

IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

by Townsman

THE TOWN HALL

The next person you see wearing a harassed look is probably an honorary secretary worrying about his or her society's autumn programme. As everybody knows, halls suitable for meetings are scarce, and no one can be sure when the Town Hall improvement scheme will be completed. By September, we hope, but bookings for the autumn are all 'provisional'.

Some of us, I imagine, will find it strange to enter the renovated Town Hall and face a stage at the High Street end. This transfer from fore to aft should please dramatic societies; they will be able to use a neighbouring committee room as a dressing room.

I hope the Town Hall's one and only box, above the main door, will be saved and perhaps provided with a carpet for royal occasions. As a boy it was always my ambition to ascend the stairs to this box and look down on the masses below. When this ambition was achieved, I had to take a back seat and saw about a quarter of the stage.

THE READING ROOM

The Institute, to which Beorcham devotes an article on another page, is to vacate the reading room in the Town Hall building by the end of June. In due course the Institute chess club will return to this room two evenings a week, but at other times it will be available for small meetings. Whether there will be a demand for it remains to be seen.

There has been talk of using the reading room for small art exhibitions and perhaps displays of local by-gones which could form the nucleus of a museum. Such displays would leave space for meetings, but if the town wants a museum it should start thinking of larger quarters.

Meanwhile, the Institute, which, as was pointed out at a recent meeting, is a society, not a building, is not closing down. It has to find a new home for its unique collection of books of local and county interest, and—who knows?—one day it may have a new and nicer reading room, perhaps with refreshments available for members and friends. Such a room would especially appeal to the increasingly large number of retired people.

THE CIVIC CENTRE

Very little has been said about the use that may be made of the Civic Centre when we have a new, larger local authority based on Hemel Hempstead. No doubt there will still be a need for offices for the payment of rates and rents, and some officers, surely, will still be stationed in the town.

But what of the council chamber? Some time ago it ceased to be used as a

police court and it is extremely doubtful whether the new authority will want it for meetings. This could be a very useful addition to the town's halls, and no doubt some smaller rooms in the Civic Centre could be used by one society or another. Why, we might even have a reading room there!

But, you may say, we already have a good reading room at the County Library. Quite. But the one, I have in mind could become a nice little social centre.

FROM ALLEY TO STREET

The derelict shops at Prince Edward Street corner have again been in the news. Anything that takes their place is bound to be an improvement on the present scene.

I wonder how many—or how few—people know that the Town Hall would have been built there in 1859–60 had William Hazell not found the present site? The Town Hall and Civic Centre would have been neighbours.

But in 1860 Prince Edward Street did not exist. A shop had to be knocked down to provide an entrance from the High Street. Previously there was a narrow right-of-way to Butts Meadow known as Snob's Alley, probably named after a bootmaker, not an ostentatious vulgarian.

THE TOWN SIGN

I have heard several derogative remarks about the town sign outside the Civic Centre. Already it looks the worse for wear. The wood is turning green, suggesting that the post is as old as the coat of arms which was granted to Berkhamsted when it was a borough in 1618. The coat of arms itself needs repainting.

But it would probably be a waste of time and money to fix another inscribed brass plate to the post. The original plate, which announced the gift of the sign from the Citizens' Association, was prised off several years ago.

THE FLOODLIT CHURCH

I forget how many years have elapsed since the parish church was last floodlit. But once more the grand old building is bathed in light, looking rather fairylike from a distance and majestic from close range.

When I retire for the night, I see the shining tower from my bedroom window and hear the chimes of the church clock. Twelve o'clock, as the old nightwatchman used to say, and all's well. As a matter of fact, I was born within the sound of the bells of St. Peter.

Speaking of clocks, I do wish our public timepieces, striking or non-striking, would work to rule. Every one—and sometimes more than one at a

time---periodically fails to do its duty. Clockitis, that dread disease which affects the hands, is far too prevalent in Berkhamsted.

A LONG SPRING

At the time of writing people are still grumbling about the weather. It could be better, but there are compensations. Have you ever known such a long springtime? Week after week the trees are still in young leaf, every meadow is as fresh as its daisies, and there are more bluebells in the woods and lanes than ever before. Perhaps this is because one so seldom sees people carrying home huge armfuls of bluebells, a familiar sight in years gone by.

All too soon the countryside loses its freshness, but this year we have been lucky. But perhaps there will have been a heat-wave by the time you read this page.