

# IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

by Townsman

## ODD CHARACTERS

During a talk to a local society I mentioned some of the odd characters who were known to everybody in years gone by. The subject was obviously to the taste of my audience; older folk added their own reminiscences, and it was not easy to bring the meeting to a close.

Some characters have already been mentioned in these notes: Ali Sloper, for instance, who gave paper windmills for jam-jars, and a man who went from door to door selling chalk from the Common—an essential commodity in the days of whitened doorsteps and hearths.

Now for a few more memories. I suppose every old Berkhamstedian remembers Dutter, so-called because of a speech defect which caused him to say, 'Dut-dut, dut-dut'. It is perhaps rather cruel to recall this poor little cripple, but Freddy Honour was part and parcel of the local scene, earning a copper here and a copper there as he undertook the most menial of tasks. At a time when our footpaths consisted partly of cobbles, many householders paid Dutter to remove the moss which grew between the stones outside their houses. He used an old table-knife which had been worn down until the blade was only an inch or so long. There he sat, hour after hour, very much a down-to-earth fellow, prising out the moss and content with his lot.

## JIMMY AND JOHNNY

Then there was 'Shiner', a glowing name for a man who earned a precarious living by scattering soot in the fields. It was hardly surprising that he never looked clean. He lived in the Red Lion Yard, a slum behind the pub which was replaced by the Midland Bank.

In complete contrast, Jimmy O'Connell was smart, neat and bright, as befitted a man who specialised in window-cleaning and whitewashing. But he took on other odd jobs, such as lopping trees. It is said that he came a cropper when he propped his ladder against a branch he was sawing off. At week-ends Jimmy wore a frock coat and silk hat, looking the perfect gentleman as he walked the lanes to visit some distant place of refreshment. He was always polite and cheerful.

Another familiar figure was Billy Collins, a Cockney, who lived in Happy Valley, a cluster of tiny cottages off Castle Street. Billy hawked fruit and vegetables, starting with a hand truck and eventually acquiring a donkey to haul his little cart. The donkey became as famous as Billy himself.

All these characters were little men. One more comes to mind: Johnny Rippon, who pumped the organ at the

parish church and passed on local news to all and sundry. Every Saturday afternoon he stood on the canal bridge in Lower King's Road, watching the football match from afar and then, immediately after the final whistle, dashing up the road to be first with the news, calling out, 'Berkhamsted won three-none', 'Berkhamsted lost two-one'. Every day he stood at the top of Castle Street at 6 p.m., to check his watch with the church clock.

Poor old Dutter, Shiner, Jimmy, Billy and Johnny. We shall never see their like again.

## DIGGING FOR HISTORY

A few months ago the Local History Society discussed the starting of an archaeological section. Several members expressed interest in the proposal, but for a variety of reasons no immediate action was taken.

Now, however, it is felt that an invitation to join should be extended to everybody interested in archaeology, and it is hoped to call a public meeting in the autumn.

Of course, every 'dig' will have to be made under expert supervision. In the past, several Roman sites have been neglected or badly treated. For instance, the substructure of a large Roman building, with dressed flint walls and tessellated pavements, was found on the Common, and much damage was caused by untrained enthusiasts.

A few months ago, when pipes were laid for natural gas, part of a Roman wall was exposed. There was no time to carry out a full investigation, but the position was carefully noted and one of the first tasks of the proposed group could be a thorough exploration of the site.

The important thing is to have a keen body of workers to go into action directly an interesting discovery is made.

## TRUCKS AND PRAMS

'I noticed a short time ago that a complaint had been made as to the frequent obstruction of footways by wheelbarrows and trucks being wheeled thereon, and a notice issued to the effect that anyone found committing the offence would be prosecuted. Since that notice has been issued I have noticed and heard complaints respecting the frequent obstructions made by perambulators passing two or three abreast down the street. Why should this not be stopped, as this causes a greater nuisance than those complained of?—A Gouty Pedestrian'.

This letter, entitled 'Street Obstruction at Berkhamsted', appeared in the *West Herts Post* (printed in Berkhamsted) in 1887.

## HALF-A-CROWN A WEEK

Referring to a 'Beorcham' article, a correspondent says that she attended the old Court House school, which closed down nearly 70 years ago. Having passed all her examinations, she left school at the age of twelve and started work at the King's Arms as a kitchen maid, working from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays, and from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Sunday, for 2s. 6d. a week and all meals.

The correspondent continues: 'At the age of fifteen I could cook a full-course dinner and often had to do so, as the cook liked the bottle. My Saturday treat was half-a-pound of sweets from Pike's, 2d., and a hot dog in the market. Mother did straw-plaiting, and I used to help her pluck poultry for the gentry; mother also made feather pillows for them. We used to go gleaning and acorn-picking, taking the corn to Mr. Cook's mill and making lovely home-made bread. I also remember when Mr. Costin made canal boats and barges at the end of Bridge Street'.

A most interesting letter. Perhaps it will encourage other readers to share their memories with us.

## SON ET LUMIÈRE

### THE STORY OF HEMEL HEMPSTEAD

'The Story of Hemel Hempstead', is the title of a display of 'Son et Lumière', to be performed in St. Mary's Church, Hemel Hempstead, during the period 6-25 September. The narrator will be Dorian Williams and the producer Gordon Fairclough.

This will be the first production of 'Son et Lumière', in a church in Hertfordshire. The work is being done with local people led by a team of professionals from the fields of drama, lighting and television.

The Queen Mother has sent a message of good wishes.

The medium of 'Son et Lumière' is a beautiful and effective way of displaying the architectural beauty of a building and of recalling the history of the people connected with it.

The production of lighting effects and recorded sound will trace the development of the town from the invasion by the Romans, through the Norman Conquest and the Middle Ages to the granting of a charter by Henry VIII.

The second part will include items on the development of trade from the market to the industrial estate; of transport, education and the hospital and social services.

The performance will occur each evening, except Sundays at 8.30 p.m. Tickets (from Frames Tours, 2 Bank Court, Hemel Hempstead, or at the door), will cost 40p, with a reduction to 25p for children under 14 years and parties over 20 in number.