

Berkhamsted Notebook

By TOWNSMAN

HIGH TIME

It's about time somebody said 'Thank you' for the high time we now have at the central crossroads. I refer to the clock on top of the shop at the corner of Lower King's Road and High Street.

For years the hands of the clock were either erratic or idle, and for months dials and hands were missing. But now there are clear, new dials, hands that really work and keep good time, and just the right amount of illumination at night.

In comparison the Town Hall clock looks as if it could do with a little extra candle-power, and perhaps the Urban Council will take the hint. After all, the clock is the only part of the Town Hall building that is maintained by the Council.

I am sure the clock at the crossroads was not installed just because the corner shop, before the block was rebuilt in the early 'thirties, was occupied by a clock-maker. Dear old Mr. Morris, who kept the shop, was a very good craftsman, but the one clock he apparently never mended or regulated was set in the wall of his premises, facing Lower King's Road. It was always wrong. For a clockmaker to exhibit such a bad time-keeper struck me as a poor advertisement until someone suggested that Mr. Morris's idea was to encourage people to buy clocks and watches and not depend upon public timepieces.

HAVE A GUESS!

A reader asks if I can give her any information about what she describes as one of the most familiar, conspicuous and unusual buildings in the town. Go on, have a guess. But I don't think you will get it.

Well, it's in Lower King's Road, it stands near canal bridge, it is strong and tall, and it is known as 'Castle Mill.' Older folk speak of it as 'Knowles' Mill,' for it was built in 1910 for Messrs. J. G. Knowles & Son, corn forage and seed merchants. Very good use was made of a narrow but extremely serviceable site. From one side of the building intake elevators received grain from canal boats; on the other side grain was received by wagon. The tallest part of the building, incidentally, was the silo.

In recent times new uses have been found for this not very old mill. Today it is occupied by a firm of architects, who have smartened it up and added some appropriate castle-like touches.

AULD LANG SYNE

Many hundreds of parishioners remember the custom of meeting under the yew tree at midnight to join hands, sing 'Auld Lang Syne,' and welcome the New Year.

This custom ceased to be observed during or soon after the 1939-45 war. Parishioners attending the Watchnight Service were well aware of the songs of revellers outside the church. Bellingers heard them, too, between the dings and the donges. After the service, some of the worshippers joined the revellers, linking hands to give the New Year a friendly start.

I have spoken to several of our oldest residents, and all agree that the custom existed when they were young. No one knows when it started, or by whom it was started. Perhaps it 'just happened.'

I would like to know whether a similar custom exists, or existed, in other towns and villages. If you can add to the scanty material in my possession, I shall be much obliged to you.

THE SHAH AT ASHRIDGE

Recently a reader brought along a photograph taken in the grounds of Ashridge House in the 'eighties, showing Lord and Lady Brownlow with various guests, the most famous of whom was the Shah of Persia. Happily, my files contain a good deal of information about this unusual royal visit.

Outside Berkhamsted railway station, grandstands were erected and thousands of people cheered the Shah when he arrived by special train. Volunteers of the 2nd Herts Rifle Brigade, in grey uniforms with red facings and spiked grey helmets, formed a guard of honour on the station platform, and men of the Herts Yeomanry, in scarlet coats and steel plumed helmets, escorted the Shah to Ashridge. A great object of interest was a huge diamond on the Shah's fez.

Earl and Lady Brownlow knew how to give their guest a right royal welcome. Prince Albert was there, too, with 400 notabilities from Herts and Bucks.

FAIRYLAND

Cartloads of flowers were used to decorate Ashridge House, and the gardens were 'like fairyland,' with thousands of lamps and Chinese lanterns. Coloured lights flared forth from the tower roofs (I'm quoting a contemporary report), and 'the waters of the east fountain, leaping up 100 feet high, sparkled and mingled with the smoke of the coloured fire until one could not tell which was water and which was smoke.'

The Shah was impressed by the decorations, but he had no ear for Western music. For this reason a concert by the band of the 1st Life Guards was cut short. It is not true, however, that at another concert the Shah preferred the tuning-up noises to orchestral works and demanded an encore of 'the first item.'

At the reception, the great Edison displayed his first phonograph, fore-runner of the gramophone, and about six people at a time listened-in with headphones. The Shah ordered his court poet to recite verses into the phonograph, but it was not long before the Shah cried 'Bus! Bus!' This, as every Persian knows, means 'enough'.

The Shah's bedroom was 'magnificently disposed, and he slept in true Oriental fashion. The members of his suite reposed on crimson-coloured beds raised an inch or two from the floor.' It is said that the Shah was asleep when dinner was announced, but the members of his suite dared not wake him lest they lost their jobs, or perhaps even their heads, on returning to Persia.

RECTORS NOTES from page 3

Berkhamsted School for a visit from the Archbishop of York to Berkhamsted on Sunday, 9th February. He was to have preached in the School Chapel in the morning, but the Headmaster has very kindly accepted an invitation to join with us in the Parish Church for this occasion. The Archbishop will therefore preach to all of us at Mattins at 11.15 a.m. on this day.

TRIXIE DAY

It was with sorrow that we heard of the rather sudden death of Trixie Day. Trixie was known and loved by many friends and neighbours and—thanks to the wonderful care and attention of her parents and family—lived a very happy and useful life in spite of her handicaps. Our sympathy goes out to Commander and Mrs. Day and Trixie's two brothers.

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