

Fined for not going to Church

by 'BEORCHAM'

To provide a sequel to last month's article, which was based on local police court cases of Victorian vintage, I have been dipping into much earlier sources of information.

The offences (most of them rather petty) and the penalties (not so petty) interest me less than the incidental information that may be gleaned about occupations, wages, prices, customs and family names. Much may be learnt about living conditions, and there are constant reminders that whatever else may change, human nature is much the same from one generation to another. With a few bare facts and a little imagination it is possible to conjure up lively pictures of local scenes and events of long, long ago.

Take, for example, the prosecution of washerwomen for polluting the water of St. John's Well in 1400. At least we know that in a very unhygienic age some if not all of the townspeople had clean clothes. Perhaps the stream which ran down St. John's Well Lane was dammed to make a communal washing place such as one still sees abroad. No doubt the washerwomen sang, quarrelled, discussed the latest scandal at the castle and generally had a livelier time than those who sit and wait in laundrettes.

I fancy that Jane Heyeward was a washerwoman, for in 1436 she was accused of stealing a tub worth 1½d. and 'greysepe' (soap) of the same value. She also stole a mortar (2d.), a hen (2d.) and a pair of tongs (2d.). The penalty did

not fit the total cost of the stolen articles, for Joan was fined 6d.

A BROKEN LEG

The medical service was somewhat below present day standards. According to a court roll for 1447, John Whithed alleged that Thomas Lecke, a doctor, had failed to fulfil his promise to mend Whithed's broken leg before a certain date. The case was settled out of court.

Moving on to later times, there are bountiful sources of information in the Hertfordshire County Council's series of books containing notes and extracts from sessions rolls, some dating back to the reign of Elizabeth I.

Repeatedly one comes across prosecutions for not going to church. The offenders, of course, were Nonconformists. The Sabbath was strictly observed—licensed victuallers and alchouse keepers especially were closely watched—and it was unlawful to work on a fast day. Local people appeared before the justices for such offences as carting on holy days or 'misspending the evening prayer by

servicing of hogges.' In 1680, Jeremy Potten, spoonmaker, with several others, were in trouble for coursing and killing a hare with two greyhounds in Castle Field, during the time of divine service.

DEMOLITION ORDER

Now that building sites are scarce, it is hard to believe that it was illegal to build a house without assigning to it four acres of land. For ignoring this rule, William Trott, of Berkhamsted, was ordered in 1674 to pull down his newly-built cottage. If there was no planning permission in the modern sense, one nevertheless was expected to build a tolerably good house, not a poor habitation such as a certain Mr. Mayo put up on waste manorial land for James Rea, his wife and children. It was 'not fit for any Christian to inhabit,' having but one room and being 'upheld by small sticks thrust into the ground and not any timber about it,' and 'so low that the cattle may take the thatch from it.'

Michael Handcock, who was granted a licence in 1656 'to keep a tavern at the sign of the Swan in the borough of Berkhamsted,' must have been favourably disposed towards the Commonwealth, for applicants were required to be 'of honest life' and 'well affected to the present Government.' Duly licensed, he escaped the troubles which befell Elizabeth Gosson, a Northchurch spinster, who in 1630 was brought before the justices for keeping an alchouse without a licence. Similar offences were committed by Richard Twisdell and Anne Stone, widow, in 1666, and by Rebecca Clarke in 1669.

UNLICENSED TRADERS

A 'common berebrewer' with the uncommon name of Grumball Pemmerton was prosecuted in 1606 for selling 'bere' by retail without a licence. Not that licences were required only by people who sold strong drink. In 1616, Edward Halsey, of Great Gaddesden, was convicted for keeping a private school and teaching without a licence from the Bishop of Lincoln. He 'had not taken the oath of allegiance and does not attend any place of common prayer.' Thomas Plane, of Berkhamsted,

was summoned in 1683 for selling corn without a licence, and several tradesmen were in trouble for not having served apprenticeships.

A number of Berkhamstedians were prosecuted for obstructing highways and byways. In 1669, ten men were summoned for putting timber on the highway and allowing it to remain there to the detriment of the inhabitants—an interesting reminder of the strength of our ancient woodware trade. In the same year (1669) a more unsavoury nuisance was caused by

Thomas Grover, who put a dung-hill on the highway. Then, in 1678, Thomas Winters 'annoyed the King's way by the church with straw . . . soe it is not passable for carts'.

To end on a kindly note, applications were made for pensions from the county's maimed soldiers fund. John Bird, badly wounded while fighting for Charles I in the Civil War, could not earn a living in his old age, and so the rector and others successfully petitioned the justices for a pension.



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