

The Curate's elopement

by 'BEORCHAM'

THIRTEEN CHILDREN

As a local historian I am occasionally asked to call on people who wish to show me old books, papers and pictures. If I remember one visit with particular pleasure it is because I was shown a series of letters, dated 1822-3, from which it was possible to piece together a romantic story of the coaching days. It concerns a Berkhamsted curate who, as a youth of eighteen, eloped and married the girl with whom he was head over heels in love.

The invitation to inspect the letters came many years ago from a very elderly resident, a granddaughter of the curate. She was surprised and delighted that I already knew a little about the Rev. James Caufield Browne, such knowledge as I possessed having come from Henry Nash's *Reminiscences of Berkhamsted* and one or two other sources.

For instance, I knew that Browne was keenly interested in the revival of Berkhamsted School and lost a great deal of money by building three houses in Castle Street which he mistakenly thought would be used as boarding houses or as homes for the masters. But unlike most curates, past and present, Browne was a fairly rich man, able to buy a large house—Boxwell—and fill it with his wife, nine daughters and four sons. And no doubt he obtained a good price for Boxwell House when, on Boxing Day, 1843, he sold it to John Towell, who, sixteen months later, was to be hanged at Aylesbury as a murderer.

According to Nash, Browne was 'open, candid and genial, ready at all times to meet friend or foe with a smile.' It is difficult to picture a smile when this strict Sabbatarian, on the way to church on Sunday

mornings, knocked cabbages off the window-sills of cottagers who tried to earn a few coppers by selling their own produce. But Browne knew how to earn the respect of the tough, rough labourers who built the railway. When it was known that he would conduct the funeral of a man who had been killed in an accident, the whole labour force, between 300 and 400 strong, donned clean white slops and attended the service.

'SO YOUNG A MAN'

Now for the story which we were able to piece together from the letters. The first, dated April 30, 1822, is addressed to James Browne by Isabella's father:

'Sir,—Had I not received previous intimation on the subject of your letter of the 26th inst., it would certainly have much surprised me, and I cannot refrain from expressing my disapprobation that a correspondence should have been so clandestinely carried on with my daughter. . . . Your age appears to be about 18—much too young to think of making an immediate matrimonial connection. I can therefore only say that for the present it is inconsistent with propriety for my daughter to carry on

any correspondence with so young a man. Should the same sentiments be in force at the period when you are nearly of age, I may consider the view you propose in a very different light, but for the present even yourself must see how objectionable any correspondence must be between my daughter and yourself. . . . I remain, Sir, Your very humble Servt., John M.'

The second letter, dated May 8, 1822, though not quite so severe, reiterated 'the impropriety' of Isabella's corresponding with 'so young a man.'

FAMILY RIFT

There are no details of the subsequent elopement and marriage, which was soon condoned by Isabella's father but not by her mother, who refused to have anything to do with such a headstrong daughter. Not that there was any question of Isabella marrying into an 'inferior' family. The bridegroom was the son of the Hon. Howe Browne and grandson of Lord Kilmaine, and many a mother would have swooned with delight at the prospect of a connection with the peerage.

Happily, Isabella's father soon realised that his daughter had married a very worthy young man, and gave him £100 a year, the equivalent of perhaps £1,000 at the present time. Writing to 'My dear Isabella' shortly before Christmas, 1822, her father said he hoped she would always find James a kind and affectionate husband and that his attachment would be ensured by 'your prudent and good conduct'.

A HEALTHY BRAT

In the spring of 1823, the first child was expected, and in a letter to 'My dear James' (a pleasant change from 'Sir'), his father-in-law said that he was grieved that every attempt at reconciliation had failed: 'her Mother remains inflexible and professes that she will not be moved with maternal feelings even at a moment when nature most awakens them.' A few weeks later came another letter stating that Isabella's father was happy to hear that James was pursuing his 'original plan of a Cambridge admission with a view to the Church.'

It seems that 'brat' was a term of endearment, for a letter dated May 21, 1823, addressed to 'My dear James,' states: 'I hope that dear Isabella is in good health and . . . will in due time happily contribute to realise your anxious anticipation

of becoming the parent of a healthy brat—a consideration which without doubt must create in your mind pleasing and serious reflections.'

NO SPARE ROOM!

The last of the seven letters, dated July 16, 1823, and addressed to 'My dear Isabella,' contains some useful hints:

'You are quite right not to furnish more than present means will afford, and you will excuse my saying I think it is a pity for you to have a spare bed, as it will be an inducement to you both occasionally to invite a friend, and that is what

your present finances will not well admit; besides, if you have not a room prepared of course none of your friends can be displeased or disappointed. When I or your brothers come to see you, we do not mind sleeping at an inn.'

We leave James and Isabella with the first of their thirteen children of Cambridge, knowing that after the curacy at Berkhamsted the path to the rectory at Compton Martin, Somerset, would be widened for the nine daughters to walk abreast. Finally, the family moved to Dudley, Worcs., where James was vicar for thirty years.

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