

IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

by Townsman

DANGEROUS ROADS

I would be the last to decry the massive interest taken in the proposed motorway, but it is high time more was said about the town's own road problems.

A step in the right direction is being taken by reshaping the bend in Gravel Path where it is joined by Whitehill. Chesham Road is also causing concern—for the umpteenth time.

But what about the upper part of Kings Road? Here, as in Chesham Road, steep banks on either side create great problems. The fact remains that, in the absence of a footpath, walkers have to share the road with very heavy, fast traffic.

In the upper part of Cross Oak Road pedestrians also fear to tread. The road is extremely narrow, with high hedges on either side.

I suppose we must go on spending money on car parks, but sometimes I wonder whether we get our priorities right.

WATERCRESS BY THE TON

In the recent 'Down Your Way' radio programme, Mr. Dennis Bedford, of St. John's Well Lane, chatted about his family's long association with the watercress industry.

Curiously enough, a few days before hearing his talk I came across the following in the *Berkhamsted Times* for 17th February, 1883:

'Mr. Bedford has at great cost and labour converted dirty ditches and offensive marshes to pleasing water-courses, in which grow a most healthy product. He has created a new industry, which affords employment to many men, and in the summer season gives carriage to the northern towns by the Railway Company of nearly 100 flats a day, which the passenger trains stop to take up. As each hamper contains about half a hundredweight, more than two tons a day of watercress are in the busy season deported [*sic*] from Berkhamsted Station by one grower alone, while probably as much comes also from Chesham and Bourne End for the same destination'.

The Chesham hampers of watercress were brought to our railway station by road, as our Buckinghamshire neighbours did not have their own station until late Victorian times.

PETER THE WILD BOY

My thanks to Mrs. E. M. Hull, of Holliday Street, for drawing my attention to a reference to Peter the Wild Boy in *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

She quotes the following, spoken by Mark Tapley about Mr. Montague Tigg: 'That's my opinion. I wouldn't have any such Peter the Wild Boy as him in

my house, sir, not if I was paid race-week prices for it. He's enough to turn the very beer in the casks sour with his looks, he is! So he would, if it had judgment enough.'

There is no need to tell *Review* readers that Peter was an eighteenth century oddity whose memorial may be seen in St. Mary's, Northchurch. The fact that Dickens mentioned Peter without further explanation shows how widely the wild boy was known fifty or more years after his death. There is another mention of Peter in *Edwin Drood*. Modern readers, unless they have local knowledge, must wonder what the Dickens Charles was writing about.

WRONG LETTER

Every time I go along the road from Netherby Grange to Wigginton I gaze in wonder at a metal signpost bearing the words 'Public Footdath'. Month after month it remains unaltered, despite the fact that one dab of green paint and another of white would turn the d into a p. What a pity the word wasn't spelt 'footbath'; I would then have resisted efforts to correct the mistake.

Speaking of misprints, the long-defunct *Berkhamsted Times* had to apologise to a speaker at a local dinner for attributing to him the use of the word 'fanatical'. It should have been 'puritanical'.

GRAEMESDYKE ROAD

I have been asked if there was ever a Grimsdyke in or near Graemesdyke Road (a very posh spelling), and if so, whether any portions of the ditch remain.

Among my papers I have an old letter stating that before the houses were built the line of the ditch could be traced about fifty feet to the west of the road along its whole length.

A resident tells me that he is sure a ridge in his lawn is part of Grimsdyke. Perhaps other people living in Graemesdyke Road will let me know if there are traces of an ancient earthwork in their gardens.

NAMESAKES

In your travels you may occasionally see a familiar place-name in an unexpected setting. For instance, a friend was exploring the countryside near Banbury and found himself in a village named Wigginton—the same spelling as Hertfordshire's highest village. Had he gone on to Staffordshire he could have found a Wigginton there, too.

There are Water Ends in East Herts and Bucks, Lye Greens in Sussex and Warwickshire, Bourne Ends in Beds (2)

and Bucks. You will find a Ley Hill in Derbyshire, a Hudnall in Gloucestershire, a Ringshall in Suffolk, and a Cheddington in Dorset.

Other namesakes with slightly different spellings are Asheridge (Bucks), Bovington (Dorset), Dudwell (Shropshire), Albury (in East Herts, Surrey, Oxon, Australia and New Zealand).

Of course, Berkhamsted has a namesake near Hertford (Little Berkhamsted) and another in Connecticut (Barkhamsted). Tring and Dudswell are within a few miles of each other in Quebec as well as in England. Watford has namesakes in Northants, Ontario and North Dakota.

And that's the end of this month's geography lesson.

GARDEN SLEEPERS

A friend tells me he would like to acquire a granite sleeper from the original London and Birmingham Railway. Having heard that other people have such relics in their gardens, he would like to have one, too.

Well, there must be dozens in the district, some broken, some almost as good as they were when George Stephenson's son Robert made the mistake of thinking that granite blocks would be better than wooden sleepers for his railway.

The other day I saw some particularly good specimens in the front garden of a house at Wigginton in a little road with a delightful name, The Bit.

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with the church: a Mothers' Club, Blanket and Loans Society, Needlework Society, Dispensary, Parochial Nursing Association, Mission Room, Night School, Depot for the Sale of Church Books, Working Society, Drum and Fife Band, and various guilds. Many families were on the poverty line, especially in winter, and so there were many calls for charity.

REVERED—AND FEARED

A little light relief is provided by Arthur Keyser, a diplomat, who spent some of his early years at Berkhamsted and wrote a book entitled *Triffles and Travels*, published shortly after the first World War.

Cobb, says Keyser, was 'our revered and rather feared rector, who made us squirm in our seats one Sunday by preaching against tennis on the Sabbath, with of course some appropriate biblical verse as his text. But the fear was slight and transient compared with the awe inspired by the severely rigid principles and strenuous activities of Mrs. Cobb, the rector's wife.'

Keyser goes on to recall the considerable commotion caused when the rector 'dissolved the ladies' choir and installed boys in surplices in their place. Local feeling was intense, and for weeks little else was discussed across parochial tea tables. The climax was reached when a popular and irascible squire, meeting

the rector in the main street, shook his fist in the reverend face and called him a damned scoundrel'.

But Cobb, too, was a popular man, one of the very best rectors Berkhamsted has ever had. A contemporary described him as genial, kind, and a great administrator; a powerful and attractive preacher, with a beautifully clear and mellow voice.

Cobb was also a great traveller, and filled many pages of the parish magazine with lively accounts of his holidays on the Continent. Some extracts will be given next month, when we shall continue this long-overdue tribute to Cobb and recall another Victorian writer to whom local historians owe so much, Henry Nash.