

Berkhamsted Notebook

By TOWNSMAN

The End of the Road

Several motorists, a friend tells me, were discussing their holiday adventures when someone mentioned our own highway, the A41, and said he was ashamed to admit that he did not know where it ended.

The shame was widely shared. Chester? Bangor? Holyhead? In the guessing game Birmingham and Aylesbury were also mentioned. Eventually some one consulted a map and announced that the A41 ends at Birkenhead.

Did you know that? I didn't, despite the fact that I was in Birkenhead a short time ago.

By the way, our 'Berk'amsted' pronunciation is sometimes mistaken for the Mersey sound of Birkenhead. Years ago, at Euston station, a booking clerk was about to charge me for the fare to Birkenhead when I said: 'No, no, Berk'amsted, not Birkenhead.' 'If you mean Berkhamsted,' he snorted, 'I wish you would say so.'

From hard experience I know that it is advisable, when telephoning to business firms in the Midlands and the North, to go in for a little ham acting by stressing the middle syllable. And it is not only a certain similarity of pronunciation which causes confusion. Post Office sorters, in their haste, occasionally send letters and parcels plainly addressed 'Berkhamsted' to Birkenhead.

It is only fair to add that they are very good at deciphering Chinese scribble, and the prompt delivery of a letter addressed 'Birkhampton, Berks' is worth fivepence of anyone's money.

After 54 years

Early in September I had the pleasure of meeting a man who was paying his first visit to Berkhamsted since 1914.

Captain D. M. Pearson came here with the Inns of Court O.T.C. shortly after the outbreak of the first World War, and departed for active service a few weeks later. In those few hectic weeks he made good friends and, like so many of his comrades, retained pleasant memories of the town and its people.

He recalled the 'baths list' which gave the names and addresses of residents who, at stated hours, invited soldiers to call and take hot baths—a very welcome facility at a time when most of the men were billeted in houses with no baths.

Returning after so long an absence, Captain Pearson, who lives at Epping, paid a visit to the Castle and walked to the Common to see the Inns of Court war memorial. He was disappointed that the shops no longer sold postcard views of the memorial; but I suppose that after half a century the demand is minimal.

Georgian Evening

A little more information about the Georgian Evening at Ashridge House on Saturday, 19th October.

The idea came from the Local History Society, and the programme will be provided by the Music Society and the Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society.

There will be excerpts from 'The School for Scandal' and 'The Rivals,' some songs, and music by Handel and Mozart. The players, all in Georgian costume, will be introduced by one who was noted for his strange taste in dress and other eccentricities—the Duke of Bridgewater, renowned as the father of inland navigation. Not the real duke, of course—he died over a century and a half ago—but his representative will be very much at home in the vast mansion that was built by the Bridgewaters.

Guided Tour

A newly-published road atlas contains some highly interesting information about Berkhamsted. Sightseers are recommended to go to Berkhamsted Place, 'where Charles I lived as a child'. I'm afraid they won't see very much; the house was pulled down many moons ago. And Charles spent just one night there, when he was about 16 years old.

Berkhamsted is also recommended as a place where one may brush up one's Cowper or Chaucer ('both poets lived here'). But we have no evidence that Chaucer ever came to Berkhamsted.

Roadmender V.C.

Recently I came across a curious item of news which appeared in *The Sketch* of 8th February, 1899.

It appears that local roadmenders were entertained to dinner 'by some cyclists and others.' The Hon. Walter Rothschild subscribed to the fund, and to each of the roadmenders on the Ashridge estate the Countess Brownlow presented a 'scarlet wool jersey, which added a touch of colour to the scene.'

The guests included James Osborne, V.C., who was asked at the dinner to recount how he had won this much-coveted distinction. He was serving as a mounted infantryman when with six of his comrades he was cut off from the main column. While in this position six men were shot by Boer sharpshooters.

When Osborne and two companions reached the regiment, a call was made for volunteers to go and see if any of the fallen men were alive and if so to bring them in. Osborne at once volunteered and successfully brought in one of his comrades. For this daring deed he was awarded the Victoria Cross on 22nd February 1881, and received a pension of £10 per annum. To eke out this pittance he worked on the roads at Berkhamsted, hence his presence at the roadmenders' dinner.

Post Alley

A short time ago I admitted my inability to answer a correspondent's enquiry whether the little alley between Back Lane and High Street had ever had a name.

Mr. Percy Pocock, who for many years kept the hairdresser's shop opposite Chesham Road, tells me that in his young days it was known as Post Alley. This name was not inspired by the ancient post which stands at the High Street entrance to encourage leap-frogging and discourage posthorn gallops. What is now a television rental shop on the east side of the alley was a post office donkey's years before we had television licences, so Post Alley could not have had a more appropriate name.

I hope that we shall now resume using this name. Could not the Council put up a nameplate for old time's sake? It would certainly not be a greater waste of money than the substitution of Church Lane nameplates for those of historic Back Lane.

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