

'A Short History of Berkhamsted'

by PERCY BIRTCHNELL

The work of Percy Birtchnell is already well known to readers of the 'Review.' His regular series of articles on the town's past is probably the most widely read regular item in these columns and on reading this book it is easy to see why.

Mr. Birtchnell has provided us with a book which catches the imagination. Tracing the growth of Berkhamsted from the earliest times he takes us through the various phases of our history in a way which is always interesting and sometimes exciting. He describes the important place which Berkhamsted came to hold in the national life when it was a leading centre of royal power in the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries.

The development of the castle led to the growth of the settlement with its market, large church and hospitals. By the standards of the time it was a prosperous place.

In 1216 the castle suffered its one and only siege and the first of the heroes of the book appears. The garrison of the castle was led by one Waleran. He 'made spirited sallies, seized chariots and provisions, carried off a banner, threw the enemy camp into confusion and disarmed the barons (the besiegers) as they sat at table.' Although the garrison was starved into surrender they had resisted gallantly and their lives were spared.

With the decline of castles in general and of Berkhamsted castle in particular the town fell on hard times and a period of decline set in. It was a period of minor scandals: in 1639 the burgesses were in disgrace for not returning to the Dacorum Hundred the sum of thirty pounds. This had been advanced for the construction of a jail, a building which was later sold at a profit by the council. They seem to have kept the profit.

James I gave the town £100 so that a workshop could be founded for the relief of the poor: instead the money was used to buy land the income of which was used to subsidise the rates. Charles I also gave £100 for the relief of the poor but something went wrong and only £82 was eventually recovered. Mr. Birtchnell has a journalist's 'long nose' for a story and can hold our interest despite the fact that many of the incidents occurred so long ago.

The seventeenth century was not entirely without its nobler side and Daniel Axtell and Anne Murray placed, on opposite sides, acted with courage

during the period of the civil war. Mr. Birtchnell records this period with a keen appreciation of the drama of events.

The story is brought up to date by way of the sad tale of the 100-year litigation surrounding the Berkhamsted school, the battles over whether the Common should be enclosed and the development of modern communications with all the relatively violent changes which that involved. The author's method is to describe the overall history of the town in general terms and then to pursue particular themes in detail. He discusses the history of particular institutions and buildings; and this is a good idea because it brings into the narrative the things which those now living in the town are familiar with.

There are interesting sections on interesting people who lived here and on literary associations.

Another feature of the book particularly appealed to me. 'The History of Berkhamsted' is rich in small details which gave the reader's imagination ample excuse to run riot. Who dropped his long bow in the moat and why? Come to that how did a full jar of gooseberries end up in the same place. What was the real cause of the fire which burned down the market hall in 1854. And how did a valuable coin come to be dropped in the street around 270. We

can speculate on these questions and many others to our heart's content.

It is often said against historians that they tell only the story of the fortunate classes of society. It is a virtue of the present book that it tells us about a cross section of society. The hard lot of the poor of Berkhamsted in former times is described in terms which leave no doubt that in this respect things have changed for the better.

Mr. Birtchnell is to be congratulated on condensing so much into 123 pages without losing too much interesting detail. For one pound the book, with hard covers, is extremely good value for money. It is well illustrated with reproductions of drawings and prints and contains a number of interesting photographs as well as several maps. There is a comprehensive bibliography for readers who wish to pursue the subject further.

It is surprising how many famous, notable, even heroic people this town has known, in say, the past 750 years. It seems a shame that our new third middle school should not have been given a name worthy of our history, to set along side Augustus Smith and Thomas Bourne (whose connection with the town was, as Mr. Birtchnell makes clear, rather tenuous). This book contains, on my reckoning, at least a dozen names worthy of selection and what is more the necessary evidence for the claim is provided as well.

SAVE THE CHILDREN

Berkhamsted Branch of The Save the Children Fund are holding a 'HARVEST HOP' at Potten End Village Hall on Friday, 6th October. Tickets, 75p each, include a harvest supper with a glass of cider. There will also be a bar, and dancing will be varied and include some square dances. Do come along and enjoy yourselves! Tickets are obtainable from Mrs. Newland, 4 South Park Gardens, or any member of the committee.

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