

# THE STREETS OF BERKHAMSTED

by 'BEORCHAM'

Victorian compilers of guide books and gazetteers often described Berkhamsted as a town of two streets, High Street and Castle Street. This was never strictly true, for Mill Street, Water Lane, Raven's Lane, Chesham Road and King's Road are of great antiquity. And it was patently absurd to go on talking of two streets in later Victorian times, when many new roads were constructed.

It is a fact, however, that in 1851 more than three-fifths of the total population of the large parish of St. Peter lived beside the highway or in Castle Street. Moreover, it seems that only one new road (Highfield Road) came into being in the first half of the Nineteenth Century.

## SUDDEN GROWTH

How, then, did Berkhamsted, with 1,690 inhabitants in 1801, find homes for a population which had doubled to 3,395 by 1851? Tapping a unique source of information, I have spent hours studying the 1851 census returns, the first to show each person's full name, age, sex, occupation, family status, address, and place of birth.

Incidentally, comparisons with today's figures are difficult, owing to several boundary changes, but roughly speaking the population of Berkhamsted (excluding Northchurch) is about three and a half times larger than it was in 1851, while the built-up area may be a dozen or even twenty times larger. Your guess is probably better than mine!

At the present time there is little visual evidence of a building spurt to cope with a massive increase of population in the first half of the Nineteenth Century. Of course, much of the older part of the town has been rebuilt. But there must have been much activity for Berkhamsted to have had two master builders, John Skinner and Joseph Harris, each of whom employed 14 men, while Marianne Halifax, a widow, employed nine men as plumbers, glaziers, etc. No doubt many of the houses they put up were very small, huddled together in existing roads, and destined to become slum property three or four generations later.

## DEPOPULATED AREAS

Some roads that were teeming with life in 1851—and much later—are now depopulated. For example, Water Lane, the Wilderness, Red Lion Yard, Waterside and that portion of Gossoms End in St. Peter's parish were inhabited by 497 people (102 houses) in 1851.

The number of people with High Street addresses today is much, much smaller than the 1,549 who inhabited 311 houses in 1851. Similarly, Castle Street

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has lost half of the 76 houses that were inhabited by 394 people in 1851.

On the other hand, Grub's Lane (Chesham Road) with 10 houses and 44 people, Cock's Lane (King's Road) with 7 houses and 27 people, and Raven's Lane with 2 houses and 11 people in 1851, have many more houses and residents today. Highfield Road, known as Albert Place in 1841 and renamed Prospect Street a few years later, was inhabited by 210 people (44 houses) by 1851.

### LARGE FAMILIES

Two outposts of the old parish have changed considerably. Frithsden, which extended into the parishes of Northchurch and Pitstone, had 55 houses, 255 inhabitants and a school in 1851. Today it is a very small hamlet. Yet Potten End, now the largest village in the district, had only 45 houses and 225 inhabitants (some of whom lived in Northchurch parish) in 1851.

An average of five persons per house does not suggest overcrowding, but many cottages were very small, and some of the smallest were in Water Lane, where two families were blessed with seven and one with nine children.

It may be supposed that most of the residents were born in the parish. This was certainly the case at Potten End and Frithsden. But in the town many people hailed from distant parts. In the "Where born" column, nearly every English county appears, as well as Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, New York, Quebec, Halifax (Nova Scotia), Madras and Calcutta. The gasworks superintendent and his wife came from Killarney; a Chelsea pensioner's wife hailed from Dublin.

### BOARDERS FROM INDIA

Ten boys born in India were sent to Berkhamsted to be educated. The Rev. J. R. Crawford, headmaster of the Grammar School, had 11 boarders, four of whom came from India—and one from Eton! Five servants, one from Berkhamsted, the others from Worcestershire, Somerset, Warwickshire and Gloucestershire, looked after the headmaster, his wife, their five children and the 11 boarders.

Three boys from Calcutta were among the 13 boarders in the house of the assistant master, the Rev. F. Harvey, whose two servants came from Somerset. There was also a boarding school at Elm Grove corner, whose Sarah Hawkins presided over 19 boys, three of whom hailed from India. Somewhere near the Town Hall (before it was built!) Elizabeth Spicer kept a boarding school for 16 girls, known as "Merry Hall."

### GOSSIPING SERVANTS

The practice of employing servants from afar may have been due to a desire to reduce idle gossip in the town; a local girl might go home and spread stories about the goings-on of the gentry. Thomas Halsey, M.P., at The Hall, employed a butler, footman, coachman, groom, housekeeper, cook, nurse, two laundry-maids, two housemaids, one dairymaid, one kitchen-maid and two gardeners. Of these only the groom and one gardener were born in this parish.

Not one of the eight servants employed by General

Finch at Berkhamsted Place was born here. At Haresfoot, Col. Algernon Smith-Dorrien employed 12 servants, of whom only two were Berkhamsted-born. A very large staff to look after the Colonel, his wife and four children; but in the years to come nine more children were to provide full employment for the nursemaid.

### THE REVIEW

For September only, please send your articles to the Editor at 20 Murray Road. This temporary change is due to holiday arrangements. Articles in by the seventh please!

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