

# Changes at the Crossroads

by 'BEORCHAM'

The hoardings are down, and we now have an arresting view of the new police station—the first major change at the crossroads since a block of shops and offices was built on the west side of Lower King's Road in the early 1930s.

As a local historian, I would like to see a tablet on the wall of the new building, stating that since 1764 the site has been occupied by a Bridewell (prison) and successive police stations. But what effect this would have on the crime rate I cannot imagine.

To be strictly accurate, much of the original site has been surrendered to widen the road and footpath. At each rebuilding (in 1894 and again in recent times) adjacent shops were acquired and demolished, and the police station was seen proceeding in an orderly

manner in an easterly direction. When King's Road is again widened, we shall use a footpath which goes over the site of two wretched cells (one for men, the other for women) and a dungeon which, in 1789, was described as 'a most dreadful hole.'

## Neighbouring Shops

An undated photograph suggests that the Bridewell (which became a police station in 1843) was pleasant to look at, with an overhanging upper storey facing King's Road. The photograph shows an adjoining shop kept by a man named Collins, who, I believe, was a plumber. This or the shop next door was at one time kept by Mrs. Garnett, who sold shoes and permitted Miss Young to run a small private school in the back room. At an earlier date the police in-

spector's neighbour was William Cooper, founder of the chemical firm. As we all know, two more shops were demolished for the recent rebuilding. The next door neighbour is now the Midland Bank, which replaced the Red Lion Inn (afterwards East's furniture shop) shortly before the 1939-45 war.

Of much greater importance is the opportunity we now have of again widening King's Road. Until mid-Victorian times this was known as Bridewell Lane or Cox's Lane, the latter being a misspelling of Cock, a family name. A manorial survey of 1607 mentions John Cocke, who held 'one tenement at Cockes lane ende,' for which he paid a quit rent of 4d.

## Truly Rural

Before the early years of this century King's Road (so renamed because it leads to Kingshill) was so narrow that a heavily laden haywain would brush the walls on either side.

Not that there were many buildings in King's Road. On the east side just beyond the police station,

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was a row of eight little cottages, followed by two more small houses. On the west side, the only building was the corner house (now Barclays Bank) until Hope Hall (now the Evangelical Church) and Hope Villas (one of which was the minister's house) were built in 1874

Then, as now, there were no shops in King's Road, but in a small shed Tom Meck, a wood-turner, specialised in the manufacture of pump buckets and suckers, for which there was a steady demand at a time when many people lacked piped water.

Two minutes' walk from the High Street, King's Road was truly rural, without another building all the way to Kingshill. Clarence Road did not exist, and Charles Street was a little green lane. There was a horsepond beside the road some 200 yards beyond Butts Meadow.

#### Traffic Problems

The crossroads did not exist until Lower King's Road was made in 1885. The cost of this new road was defrayed by public contributions, and a point made by the promoters was that King's Road had a slight gradient compared with Chesham Road, a gruelling climb for horses. But coachmen and waggoners were not impressed by this claim; the 'bottleneck' created by the police station and cottages caused long hold-ups and frayed tempers. Gentlemen in a hurry to catch a train were known to use ungentlemanly language. Oddly enough, in 1887 it was proposed to lay rails along this narrow road for a stream tramway to Chesham!

As already stated, the police station was rebuilt in 1894, but the traffic problem was not eased until the old cottages were pulled down a few years later. At the same time Lower King's Road was widened. The two roads are not in alignment because Lower King's Road was widened on the west side, and King's Road on the east side. Originally there was only a trifling divergence.

#### How the Poor Lived

As the story of the Bridewell has been told in earlier articles, I would like to say a little more about the old cottages in King's

Road. It was my good fortune, many years ago, to receive a letter from Edward Emery, recalling his early days in 'the row.' The occupants of the eight cottages, he said, shared one drinking water tap, one rainwater tank and one brick oven, the neighbours taking turns to cook dinners for the eight families, using furze for fuel.

August holidays, Mr. Emery recalled, were spent gleaning. 'We gathered enough in Dell Field to last the family all through the winter. Mr. Cook, at the watermill, ground the wheat into flour, and the home-made bread was very good and no mistake. Farmers

were very kind, sending word when gleaning could start and giving the children little jobs such as stone-picking.'

Some of the cottagers, Mr. Emery added, could ill afford to pay the modest fees for sending their children to school—a penny a week for infants, twopence for older children. When they stayed away from school, Inspector Coulter did not have far to go to remonstrate with the parents. But sometimes he had to make longer sorties, brandishing a big stick as he chased the truants.

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