

# A BERKHAMSTED NOTEBOOK

BY TOWNSMAN

## Side by Side

Walking over Castle Street canal bridge, I overheard a small boy ask his father why there was 'a funny little bridge' beside the main one. Dad did not seem to know the answer, and if I wasn't such a shy, retiring type I would have stopped to enlighten both father and son.

Most townspeople, I imagine, know that the little bridge served a very special purpose in the days of horse-drawn boats. At Castle Street, as at some other places where the towpath changes from one side of the canal to the other, the horse was led over the little bridge while the boats, temporarily lacking one-horsepower, continued to glide along with no serious loss of speed. It wasn't really necessary to lead some of the horses; they knew the way and enjoyed a minute's freedom from towing.

As the road and footpaths over the main bridge are so narrow, I am surprised the old horse bridge has not been brought into use for pedestrian traffic. It would not be a difficult matter to break through the wall and fence on either side of the canal to provide a good, safe footway on the far side of the west wall.

## Whiter Berkhamsted

Someone asked the other day if I remembered 'Billy Whitening'. Of course I do. He was the man who, in the days of my youth, helped to keep the homes of Berkhamsted white and pure.

Billy's speciality was chalk—good old Chiltern chalk, quarried on Northchurch Common. He wrapped the lumps in newspaper and cut out the middle-man by selling direct from quarry to back-door. Just a ha'penny for the special introductory trial offer; a penny for the generous king-size bumper packet.

That was in the days when few fireplaces were tiled. Hundreds of Berkhamsted housewives were proud of their whiter-than-white hearthstones. Applied damp, the chalk gave the stone an unhealthy grey complexion, but on drying out the surface was as white as—chalk.

For good measure some housewives whitened their doorsteps, though the footprints transferred to lino and carpet in wet weather were not greatly admired.

## Old Characters

'Billy Whitening' (that wasn't his real name!) was one of several characters who provided local colour in years gone by. Red, white and blue came from

Ali Sloper (another nickname), a street trader who made toy windmills, using coloured paper, sticks and nails. With a gay assortment of whirling windmills, he pushed a truck around the town and offered one of his masterpieces to any child who gave him a jam-jar. Many a youngster wondered whether it was better to keep a spare jam-jar for tiddlers or exchange it for a windmill.

Dutter was the nickname of another old character. He did all sorts of odd jobs—some very odd indeed. Occasionally he earned an honest penny removing moss and grass from between the cobblestones which once made walking along the High Street such a joy for corn-plaster magnates.

Then, before my time, there was 'Old Brushy', who came over from Chesham to sell brooms and brushes. He had a street cry of his own and would occasionally select a broom with a very long handle and prance around it.

You don't get that sort of salesmanship nowadays.

## Brickhill Green

Can nothing be done to stop Brickhill Green becoming a rubbish dump? A large cistern is one of many eyesores; you can see old prams, old bikes, any old thing on what was once a charming little piece of common land.

Adding to the mess, one of the most unkind vandals of all recently unloaded on the green a hefty carton crammed with waste paper, cardboard and other rubbish. The carton burst open and scattered its unwholesome contents over a wide area.

What a way to ruin the countryside!

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