

6

# Gathering Winter Fuel

by 'BEORCHAM'

A SHORT TIME AGO I saw what was once an almost everyday sight, a chimney that was well and truly on fire. I doubt whether many young people of today ever see such a sight; some of the newer streets of the town are virtually smokeless zones, and even in the older streets it is the exception rather than the rule to see smoke issuing from a chimney-pot.

Within a generation or so we have lost many once-familiar sights. How long is it since you saw someone on a wooding expedition gathering winter fuel and taking it home in an old pram or truck? When did you last see a chimney sweep with the old type of round brush? How long is it since steam engines shunted coal trucks in the sidings (now a car park) at Berkhamsted station?

And how few coal merchants are there in a town which had *seven* in 1890?

## ROYAL GIFTS

Few local historians, I imagine, pay much attention to heating, but in Berkhamsted, which burnt so much furze that a special type of oven was developed for the purpose, it is a very interesting subject. No doubt it was wood, not furze, which fired the hypocaust heating system of the Roman building on Berkhamsted Common—a refined type of heating which was not to be surpassed until comparatively modern times. We have documentary evidence that the Black Prince made handsome gifts of whole beech trees for fuel as well as for building purposes. Charles I did his best to

keep the home fires burning by giving £100 to provide faggots at Christmas for the poor parishioners of Berkhamsted.

Until a century or so ago furze was used in cottage, inn and brewery. Inexpertly used, it blazed quickly and dangerously showering the room with sparks. But our forebears knew how to coax intense heat which kept the pot boiling and the parlour cosy. There was a nice rustic odour, too. Furze was especially useful for starting or reviving a log fire in days when newspapers were small and scarce. Hundreds of cottagers never handled so much as a scrap of paper from one year to another.

## CHIMNEY SWEEPS

Fireplaces were large, even in small cottages. That was because furze and wood were burned on ample hearthstones, resting on dog-irons, until coal was plentiful and cheap. And long after grates were installed for coal fires, some chimney sweeps used not brushes but furze bushes.

Why should the sweep patronise the town's many brushmakers when

a few furze bushes cost nothing more than a walk to and from the Common? His gnarled hands were injured to the spikes; nothing, he said, got into the crannies and swept a chimney so well as furze.

The sweep was perhaps the last man to find an everyday use for gorse, furze, or, as the old country people called it, fuzzen. Yet for generations the taking of furze and fern from Berkhamsted Common was one of the coveted rights of the commoners. The privilege was cited in the law-suit which followed the frustrated enclosure of the common in 1866, when witnesses related how they had cut furze for fuel and fern for various husbandry purposes.

#### UNWELCOME 'FOREIGNERS'

Excessive cutting sometimes created a shortage of fuel. To make matters worse, outsiders or 'foreigners' (foreigners) helped themselves to the Berkhamsted commoners' furze. Not content with a bush or two, they took cartloads. Even the implements used by furze-cutters were limited in size; in 1725 it was forbidden to use 'any other weapon or working tool than a one-handed bill with a stale helve or handle thereto affixed of the length of 12 inches and longer'. Offenders were liable to a fine of five shillings.

A year later exceptions were made in favour of persons under 14 and over 60 years of age, and disabled or infirm persons. They were permitted to use 'Hows or handbills or short bills but not long bills'.

In a growing town the cutting and selling of furze became a little industry. There was steady employment for carters, and it was repeatedly necessary to remind all concerned that the selling of furze was restricted to fellow commoners. The possibility of a fine, however, did not deter 'foreigners'. Among the intruders was a Kensworth brick-maker, who had the nerve to complain of high cartage costs! His men had to lurk in a public house until dark and then set off with illicit loads.

#### THE COMMON LAID BARE

It was a calamity when accidental fire of the common reduced supplies for the hearth. But the shortages were usually caused by selfishness.

The common became quite bare at the time of the buildings of Ashridge house; many acres of gorse and fern were denuded to fire the kiln which provided bricks for the new home of the Bridgewaters which, though stone-faced, contains many tens of thousands of locally-made bricks.

By the time Ashridge was built, however, coal was arriving by canal boat at reasonable prices, the carriage charge being ½d. per ton per mile. Even so, most of the cottagers continued to use wood and furze, as did bakers and others who, with their capacious ovens, regularly

cooked Sunday dinners for many of their neighbours.

This article started with a reference to chimney fires. Here is another. In 1913 Councillor H. B. Lane told the Berkhamsted Urban Council that hardly a day passed without there being a chimney fire in the town. Major James Parsons, Chairman of the Council, said he thought the public should be informed that there was a penalty not exceeding 10s. Councillor J. W. Gilbert, however, pointed out that most of the fires were due to the construction of the chimneys, not to the neglect of the householders.

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