

Early days of the Urban Council

by 'BEORCHAM'

In 1970, seven articles were devoted to the various forms of local government from Saxon times until the end of the nineteenth century. And now it is time to continue the story, for in five months' time the Urban District Council will be replaced by a not-quite-so-local authority, the Dacorum Council.

This will be the most important change since the urban district was formed in April, 1898. Previously the town was governed by the Vestry (in later years known as the parish council) and by the Rural District Council, which, prior to 1894, was known as the Rural Sanitary Authority.

What was Berkhamsted like when it became 'urban' 75 years ago? Despite much Victorian development it was still a very compact town. In the west it ended

abruptly at Cross Oak Road; there were no houses on the west side of that road other than two flint houses high up the hill, though the first six houses had been built in Shrublands Road. Gossoms End was sometimes looked upon as a hamlet between Berkhamsted and Northchurch, and for some years houses on the south side of the highway were 'urban' while those on the opposite side, being in Northchurch parish, were 'rural'. Similarly, George Street and Ellesmere Road, being in the detached portion of Northchurch parish, were excluded from the urban district until 1909.

Park View Road, North Road, Shrublands Avenue, Queens Road and Greenway, all of which were built before the First World War, did not exist in 1898. By that year,

however, the first few houses had been built in Clarence Road, Boxwell Road and Montague Road. Doctors Commons Road and Graemesdyke Road had been named but there was only one house in either road. Lower King's Road was very narrow; on the way to the station one passed A. C. Meck's stables, the Salvation Army barracks and the lock-keeper's house. The stationmaster's house came later.

THE FIRST ELECTION

The population of the 1,035 urban acres in 1898 was about 5,000. Relatively few people had the vote, and when the first election was held on April 14th (sixteen candidates for twelve seats), 169 votes were sufficient to elect the twelfth man. David Osborn, with 346 votes, headed the poll and was elected the first chairman. Unfortunately, as a builder and contractor he underestimated the cost of the large boarding house in Chesham Road known as Incents, and went bankrupt. He had to resign from the Council, and his successor as chairman was George

Loader, who kept a shoe shop opposite Chesham Road.

For several years the Council functioned without full-time officers. Meetings were held fortnightly in the workhouse boardroom, and in addition to serving on the Council's own numerous committees, members were appointed to serve on the Aldbury Isolation Hospital Committee, the Berkhamsted and Northchurch Joint Fire Brigade Committee, and the Berkhamsted and Northchurch Joint Sewerage Committee.

CHEESE-PARING

In the words of a councillor of the period, right from the start a cheese-paring policy had to be adopted because the Council had inherited debts, liabilities and confusion from the previous authority. The first big job was the replacement of a defective sewerage system on which thousands of pounds had been wasted. At even greater expense roads and paths were reopened, new pipes were laid, and there were so many trenches and heaps of rubble that a special report was made on the availability of red lamps to warn pedestrians of all the obstructions.

Private contractors collected refuse and watered the streets. It was not long before the Council decided that it would be better and more economical to have their own labour force. Mr. E. H. Adey, the first surveyor, went very carefully into costs, including the depreciation of horses and dustcarts. As for street watering, Mr Adey looked up parish records and found that from 1894 to 1898 the average number of cartloads of water used per year was 6,517. Of course, the number was higher in dry summers.

ROUGH RIDE

Mr. Adey, who received £100 a year for his services as surveyor, inspector of nuisances, inspector of canal boats and inspector of dairies and cowsheds—very necessary when milk was blamed for the spread of tuberculosis and typhoid—was a very busy man. One day he and two councillors rode to Broadway Farm and back to test the new horse-drawn 'ambulance for accidents.' He recommended

rubber tyres after enduring vibration and noise which made it difficult to hear each other speak.

One of the councillors who rode to Broadway was Dr. Bontor, who complained that ashes had not been collected from his house for three weeks; he had to store them in his bath and in an old silk hat. Later on the doctor was so angered by his colleagues' reluctance to enforce a certain bye-law that he could no longer remain a member. He paid the £1 fine as required by Standing Orders and stalked out of the boardroom. The seat was

declared vacant. It was filled by Dr. Sidney Algernon Bontor!

The financial position prevented the Council's acceptance of the Railway Company's proposed improvement to the bridge near the Crystal Palace public house at a cost of £1,700. But even in 1900 cars, motor-cycles and cycles were sufficiently numerous for the Council to pass a resolution recommending a tax on those vehicles; the Local Government Board and the local M.P. were asked to support the resolution.

(To be continued)



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