

# IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

by Townsman

## NEW SHOPS FOR OLD

It cannot have escaped your notice that Berkhamsted keeps on changing. Last year we were all wondering why so many shops were closing down. If anything creates an air of depression, it is a shop with locked doors and empty windows.

Recently, however, a few deserted shops have come to life again. Some have changed trades as well as hands. The High Street is all the brighter for these changes, but there are still several empty shops, some very conspicuous. One recent loss was Mr. O'Toole's shop near the police station—so near, in fact, that it has been demolished for a new, larger station. I miss the pavement displays of fruit and vegetables which brightened a very dull part of the High Street.

## THE BRIDEWELL

This isn't the first time the police have taken an adjoining shop into custody. A certain Mr. Collins went out of business, or transferred it elsewhere, when the recently-vacated police station was built in the 1890s. Before that time the local headquarters of law and order was an old house with an overhanging upper storey in King's Road, ideal for sheltering callers at the side door. But in those days King's Road was very narrow, and to widen it the 'new' station was built a few yards east of the old one.

I cannot shed tears over the departure of one of the ugliest buildings in the town. But it must have been much more serviceable, if visually less attractive, than its predecessor. The Bridewell, or house of correction, contained, in addition to apartments for the keeper, a ward for men and another for women. Nine steps led down to a dungeon, 13½ ft. long, 9½ ft. wide, and 6 ft. 3 in. high. There were no windows, chimneys, bedsteads, or even straw to give prisoners a little comfort when sleeping. The floors were 'very damp'. The keeper's salary was £20 a year in the 1770s; he—and at one period she!—had the profits of the work of the prisoners, who were sometimes employed in breaking stones and were allowed a pound of bread daily. Then, in 1843, alterations were made to the building at a cost of £56 10s. 'to render the place fit for a police station to which prisoners might be remanded before commitment, but it would not be fit for prisoners under any sentence, however short'.

## SALTER'S CHARITY

The blue lamp has been transferred temporarily to Park View School, which was vacated by the teachers and pupils in July 1971. Here again we are on historic ground, formerly known as

Salter's Charity. Land at the bottom of Park View Road was given to the parish in the reign of Elizabeth I by Edward Salter, the rent to be distributed to the poor. He also gave land in Northchurch for the poor of that parish.

Before the school was built in 1834, the front part of the site was occupied by a straw-thatched house which for many years was used as a workhouse. It seems that conditions there were almost as bad as in the Bridewell.

I wonder what will happen to Park View Police Station when the building is vacated?

## GOSSOMS END CHANGES

Demolition workers have been active at Gossoms End as well as in the Town Centre. Old cottages between Stag Lane and East's timber yard have gone, and many people must be wondering what will take their place.

The Local History Society has an Old Buildings Group which keeps an eye on properties that are likely to disappear, and some months ago two members of the group suspected that two of the Gossoms End cottages (Nos. 38 and 39) were timber-framed. A thorough investigation was mounted and measurements were taken for record purposes.

It was thought that the two were originally one house, built about 1600 round a central chimney stack. A number of similar buildings have been found locally.

When the bulldozers moved in, the bricks tumbled without trouble, but the old beams were seen to put up a sturdy resistance.

## ROUND THE TOWN

Talking of changes, I expect you have seen how part of the steep field above Dell Field has been levelled for the third Middle School. There is a fine new road running parallel to the old packhorse way to Dunstable, and if a name has not been selected for it I suggest Dunstable Way or Packhorse Way. Archaeologists have been busy on the site of the new school, and no doubt they are now hoping that a fourth Middle School will be built on land that will also yield interesting finds!

Turning to the opposite side of the valley, Three Close Lane is being widened, and part of the old cemetery wall has been demolished. How we, as children, loved to collect the creeper that grew on the wall and was always at its colourful best when the time came to decorate our harvest festival baskets.

Hundreds of residents remember when Three Close Lane was a drive to Highfield House and the first part of a long, straight walk to Ashlyns. The footpath was closed when Ashlyns School was

built; to compensate the public for the loss of a beautiful walk the Foundling Hospital gave the town Velvet Lawn, the recreation ground at the top of Swing Gate Lane.

Incidentally, if you have not been in that part of the town recently, I recommend a walk round what is known as Phase Two of the Ashlyns Estate. Houses, dozens and dozens of them, occupy the old allotment gardens and the large field above the Rectory meadow. Work is still going on, but what is virtually a new suburb must be nearing completion. As one young, proud householder remarked to me, 'It's smashing!'

#### **AXTELL'S DESCENDANTS**

If you are a regular reader of the *Review*, you are probably aware that Daniel Axtell, captain of the guard at the trial of Charles I, was a Berkhamsted man. He was executed at Tyburn as a regicide, and is much revered by descendants of his brother Thomas, who, as a young man, emigrated to New England. On many occasions Americans have visited the home town of their seventeenth century ancestor, and I have just heard that some will be here for the Festival of Berkhamsted.

#### **BERKHAMSWOOD**

A serial story could be written about the various spellings of the name of our town. I have just received a letter addressed to 'Berkhamswood'. The postman did not bat an eyelid. I suppose he is used to this sort of thing.

#### **COMMON PEST**

Walking up New Road the other day, I was horrified to see, on the roadside verge at the entrance to the Common, a large paper sack full of broken plaster.

Why on earth do people take their rubbish for a ride and spoil the countryside?