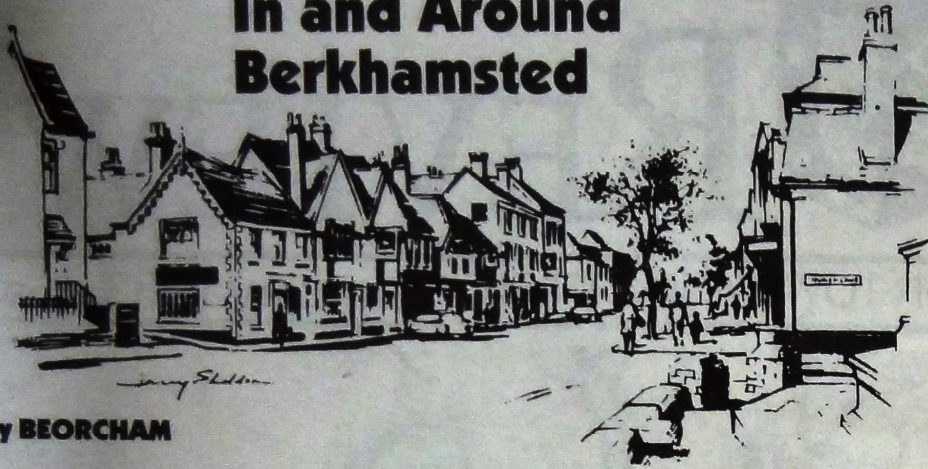


In and Around Berkhamsted



By BEORCHAM

Berkhamsted's Bridewell

That Berkhamsted no longer has a prison is, perhaps, a sign of Progress. We couldn't possibly provide full employment for the jailers in these law-abiding days. But once upon a time, when the town was rather more self-sufficient than it is today, we had an unpleasant, uncomfortable prison right in the heart of Berkhamsted.

No one is old enough to remember when men and women prisoners spent weeks and months in the Bridewell, for it ceased to be used as a prison in the 1830's; but, as a perfectly respectable police station, the building survived until 1894, when it was replaced by the present headquarters of law and order.

This will not be news to regular readers of these articles. But it so happens that a picture in the "Bygone Berkhamsted" calendar for 1951 encouraged a member of the Local History Society, Mr. J. W. Cousins, to collect all the information he could find concerning the Bridewell. Thanks to his co-operation, I am able to shed further light on a subject which was dealt with rather briefly, in the "Houses with a History" articles which appeared in the REVIEW some three years ago.

Three Tenements Converted

Studying pictures of the Bridewell, many towns people have found it difficult to reconcile the date of its opening (1764) with the 16th or 17th century style of architecture. But now we know the reason why. At the January Sessions, 1763, the chief constable of Dacorum reported that there was no proper Bridewell in the Hundred, and MR. T. H. Noyes, J.P., was instructed to find a suitable place for building one and to obtain

estimates for its erection.

MR. Noyes was one of those men who liked to save public money. Why have a new building? He suggested the conversion of three tiny tenements at the corner of Cox's-lane (now King's-road) into a Bridewell. The suggestion was accepted: Messrs. S. Axtell, Francis Gould and Job Beezeley had to find new homes and the owner of the freehold property, Mr. George Rose, received £112 as a fair and just price. By April, 1764, the necessary alterations had been completed at a cost of £120 12s.10d. Thus, Berkhamsted had a new Bridewell in a second-hand building at a cost of £232. Goodness knows what the site alone would now be worth if lack of business caused the police to abandon Berkhamsted!

The "Cage"

But don't imagine that the Bridewell was Berkhamsted's first prison. A "cage" or place of detention for prisoners is mentioned in a document dated 1616, but its site is unknown. Probably it stood by the bygone market house at the top of Water-lane for it was there where the stocks and whipping-post were situated. Incidentally, James I, in his Charter, authorised "a prison or goale within ye boroughe" ("goale" is NOT a printer's error!), and a borough inventory of 1642 mentions shackles and two pairs of handcuffs.

Little is known of this early Stuart House of Correction. In 1626, the keeper, Henry Homes, complained that the inhabitants of Aldbury refused to pay their share of his salary—"13s. 4d due from them for the execution of his office for the last 2½ years ended at Lady day last." A few years later, apparently, the people of Berkhamsted sold the House of Correction, for in 1638, 1639 and 1640, the bailiffs and burgesses were called upon to explain to the Justices what they had done with the money raised by the sale of the House, "which was heretofore purchased for £30." A satisfactory explanation must have been forthcoming, for the Sessions Rolls contain no further reference to the matter.

