new date.

Those who saw the archers, however, were impressed by their skill, and there was the added interest of knowing that the demonstration was taking place where the warriors of old practised at the butts—hence the name Butts Meadow. Until 1931, when the meadow was levelled, one could still locate the sites

of the butts and the places where the archers stood to shoot. If I had my way, Prince Edward Street would be renamed Archers' Way, for the ancient right of way from High Street to Butts Meadow was used by our warriors when 'the myghte of the realme of Englonde stode upon archeres.'

## NATIONAL SERVICE

No one knows when archery was first practised; eastern races were highly skilled in the use of the bow long before the Christian era, and Romans used it in sports of the arena as well as a weapon of war. But it was left to Englishmen to bring the art of bowmanship to perfection. Centuries ago, by royal decree, butts were set up in every parish, and men were compelled to practise every Sunday and holy day.

Absentees were liable to a fine of one halfpenny—not an inconsiderable coin when a week's wages were reckoned in pence, not pounds.

In the history of archery, Berkhamsted has an unusual claim to fame. When the east moat of the castle was being cleaned out some forty years ago, a yew bow-stave, about 4-ft. long with tapering sides, looking rather like the stave of a barrel was found at a depth of 2½-ft. It dates from the thirteenth century and may have been used in the siege of 1216. Stored at the British Museum, this very early bow has been the subject of learned articles. In 1967 the Berkhamsted Bowmen paid a visit to the museum to see the relic, which is not on public view.

## THE PRINCE'S ARCHERS

When the Black Prince left Berkhamsted Castle, his favourite home, to fight the French, he was accompanied by archers from the town that had grown up outside the castle walls. Berkhamsted men were among the victors of Crécy, Agincourt and Poitiers. Parishioners are familiar with the names of two of the Black Prince's warriors: John Raven, who is depicted as a knight in armour on one of the oldest brasses in St. Peter's Church, and Henry of Berkhamsted, the prince's marshal and constable of the castle, whose large tomb was formerly ascribed to the Torrington family.

In 1346, Robert le Parker, who was in charge of the deer park, was ordered

'to choose in those parts [i.e., Berkhamsted] six good companion-archers, the best he can find, and come with them with all speed to Dover to the prince's master, Sir Bartholomew de Burgherssh, by Sunday next at latest.' Similar orders were issued to the prince's parkers at Byfleet and Watlington.

#### LITTLE JOHN

Everybody has heard of Robin Hood's gallant companion, Little John. But did you know that we had an archer named Little John at Berkhamsted? He is mentioned in a document of 1356: 'Order to Master John de Brunham, the prince's clerk and chamberlain of Cestre [Chester], to pay by indenture to Little John of Berkhamsted, whom the prince is sending to Cheshire with the king's commission to carry bows, arrows and bowstrings to Plymouth by land, a reasonable sum for the said carriage, and 6d. a day for his wages.'

The Black Prince had ordered 1,000 bows, 2,000 sheaves of arrows and 400 gross bowstrings from the fletchers of Cheshire, who were to be paid from time to time such sums as would encourage them in their work. An early example of an incentive bonus to speed munitions of war!

The name of Little John (Petit Johan) also appears in earlier and later documents. In 1354, Robert de Eleford, the prince's yeoman and constable of the castle, was ordered to deliver three beeches (for fuel) to Christiana, wife of Little John, presumably at a time when her husband was absent in France. In 1360 came an order to deliver three beeches (for timber) to Little John, as a gift from the prince.

To another bowman, John de Paylyngton, remission of rent was granted 'for good and free service rendered in Gascony.'

#### RESPECTED WEAPON

It is pleasant to know that valiant archers were rewarded, but many a Berkhamsted bowman must have perished in France, and it may be assumed that our little town, with perhaps fewer than 500 inhabitants after the Black Death, sent more than its share of men and boys to the wars.

Long after primitive firearms came into use, the bow remained a respected weapon, and one writer was convinced that 'archeres with their volleys of arrows would wound, kill and hurt above an hundred men for every one so to be done by the shot.'

The need for continuing archery practice was often debated in Elizabethan days, and an endeavour to revive the art was made by Charles I. Indeed, at the outbreak of the Civil War an attempt was made to raise a regiment of archers for the service of the king. In 1638, Highlanders armed with bows, arrows and quivers were in the Covenanters' Army at Duns Law. As late as 1807, horse archers in Poland were used against Napoleon.

Berkhamsted men were still practising archery in 1716, for in that year the butts (and the tumbrel!) were repaired at the expense of the parish.

But by that time our bowmen had no warlike aims; they met in Butts Meadow for exercise and pleasure.

#### VICTORIAN ARCHERS

Locally, a great revival of interest in archery occurred in mid-Victorian times, when annual meetings were held in the castle grounds. It was always an 'exclusive' occasion, limited to the rich families of the district. In *Trifles and Travels* (1923), Arthur Keyser recalls boyhood memories of William Longman, the publisher, who lived at Ashlyns Hall. At the archery meetings he was always a conspicuous figure, attired in the green coat of the Toxophilite Society. Then there was the Rev. Harpur Crewe, 'a regular and notable attendant, who with legs extended and chest well expanded, inspired by a noble faith, gazed at the heavens and discharged his arrows towards them, to fall he knew not where, buoyed up by

the hope (occasionally but all too seldom realised) that on their flight they would be arrested by the target.'

Keyser continues: 'I can visualise the green leather guards which adorned the ladies' wrists, and the quivers of similar colour hanging from their waists. We boys found opportunity for making fair friends through searching for their arrows.'

Unfortunately, the records and trophies of the Victorian society, kept at Longman's offices in London, were destroyed in an air-raid.

The present society, the Berkhamsted Bowmen, was founded in 1950. Many early meetings were held in the Rectory Meadow, an arrow's flight from Butts Meadow. Lessons were given by Mrs. Marjorie Spence, wife of the Rev. Horace Spence. Today the bowmen meet at Lockhart's Field, near the Cow Roast.

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