

IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

by Townsman

THE TOWN HALL

Writing these notes some time before publication date, I cannot comment on the latest chapter of the Town Hall Saga. I do know, however, that hon. secretaries, now busy drawing up programmes for 1973, are more and more exasperated by the shortage of suitable accommodation for meetings. The erection of marquees in Butts Meadow has been suggested, but lighting and heating could be a problem!

I cannot understand why, if the Town Hall could be used until May 1972, it cannot be reopened immediately. The only snag is that there is no resident caretaker. But cannot the existing heating system be used and the hall opened shortly before a meeting is due to start?

And cannot the Council Chamber be used for non-Council meetings? With improved acoustics it has the makings of a first-rate public hall of medium size, and no doubt it will be available to societies when we have the new local authority.

BIG IDEAS

Speaking of the Town Hall, I have just been re-reading a booklet entitled 'Reports of Reconstruction Sub-Committees,' published by the Berkhamsted Urban District Council in May, 1946.

The Social and Educational Reconstruction Committee carried, unanimously, the following resolution: 'That the Council be urged to give serious consideration to the provision of a Social and Educational Centre and that we recommend the Council to take every possible step to provide such a Centre.'

The committee considered a number of sites—the Town Hall, the Manor House, the Station Garage, and the site now occupied by the Post Office—but 'found difficulties or unsuitable features' and could not go beyond expressing the general opinion that the site chosen should be 'as central and accessible as possible, and one that would not exclude any of the several facilities and accommodation we consider desirable.'

The following were suggested as providing the minimum facilities:

A Public Hall to seat approximately 1,200, with arrangements for subdividing the room. Smaller Hall for club lectures and demonstrations. Library, possibly to include the County Library. Reading Rooms. Games Rooms. Recreation Rooms. Adult Rest Room. Handiman's Room (equipped). Committee Rooms. Refreshment Room. Special Rooms for educational purposes.

Well, that was in 1946. It's just as well that we never had a hall to accommodate 1,200 people; I imagine that figure was inspired by packed houses at the two cinemas before almost every householder had a television set.

LANE'S PRINCE ALBERT

The other day a friend brought along a surprise packet—a large bag of Lane's Prince Albert apples. He had been reading some comments of mine on this Berkhamsted 'creation'; the original tree was in the garden of 'The Homestead,' replaced by what is now Budgen's store, and there must be thousands and thousands of its descendants in various parts of the world.

Thomas Squire, who made many experiments with seeds and cuttings, called the apple 'Victoria and Albert', but it was marketed by Henry Lane, a nurseryman (and churchwarden), and renamed 'Lane's Prince Albert.' A member of the family has pointed out to me that it is doubtful whether the apple would have become famous had Henry Lane not seen its commercial possibilities; in the circumstances he was fully entitled to use his name.

ALFRED WILLIAMS

The town's older residents will remember Alfred Williams, of Queen's Road, who was manager of one of the town's busiest shops—W. H. Smith and Son's—for over 40 years. He died on October 1 at the age of 94, and as he retired from business over a quarter of a century ago it is sad but not surprising

that few people today recall a once-familiar tradesman and a very able hon. secretary of the Citizens' Association.

Mr. Williams, a Gloucestershire man, came to Berkhamsted in 1900 to run Smith's bookstall at the railway station. Having lost their contract with the London and North Western Railway Company, Smith's opened a shop, in half of what is now P. C. Birtchnell's shop, the other half being occupied by C. E. Southey and Co., motor-cycle manufacturers. Smith's later moved to their present premises.

Lady Brownlow, of Ashridge, was a regular customer. She always called Mr. Williams 'Mr. Smith'. Another customer, as we know from *A Sort of Life*, was Graham Greene.

Mr. Williams, a keen amateur photographer, was rightly proud of his collection of pictures of old and new Berkhamsted. This collection is being handed over to the Local History Society.

THE RED HOUSE

Two months ago I referred to the demolition of a curious flint and brick building in the garden of the Red House, and asked if anyone knew its history. As I mentioned at the time, it had a somewhat ecclesiastical appearance.

Mrs. Wingfield-Stratfield, who lived at the Red House many years ago, recalls that some fragments of coloured glass were in the windows of the curious building in the garden. Her brother, Ralph Errington, thought that originally it was a sacred building. He was also interested in what he thought were Elizabethan features of the Red House, which is generally ascribed to the late eighteenth century.

Another reader writes: 'Although the facade of the Red House is, as you say, eighteenth century, I believe it can be shown that the house itself is much earlier—perhaps Tudor. In the course of a survey made in the late 1950s, it was disclosed that the present facade is a false one, covering a much earlier and I imagine less dignified front. I imagine that the house was neglected during the dark age of the seventeenth century, and that a new front was the cheapest method of making it safe in the eighteenth.'

Any further comments?

THE FIRST THOUSAND

Within four weeks of publication, over 1,000 copies of *A Short History of Berkhamsted* were sold.