

Watching for Wrongdoers

by 'BEORCHAM'

Such is—or was the town's love of tradition that until 1956 one could still belong to 'The Great Berkhamsted and Northchurch Association for the security of the persons and property of the subscribers of the aforesaid parishes, or elsewhere, within the distance of ten miles therefrom'.

This association with a very long name lasted a very long time. It was formed in 1794 and had more or less outlived its usefulness by the time we had a well-organised police force. Nevertheless, for another century 'the town's oldest society', as it proudly called itself, had a very strong following. As late as 1925 it could still claim 120 members, though they had little to do beyond electing officers and attending an annual dinner, a ticket for which cost considerably

more than the shilling that was charged for the first dinner in 1795.

A LAWLESS AGE

Soon after the association was wound up I wrote a short article for the *Review*, based on the minute book for the years 1794-1836. This book is now in the safe keeping of the local History Society, and I have just spent an entertaining evening gleaning additional information from its pages.

The association came into being at a time of much poverty and lawlessness. Parishes still appointed their own constables, and in the absence of good communications it was less easy to trace offenders than it is today.

'Find the wrongdoer and prosecute him!' could have been the

association's motto. Any member who had been robbed, defrauded or injured and did not use his utmost endeavours to apprehend and prosecute the offender, or stopped a prosecution after it had been started, was struck off the membership roll. The association undertook, within limits, the cost of advertising, apprehending and prosecuting persons who had committed offences against members.

REWARDS TO INFORMERS

Many people were afraid or reluctant to give evidence, and to this end an elaborate schedule of rewards was drawn up. The possibility of receiving up to five guineas (later increased to £10) for giving information which would lead to the prosecution and conviction of anyone who had robbed or injured a member of the association must have loosened tongues which otherwise would have remained silent. Members, however, did not qualify for these rewards.

References in the schedule to farm buildings, crops, livestock, implements, etc., are reminders

of what was then our major industry, agriculture. Many farmers joined the association, some living in Hemel Hempstead, Wigginton, Aldbury, Bennetts End, Kings Langley and Redbourn, as well as in Berkhamsted and Northchurch. The first year's subscription was 10s., followed by an annual subscription of 5s. It was soon found necessary to increase these rates.

Five guineas was the reward to anyone who gave information that would lead to the prosecution and conviction of anyone who committed burglary or highway or footpad robbery, stole or maimed farm animals, or wilfully set fire to a house, stable, barn, or stacks of corn, hay, straw, wood or furze.

MALICIOUS DAMAGE

In such cases as breaking and entering any outhouse or barn with intent to steal, buying or receiving goods or effects known to have been stolen, cutting down or wantonly damaging trees, robbing or damaging gardens, orchards or fish-ponds, stealing or maliciously killing poultry or dogs, or stealing grain from a barn, the reward was 2 guineas.

Stealing growing corn, grass or hay, stealing or breaking hedges, hurdles or firewood, or stealing or damaging wagons, carts, ploughs and other implements, were offences which gave the informer a reward of 1 guinea.

The smallest reward was 10s. 6d., the schedule of offences in this category including the stealing of turnips, green peas or other vegetables from the fields, cutting the manes or tails or otherwise disfiguring farm animals, or wilfully destroying, maiming or damaging the property of a subscriber.

A SHE ASS ON THE COMMON

In 1802, the Rev. Dr. Bingham, of Great Gaddesden, reported the loss of 'a she ass of the Spanish kind', which he had grazed on Berkhamsted Common. The association ordered handbills to be printed and distributed, but as the articles of association contained no specific reference to an ass it was decided to fix the reward at 10s. 6d.

Dr. Bingham was again in trouble in 1804; some person or persons had spitefully and maliciously cut with a handsaw nearly sixty fir, holly and other trees in his pleasure grounds, 'some quite down, others halfway through, whereby all were damaged and mostly destroyed'.

Dr. Bingham's losses were light compared with those of Mrs. Gordon, whose extensive property was liable to numerous depredations, 'so that the consequent expense of prosecuting by this association

will very probably exceed the amount of the funds appropriate for the purpose'. Mrs. Gordon was considered such a bad risk that she was requested to withdraw from the association.

This lady lived at the Pilkington Manor House, with a large estate east of Castle Street, stretching from the High Street to beyond the railway. As her husband is said to have made a fortune in Jamaica at the height of the black slave traffic, it is difficult to find much sympathy for her!



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