

Berkhamsted in the Nineties

by 'BEORCHAM'

I have just discovered that Berkhamsted had a strike, complete with militants, in 1894, and that in the following year a local firm was in trouble for over-estimating the town's enthusiasm for chewing gum. Two oddly assorted items of outdated news, I agree, but one is bound to find contrasts in a book of press cuttings of the period.

The book, consisting wholly of reports of local court cases between 1893 and 1897, was compiled by Thomas Penny, a solicitor and first clerk to the Urban District Council. From this unusual source of information, notable not so much for the occasional sensation as for the human interest, I have added to my knowledge of Berkhamsted in the hopsy, beery and supposedly gay 'nineties.

First, the strike. It happened in

George Street early one April morning. A large number of men were digging two 20-ft. deep pits with a view to tunnelling between them as part of a much-needed sewerage scheme.

DASH FOR SAFETY

For disobeying orders, the contractor dismissed one or two men, and 28 of their colleagues took umbrage and 'threw up their work'. They were told to come back for their pay at 10.30 a.m., but nothing was heard of them until 2.15 p.m., when William Noble, the timekeeper, saw over twenty strikers approaching the site. Men still at work were threatened, and one of the strikers hurled heavy battens at workers in the pit. Stones were also thrown, and Noble, the timekeeper, had to

rush to a cottage for protection.

A few days later, in the aptly-named Sessions Hall, three strikers were charged with assaulting, beating and threatening Noble. They were sentenced to 21 days' imprisonment with hard labour, 'a lenient view being taken as they had already been four days in custody.'

CHEWING GUM

Now for a sweeter story. A local firm bought chewing gum to the value of £3 15s., but sales were small and the makers agreed to take back half of the consignment. However, there was a long delay in returning the gum and paying for the portion that was kept, so the local firm was sued at Chesham County Court. A local paper commented: 'That toothsome article known as chewing gum has not got a very ready sale in Berkhamsted. Whether the youth of Berkhamsted are above such vulgar delights or unaware that there is such a doubtful blessing in their midst is an open question.'

A strong hint to the local authority that they should provide a

proper bathing place was made by the chairman of the Bench when seven Berkhamsted lads were summoned for 'indecent bathing in the canal.' Mr. Penny, for the defence, said the text of the summons was too severe a charge. They were respectable working lads who went to swim where from time immemorial Berkhamsted boys had bathed. The magistrates said they did not wish to convict for such an offence, but the practice had to stop. Each defendant paid 1s. costs.

FURIOUS DRIVING

Then, as now, a close watch was kept on shops. There were numerous cases of milk adulteration, and a Northchurch grocer was prosecuted for selling margarine not clearly labelled with letters 1½ in. deep. Now and again a customer was in trouble. For instance, the wife of a travelling hawker bought a pennyworth of rice pudding and a pennyworth of cake, 'uttering a counterfeit coin, to wit one shilling.' The police searched her husband's van and found 24 coins, all good ones, so the case was dismissed, the magistrate saying that he did not believe the woman knew the coin was bad.

A Berkhamsted shopkeeper was summoned for obstructing the highway with his horse and cart; another man was in trouble for driving a horse and trap 'furiously' at over twelve miles an hour. Harrowing tales were told in the courts of horses that were starved and cruelly treated; a close watch was kept on overladen carts. There was cruelty to humans, too; wives were beaten, neighbours quarrelled, boatmen were disorderly, drunkenness was rife, and parents kept their children from school. There were also cases of embezzlement; a local grocer's clerk, having to keep a young family on 25s. a week, took 24s. out of the till and was sent to gaol for two months.

STIFF PENALTIES

Twenty years earlier the grocer's clerk would probably have had a much stiffer sentence. Turning to early copies of the *Berkhamsted Times* (started in 1875), I have seen a report of a Tring girl who

stole a piece of suet while a shop assistant fetched a farthingworth of salt for her from the cellar. She spent ten days in St. Albans gaol and was then sent to a reformatory for five years.

A 14-year-old boy stole money from his employer, a publican, who asked the magistrate to deal leniently with 'an otherwise good lad'. The penalty to fit the crime was 27 days' hard labour, followed by three years in a reformatory.

A printer stole 6s. worth of stamps from William Cooper, the chemical manufacturer, and was

sentenced to six months' hard labour. For stealing a shirt and a white slop, an 18-year-old labourer was sentenced to 18 months' 'hard', the magistrate remarking that he had some doubt whether he should not have sentenced him to penal servitude.

COUNTY LIBRARY

The County Library in Kings Road is normally open daily from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. except on Saturday (9.30 a.m. to 5 p.m.) and Wednesday, when the library is closed.



Big or small

we help them all

No matter how large or how little the amount you wish to save or invest, you'll find we can offer a great deal in good rates of interest and security with our savings or investment schemes. We have been established since 1884 — our experience is your profit.

HEMEL HEMPSTEAD
BUILDING SOCIETY
IS HERE TO HELP YOU PROSPER

Authorised for trustee investment
 Member of the Building Societies Association
 Assets exceeding £7,000,000
 43 Marlowes, Hemel Hempstead, Tel: 56443/54156
 Manager and Secretary C. R. Hunt F.B.S.

Local Agent: Western Insurance and Mortgage Services,
 29/33 Lower Kings Road, Berkhamsted