

THE BERKHAMSTED FAMILY ROBINSON

by 'BEORCHAM'

"Can you please tell me something about the building now known as the Berkhamsted annexe to the Dacorum College of Further Education? I remember it as a grocer's shop and have been told that in earlier times it was a draper's which enjoyed Royal patronage. Apparently the Prince of Wales's feathers were shown above the door because Edward VII, before he was King, called at the shop and bought some gloves."

It was not quite like that. However, I am grateful to the enquirer for reminding me to take another look at some of the buildings on the south side of the High Street.

What many people still call the Evening School was almost certainly built for John Rolfe, a draper. In 1851 (and perhaps earlier) he had a much smaller shop in what is now the derelict property near the Civic Centre. Later on he moved to one of the town's most ambitious buildings of Victorian times. It towers above its neighbours and the many rooms at the back overlook what for years was the yard of the Red Lion Inn.

Gloves for the Princes

In the late 1880s, Mr. Rolfe sold his business to Richard Robinson, an American, who came to England with his English-born wife and the first three of their seven children.

Mr. Robinson bought and sold property and knew little about the drapery trade. His wife, however, ran the shop successfully and continued to do so for many years after her husband's death. It is to two of the daughters, Miss Nora and Miss Ida Robinson, of Kitsbury Road, that I am indebted for much of my information.

Miss Ida, the younger sister, will not mind my mentioning that she is 86 years old. Here is her story of the shop's Royal patronage: "The head housekeeper to Lord and Lady Brownlow was Mrs. Potter, who bought the linen for Ashridge House at our shop. The Prince and Princess of Wales (afterwards Edward VII and Queen Alexandra) were staying at Ashridge, and as the princess had torn her gloves Mrs. Potter drove over to our shop to buy a new pair. That is why we displayed the Prince of Wales's feathers with the inscription 'Patronised by H.R.H. the Princess of Wales.' This became one of the minor sights of the town. People passing by were always telling their friends about it."

Cheap at the price!

Not that the "royal" shop sold only high quality goods. It carried a great assortment of drapery, men's and women's wear, carpets, linoleum and oilcloth. Even by 1893 standards the following lines (advertised in the Berkhamsted Directory) were very modestly priced: men's suits from 12s. 6d., men's

coats and vests from 8s. 11d., men's overcoats from 8s. 11d., men's trousers from 2s. 11d.

Miss Robinson recalls the large cellar which she found rather frightening; it was usually full of blankets. These were sold at what now seem ridiculously low prices. Farthings figured in many of the prices (1s. 11½d., for example), and when there was no small change customers were given a packet of pins, a packet of hairpins, or a small brooch in lieu of a farthing. The shop opened at 8.30 a.m. and closed at 8 p.m., and on Saturday evening the family liked to sit in the room above the shop and listen to the band playing outside the Town Hall, a regular feature of market day in years gone by.

A busy shop

Some of the assistants, including a dressmaker and an apprentice, lived over the shop, and there was a full-time nurse for the children. On one occasion the shop manager walked off with the cash box, which was found empty on Berkhamsted Common. On the whole it was busy, happy shop, but when Mrs. Robinson died in 1920 she left the business to her son, Harry, who had little aptitude for the trade. Incidentally, he moved into the house now occupied by his sisters, and the garden was laid out by Bertram Lane, of the nursery business, as a wedding present. Eventually Harry moved to Eastbourne; the drapery business closed down and the shop was taken over by a firm of grocers, the Star Supply Company. Later, the upper rooms were used for evening classes.

Miss Ida crossed the High Street and opened a hat shop in what had been the sitting room (with bay window) of the adjoining gracer's shop, then owned by Kingham & Sons (now Waitrose). A new window was inserted for the hat shop, and the business continued until the 1939-45 war, when, as Miss Ida says, 'nobody wanted hats.'

Various trades

Let us return to the south side of the High Street and recall the great variety of shops that could be found between Prince Edward Street and Robinson's shop at the turn of the century.

The now-derelict corner shop was occupied by the International Stores. Next door was a saddler, J. Walklate. Then came the Post Office, open from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., with four deliveries of letters and parcels on weekdays and one (letters only) at 6.30 a.m. on Sundays.

The eastern half of the Civic Centre was A. C. Neville's fish shop and ham and beef restaurant. Then came the house, office and yard of Nash & Sons, builders. The former Five Bells Inn (now Weatherhead's) was the home of F. Pocock, coal merchant, and the next house (now part of Weatherhead's shop) was occupied by J. Thornton, dairyman and poulterer.

West of the archway, H. Saunders kept a corn chandler's shop. What is now W. H. Smith & Son's shop was occupied by John Cousins, draper. Figg's shop was a tailor's kept by W. H. Newell, and Hunt and Fourmy used the adjoining house as a solicitor's

office; this is the only building in the row which is still used for the same purpose. Finally, the Robinson's next-door neighbour was A. B. Timson, tailor, whose shop later became a grocers, kept by T. R. Moss, and then a confectioners.

In the intervening years there were many changes of trade and ownership; the list given here is based on editions of Loosley's Directory published early in this century.

FUNDS FOR THE COURT HOUSE

The amount so far given for the rebuilding of the Old Court House now stands at £2,027. This includes £13.53 raised by the children and staff of the All Saints' Sunday School at a fête held in All Saints' churchyard on 28th September. Thanks are given to Miss Hazelton, to all the children and parents who took part, and to Mr. J. Dudley who mended the piano and his son Richard who played it.

SCHOOL OF EVANGELISM

What? Back to School? Yes, back to School, but school with a difference. We, ministers and lay people, have all been given the joyful task by our Lord of sharing the Gospel with other people. Some of us find this easy, others find it very difficult, while yet others find it well nigh impossible for most of the time! We all need help and we all need to help each other; we need to guide and inspire one another under the direction of God's Holy Spirit.

The School of Evangelism will have one of the shortest terms on record . . . only three weeks . . . and even then there will be more days off than there are work! The first two meetings will be on Monday evenings; the three remaining sessions will take the form of a conference over Friday night, Saturday morning and afternoon. The full details including subjects for discussion are as follows:—

Monday, 11th November, 8.15 p.m. (prompt) to 9.45 p.m.

“What is the Gospel we want to share?”

Monday, 18th November, 8.15 p.m. (prompt) to 9.45 p.m.

“How do people come into faith?”

Friday, 29th November, 8.15 p.m. (prompt) to 9.45 p.m.

and

Saturday, 30th November, 11.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. and 2.00 p.m. to 4.00 p.m.

“Where do we begin?”

The Revd. Chris. Mayfield, Vicar of St. Mary's, Luton, and one of the lecturers of the Archbishops' Council on Evangelism, will be bringing a team of people who will share with us in our thinking, learning and praying.

Where will it all take place?

At Sacred Heart Church Hall.

How do I register?

Please complete form available in each Church.

N.B. There is no age limit; all that is needed is a desire to be most faithful and obedient to Christ, nor is entry restricted to those who are (or have been) involved in C.U.E. groups.