

The Council's Early Days—III

by 'BEORCHAM'

A great deal of heat has been generated by the current Town Hall controversy, but it is doubtful whether lifelong friendships have been severed, as a local paper claimed when an extension of the urban district was proposed nearly 70 years ago.

Berkhamsted wished to take in two small but populous portions of Northchurch parish (Sunnyside and the north side of Gossoms End), as well as some thinly populated parts of the parish of St. Peter which were outside the urban district.

Mr. (afterwards Sir) John Evans, the famous archaeologist, whose house faced Berkhamsted Common, was one of the 'rural' electors who expressed strong dislike of becoming 'urban'. But the main opposition came from Northchurch. A crowded protest meeting was held

in Gossoms End schoolroom, strategically chosen so that Sunnyside electors—who were strongly represented on Northchurch Parish Council—did not have to walk all the way to the village.

PUBLIC ENQUIRIES

Fear of higher rates was uppermost in the minds of many of the objectors, but they were also intensely loyal to the parish. The acreage Northchurch stood to lose contained nearly half of all the houses in the parish. There was also the prospect of losing a portion of the railway, which had high rateable value.

In December, 1906, at Berkhamsted Town Hall, a Public Enquiry into the proposed changes lasted so long that it had to be resumed a fortnight later. Appearing on behalf of Northchurch, the Hon.

H. M. Macnaughton, barrister, said the village had a vigorous local life, so vigorous that people living in Sunnyside thought nothing of walking to meetings at Gossoms End. The object of the Local Government Act of 1898, he insisted, was to encourage interest in parochial affairs, and that had been achieved in Northchurch. If a large part of the population was taken away, the activity, usefulness and interest of the Parish Council would diminish.

LOUD LAUGHTER

Mr. (afterwards Sir) Richard Cooper, Mr. Cornelius East of the timber firm, and other businessmen expressed their views. Dr. Fry, headmaster of Berkhamsted School, thought the whole of Northchurch village should be included in the urban district. Some people feared that the working men of Sunnyside and Gossoms End who served on the Parish Council would not be elected to the Urban Council. There were heated arguments, but the frequent appearance of 'Laughter' and 'Loud laughter' in verbatim reports do not suggest that lifelong friendships were severed.

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PERSONAL SERVICE AT PETROL STATION

Another Public Enquiry was held in January, 1908—it lasted nine hours—and in the end it was decided not to transfer any rural parts of the parish of St. Peter to the urban district. Sunnyside and the north side of Gossoms End were to be added, however. It was really a foregone conclusion, for those obviously urban areas should have been included in 1898, not in 1909, when the urban district was increased by 175 acres and the number of councillors rose from 12 to 15. In the election for the three additional seats, Major James Parsons was top of the poll; for over 20 successive years he was Chairman of the Council.

COUNCIL'S FIRST HOME

Yet another Public Enquiry was held in 1908, this time into the proposed scheme to acquire premises in the High Street for Council offices—to be exact, the western half of the site now occupied by the Civic Centre. Mr. Thomas Penny, Clerk to the Council, recalled the drainage problems of the late 1890s and the series of loans which were necessary at that time. The Council's policy had been to reduce those loans before spending money on buildings, but now they had an opportunity of acquiring a central site with extensive yards, including an out-building (formerly a Wesleyan Methodist church) which could be used as a Council Chamber.

Mr. Penny added that the Council still met at the Workhouse, at a cost of £5 a year, as it had no board-room of its own, and the surveyor used his own private house in Montague Road for official purposes. The old manual fire engine had to be kept in the Town Hall, the new steam engine was kept in stables 'at the other end of the town', and it was necessary to house an ambulance, given by subscribers, in a shed belonging to Mr. Lee, the mineral water manufacturer.

WEATHERCOCKS —BY ORDER

At the Public Enquiry, Mr. Joseph North stated that the value of High Street property had doubled within the last ten years, and the reason for its increased value was that there were certain firms anxiously prepared to pay any price to get a place. A small shop which

had been bought for £525 a few years ago fetched £1,900 at a recent sale after keen competition, Mr. North added.

In July, 1909, the Council installed 'telephonic communication' at a cost that was not to exceed £6 15s. per annum for 700 calls. About the same time the Council granted permission to the National Telephone Company to erect a pole in Torrington Road subject to the usual payment and conditions and to the pole being painted green with white battens at the bottom and a weathercock at the top. A pole in Charles Street was similarly to be

painted and topped by a weathercock.
(To be continued)

COVER COMPETITION

Last month's photograph on the front cover of the 'Review' was of Clachan Seil island in Argyllshire. Unfortunately none of the readers, who wrote in to identify it, got it right. So why not try again this month? If you can guess the identity of the scene on the front of this month's magazine, let us know. The first correct entry to be opened will win the writer six months' free issues of the 'Review'.



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