

# Our historic Court House

by 'BEORCHAM'

Berkhamsted has lost so many old buildings that there is bound to be much support for the restoration of the Court House.

That it is not in the best of health is not surprising. For more than 400 years it has given useful service to parish, manor and town. At a pinch it accommodates sixty or seventy people, and now it is proposed to make an extension on the north side and provide a small upper room for committee meetings.

If anyone thinks that an ancient building should never be altered, I can only say that many changes have been made to the Court House in the past. For instance, it was the removal of the loft which enables us to see the original open timber roof, part of which will still be exposed after alterations. Ex-

ternally, the projecting upper storey is the most attractive feature, but many people are equally fond of the porch, which certainly looks ancient. In fact, the porch is relatively modern, as are the windows and the brick and flint facing of the ground storey.

## EARLY DISPUTES

Sometimes known as the Church House or Town Hall, the Court House almost certainly is of sixteenth century origin, but no one can give it a definite date. From the name it is tempting to think that it was built for meetings of the manorial courts when they could no longer be held at the Castle, but we are probably on safer ground if we support the inhabitants' claim that they built the Court House for their own use.

Another claim, that it was built on the waste of the manor, led to disputes as to its ownership between the churchwardens and the lord of the manor. Berkhamsted has been having hall troubles for a very long time!

That the site is no longer a prominent one is not the fault of the Tudor builders. Originally the Court House faced the wide market place, and it was the conversion of shambles and stalls into shops and houses which consigned the Court House and its neighbours to the shadows of Back Lane. Surprisingly, it seems that no one objected to the encroachment.

## MANORIAL COURTS

Dodderidge's survey of the manor (1607) states that the manorial courts 'for the most part have been and yet are usually kept within the Church howse' on Whit Tuesday and the Tuesday after Michaelmas. The courts continued to meet, usually in the Court House, until the 1880s, finally having little business to transact beyond the appointment of officers,

whose duties were nil. I remember Mr. G. E. Wingfield saying that he was elected ale-taster in 1885 and that it was probably the last meeting, as he was told it was a life appointment, with no pay and no duties either.

Returning to Dodderidge's survey, we learn that the churchwardens, on behalf of the inhabitants and parish, held by life tenure 'one Messuage called the Courte Howse, on the Northside of Barkhamstede', paying a quit rent of one shilling a year. A later survey by Norden and Salter (1616) states that the churchwardens, who continued to pay 1s. per annum, had time out of memory received the profits of the Court House and Church House for the relief of the poor. While always retaining the loft for their own use, the churchwardens leased the ground floor from time to time.

#### JOHN SAYER

The parish seethed with indignation when John Sayer, donor of the almshouses, was lord of the manor. The rector, churchwardens and others sent a petition to Charles II, complaining that Sayer had unjustly retained certain revenues which should have been used for the maintenance of the church, school and poor. The Court of Exchequer decided in favour of Sayer, to whom a new lease was given in 1680, a special grant being made of the Court House at a peppercorn rent, 'the better to preserve the King's right and title thereto, which the lessee is to defend at his own cost.'

In 1761 the manor was leased to the third Duke of Bridgewater, whose successors at Ashridge were benevolent supporters of elementary schools and consented to the use of the Court House for the National (Church of England) School, opened in 1838. A few years later an evening school for men and women was started in the Court House. It is interesting to find that when Lord Brownlow's trustees bought the manor and honour of Berkhamsted for £43,682 in 1863, the Court House (and the market rights) were singled out for special mention.

For over 60 years the Court House was a schoolroom. Then,

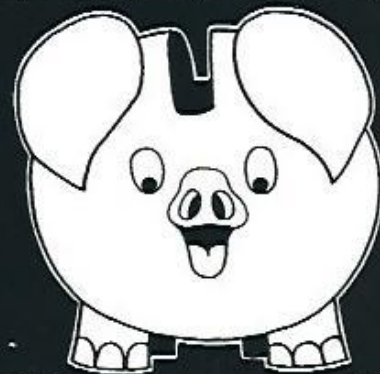
from the early years of this century, it was again used for many purposes—sales of work, lectures, and goodness knows how many grave and gay parochial functions. In 1914 it became an orderly room, placed at the disposal of the Inns of Court O.T.C. by the rector, the Rev. R. A. de Vere Hart-Davies.

Despite its great age the Court House was always a great improvement on the adjoining Victorian classrooms which were pulled down when St. Peter's Hall was built. And now, with the

promise of a new lease of life and extra seating capacity, the Court House may, in due course, come to the aid of hon. secretaries who are at their wit's end to find suitable, central accommodation for meetings.

#### THE REVIEW

Please let the Editor have your articles and your ideas for the sort of items you would like to see in your magazine. Copy for the next issue should reach the Editor by 7 August 1973.



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