

A BERKHAMSTED NOTEBOOK

BY TOWNSMAN

The Station Bell

There are loud lamentations when someone chops down a tree or smashes an ancient house to pieces. But who was upset by the recent downfall of the signal box at Berkhamsted station?

It wasn't a beautiful building, but its lights and levers welcomed us back to Berkhamsted, reminding us to pick up our papers and put on our macs before dashing off to loop the loops of Lower Kings Road.

What I really miss is the bell—you know, the one which gave a seven-minute warning of the arrival of a train and also indicated the platform number. **Dong-dong-dong** (or, rarely, one exclusive **dong**) raised the hopes of passengers waiting to travel through Northchurch tunnel. **Dong-dong** or **dong-dong-dong-dong** made departing season ticket-holders less miserable and thrilled the off-peakers.

Occasionally, four **dongs** misled the passengers. There they were, waiting on Platform Four, while the Euston Belle or the Golden Harrow glided alongside the slightly more snooty Platform Two. In the headlong rush,

stairs and subway echoed some choice snatches of conversation.

Years ago, someone tolled the bell five times, but that was a mistake. There is a Platform Five of sorts, but trains which go round the bend at the back of beyond do not pick up passengers.

Green Light

Heard from afar, the station bell made travellers run so fast that they seldom recovered their breath this side of Hatch End for Pinner.

British Railways have now dropped the clanger, and the signals aren't very useful to us, either. The light is always green unless a train has just passed by. The old semaphore did at least help us to travel hopefully, except when the green light for our train brought along a hulking great freighter.

Shall we have loudspeakers at Berkhamsted station? I am sure Castlehillians look forward to a new type of dawn chorus. 'The train now standing at Platform Four is the Flying Berkhamstedian, calling at Hemel Hempstead and Euston only. Fasten your safety belts, please.'

Thanks for the Memory

Speaking of bells, I wonder what happened to the one which adorned Alice, our horse-drawn fire engine? Thirty-five years ago, my lads, Alice attended and quenched our conflagrations. We went in for long words in those days. We also liked to get up, even at four o'clock in the morning, to see how Alice and her two horses had responded to the alarm sounded by the waterworks' hooter.

Then, about the year 1930, Berkhamsted went mad and bought one of those new-fangled contraptions, a motor fire engine. The town was never the same again. Alice, where art thou?

One bell which has been preserved is the one the late Mr. W. Elliott rang when he was town crier. It is stored at the Civic Centre by a Council which has no intention of reviving the ancient office.

Mr. Elliott loved crying and claimed to have done so in 300 towns. If I close my eyes and open an imaginative ear, I can still hear 'Water orf!' and 'Lorst! A black cat with a white chest and a torn ear.'

Down on the 'Upper'

A friend of mine, living in Kings Road, is indignant because he occasionally receives letters addressed to 'Upper Kings Road'. Just because we have a Lower Kings Road, he says, lots of people assume that the original, royal, scholastic, non-trading, tree-girt road is called Upper Kings Road.

It isn't. It is Kings Road, no more, no less. If I catch you making the mistake again, I won't let you use the new library.

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