

IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

by Townsman

THE COURT THEATRE

Graham Greene's newly-published autobiography shows that he has a very clear if not infallible memory of his early days at Berkhamsted. Many local readers may be puzzled by his reference to a cinema with a Moorish-style dome; the dome vanished forty-odd years ago, though the Court Theatre, opened in 1917, survived until the late 1950s. After standing empty for some time it became a supermarket. Then, two and a half years ago, it was burnt down and Tesco put up a brand new store on the site.

A friend recently asked if I remembered children's matinees at the Court Theatre. Of course! The price of a ticket was 2½d., and now and again the manager gave every child an orange or a bag of sweets.

For evening performances the admission prices were 5d., 9d., 1s., 1s. 3d., and 1s. 9d. There was a special entrance from Water Lane for the 'fivepennies', and one tapped on the ledge to draw the attention of the cashier, who, from the very same box office, handed out tickets to the gentry who came through the front door.

'SILENT' DAYS

Before the days of talking films and double-features the programme lasted two hours; the cinema opened shortly before 6 p.m., and closed soon after 10 p.m. In addition to the 'big' picture there was usually a comedy, a news film, perhaps a serial, and a 'live' stage turn given by a conjuror, comedian or singer. If the programme ran short, a film called 'Fate' was shown. It must have been kept in cold storage for such emergencies.

In 'silent' days, piano music was played by Jack Bath, who is still fit and well and living in Bournemouth. Later, a small orchestra was introduced; then came the 'talkies'. About that time the leaking dome was replaced by a new 'hat' and the cinema was doubled in size. An organ with flashing lights was installed with Vincent Collier as the resident organist. I have vague memories of reading, in the *Radio Times* some years ago, that this organ was transferred to Rugby.

After the Rex Cinema was opened, the Court became a repertory theatre but reverted to films soon after the war broke out. After the war it often showed Continental films. How odd to recall that only twenty years ago it was sometimes difficult to find a seat in either cinema on Saturday nights.

THOSE DREADFUL DOORS

I was distressed to see a very frail, elderly couple trying without much success to push open one of the outer doors of the post office—the one near

the telephone kiosks. Certainly the door was particularly obstinate that day, but at all times I hear criticism of the siting and weight of the double doors. Getting in and out of the building when other people are to-ing and fro-ing, wondering whether to wait, go forward, shove, shrink, or take advantage of someone else's push, can be very trying.

I feel bound to say that any door which perpetually bears a notice saying that it may be dangerous to children is a bad door, and should be replaced by something that isn't dangerous to anybody.

THE 'GAZETTE'

Having reported local news since it was started in 1904, the *Berkhamsted Gazette* is itself making news by leaving the ownership of the Needham family. The paper has a longer ancestry that the date suggests, for it was an offshoot of the *Hertfordshire, Hemel Hempstead Gazette*, founded in 1859.

For many years little more than the front page was changed for the Berkhamsted edition, but as the paper increased in size and circulation more and more space was devoted to Berkhamsted news.

Every local paper is fair game for criticism, but the *Gazette's* news service is really very, very good. Generous publicity is given to good causes, the correspondence columns are nearly always stimulating, and the paper definitely has personality.

A welcome, then, to the *Gazette* when it appears in a new format.

OUT OF TOWN

I paid a visit to St. Mary's, Hemel Hempstead, to see the first *son et lumière* programme ever given in a Hertfordshire parish church.

The borough hasn't a quarter of Berkhamsted's history, but there was still a good story to tell. Unfortunately, it was told a little too quickly by some of the narrators.

I am not sure which was the more impressive: the interior, whatever the strength and colour of the constantly changing lighting, or the floodlit exterior of a truly beautiful Norman church.

Now it is Dunstable's turn to present *son et lumière* in the famous Priory Church. Another good excuse for an evening out!

COUNTING SHEEP

A short time ago the Vicar of Potten End, the Rev. A. Llewellyn Jones, started some lively correspondence in *Country Life* by recalling the old Carmarthen system of counting sheep.

He quoted numerals up to twenty,

the first ten being ainy, bainy, barry, batry, bin, aithy, kaithy, kary, katory, kin. Correspondents in many parts of the country then sent along their own regional sheep-counting numbers, which are believed to date from very early times.

I cannot imagine that shepherds in the Home Counties kept to the prosaic one, two, three. No doubt they had their own special numbers. If you have any information on this subject, I hope you will write to me.

WHAT TO SEE

Several readers have told me that they enjoyed 'Daniel's Trudge', recommended in the *July Review*, and would like to hear of other good walks beyond the immediate vicinity of the town.

As there is insufficient space to describe the many paths I used on a recent walk to Great Missenden, I will limit my recommendation to two very good places of interest *en route*. Walkers must plan their own route; motorists, as usual, will go the easy way!

First, the ancient earthworks at Cholesbury. I doubt whether one Berkhamstedian in a hundred has ever seen the great ditch, which is reminiscent of but much older than the moats of our castle.

To find the fortification, look for the drive to Cholesbury church; you may have to ask where it is! Twelve yards or so beyond the gate and stile, look for a gap in the holly hedge on your left; here begins a footpath which runs along the rampart for a considerable distance, the ditch being on your right. On the way back you may care to use the path on the opposite bank. Of course, you will also wish to visit the church.

Next, walk or drive to The Lee, a tiny and most attractive village. Just beyond the tapered end of the green you will see a Victorian church, quite a nice one of its period. But at the far end of the churchyard path stands one of the little gems of the Chilterns, the old church of The Lee. There is rare thirteenth century glass in the east window above the stained glass figure of Oliver Cromwell, and the very early and massive font will interest you. So will a very old wall painting which has to be studied closely to see St. Christopher holding the Holy Child.

I hope you will enjoy these recommendations. And go as soon as you can: the beechwoods are splendid just now.

INTERCESSION GROUP

The Berkhamsted prayer group for intercession for the sick meets on the third Wednesday in every month at 3 p.m. in St. Catherines chapel. All are welcome. Requests for intercession are also always welcome. If some notice is given we can also arrange for invalids who attend to receive a special blessing by the laying-on of hands by the clergy. Please contact Mrs. Helen Bayes, 33 Cedar Road for further details.