The Keeper's Salary

From 1640 until 1764 Berkhamsted was as badly off as it is today in possessing no prison of its own. Instead the Hemel Hempstead Bridewell served the Dacorum Division. At least one of the keepers was no better than the prisoners, for J. Lumword, a victualler, who was appointed keeper of the Hemel Hempstead Bridewell in 1754, was discharged because he "hath quitted possession of the said House of Correction and is run away from his family and hath thereby neglected the duty of the said office."

Came the year 1764, and Berkhamsted's new Bridewell was entrusted to the care of George Hoar, whose salary was £20 a year. He died five years later, and Sarah Hoar was appointed keeper, at the same salary as her

late husband. Equal pay for women! Sarah must have been a brave soul; in 1770 she maintained and nursed a prisoner, Isaac Simpson, who had smallpox. For those extra services she was paid £5 8s. 9d.

Easy Escapes

By 1779 the authorities were probably beginning to wonder whether they had been wise to convert three tenements into a Bridewell. It was already out of repair, "insufficient for safe custody of persons committed thereto." Repairs to the value of £5 2s. 4d. were carried out, but wily prisoners had no difficulty in escaping.

In 1784, Thomas Wildly, undergoing a sentence of twelve months for petty larceny, escaped ("in spite of being in irons") by forcing a way through the thin wall dividing the prison from the stable of Mr. John Dorrien. He was recaptured at Northampton. After three more prisoners escaped a Berkhamsted carpenter named Loader was paid £33 to strengthen the Bridewell.

Bread and Water

In 1782, in pursuance of a recent Act of Parliament, the Rector (the Rev. John Jeffreys), the Rev. Walter Bingham and Mr. Thomas Halsey were appointed to inspect the Bridewell. It is to be hoped that they improved the lot of the prisoners: two men were "almost naked" and the clerk was so moved to pity as to order four shirts for the prisoners at a cost of 10d per shirt.

At the Midsummer Session, 1789, a committee of justices reported that the Berkhamsted Bridewell was very insecure. "The rooms for men and women want air", they stated. "The whole extent of the ground is 44-ft. by 31½-ft., the men's prison is 16½-ft. by 10½-ft., and the woman's 17-ft. by 11-ft. . . . It is very indifferently entered; no employment, no furniture. Keeper's salary £20. Prisoners' allowance 1 lb of bread per day, and water, and let out once a day. One side of this prison is against a cooper's shop, and that partition is a mud wall, raddled, and inside of the prison lined with an inch board. They can converse. There is a dungeon, a most dreadful hole, without air, without any light, nine steps down, and the brick bottom perished. In future no prisoner is to be put into this place. The average number committed here in a year is about 14."

Handed to the Police

By the 1820's it was generally agreed that the Bridewell had outlived its usefulness, and on at least two occasions the justices all but decided to sell the property. Finally, in 1843, alterations at a cost of £56 10s. were made to "render the place fit for a police station to which prisoners might be remanded before commitment, but it would not be fit for prisoners under any sentence, however short."

Notice Board

ST PETER'S WOMEN'S FELLOWSHIP

A Happy New Year to all members.

Due to illness in November Mary Grieve was unable to be with us; her place was taken by Gladys Fenner to whom we are indebted. We hope Mary will be well enough to speak to us at our meeting on January 28th. We warmly welcome all ladies to the Court House at 2.30pm.

TUESDAY CLUB

At our first meeting of the year - January 6th 1987 - Gladys Fenner will be speaking about her recent visit(s) to China. We meet at 8.15pm. in the Court House and are always pleased to welcome potential new members or interested visitors.

Sara Davis
(tel. 4194)

VOLUNTEER BUREAU

BERKHAMSTED BRANCH

First and foremost, this month the Bureau would like to say a very big 'Thank You' once again to everyone who came along to our Buffet and Wine evening at The Court House back in October, including our Town Mayor, Peter Ginger, who, as we all know, has an extremely busy schedule and Councillor David Sherratt, whom I had the pleasure of meeting for the first time.

Secondly, we would like to thank the Berkhamsted branch of The Young Wives' Club, who very kindly let myself and Janet Rogers of our office at 48 High Street, Hemel Hempstead (Telephone: HH 47209), talk to them for at least half an hour on Monday, November 10 1986 about volunteering.

Maureen Lawrie (our Assistant Organiser) and myself would just like to close this month by wishing all the readers of the 'Review' and all our volunteers (past and present) a MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A VERY HAPPY NEW YEAR; hopefully all New Year resolutions will be made to come along to Gable House, Prince Edward Street to volunteer on Tuesday mornings (09.30 am - 12.30 pm) during and throughout 1987! Our telephone number, if you cannot make it to our office, is: Berkhamsted 6051. The Hemel Hempstead branch will be open as usual - MONDAY TO FRIDAY (09.30 am - 4.00 pm) except over the Christmas and New Year period.

SEE YOUR LOCAL PRESS FOR MORE DETAILS.

Glenda Knight
Hon. Organiser