

# BERKHAMSTED REVIEW



## In and around Berkhamsted by 'Townsmen'

### HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Once upon a time it was the custom to gather under the yew tree at Castle Street corner and sing 'Auld lang syne' before wishing one another a Happy New Year. People leaving the Watchnight service would link arms with others who had been to parties or had stayed up late for old time's sake. Nobody knows when the custom began and I am not sure when it ended; probably during the 1939-45 War.

In lieu of a meeting under the yew tree, may I wish you a Happy New Year? Let us hope that 1974 will bring a prompt end to the Town Hall squabble, a gentle transfer from the old to the new local authority, a revival of interest in local affairs, and more jokes and fewer grumbles.

### KING'S HALL

So much has been said about the future of the Town Hall and St. Peter's Hall that it is reassuring to know that the King's Arms Hotel owners have no plans to demolish the King's Hall 'in the near future.'

Did you know that this hall was originally stables belonging to the King's Arms? I have not been able to ascertain the building date, but it is shown on a map of 1878.

In March, 1912, plans to convert the stables into an 'electric theatre' were turned down by the Urban Council; the surveyor did not find the building sufficiently substantial for a cinema. Six months later the decision was reversed, subject to the walls being strengthened.

And so the Berkhamsted Picture Playhouse started business as a

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rival to the slightly older Gem cinema in Cowper Road, which stayed in business for a few more months. In March, 1917, it was the turn of the Picture Playhouse to close its doors; most of the seats were transferred to the newly-built Court Theatre, on the site now occupied by the Tesco store.

### QUEEN'S HALL

A few years after the 1914-18 War, when the Picture Playhouse was renamed King's Hall and used for dances, dinners and a great variety of meetings, a rival hall of about the same size was built on part of the site of the old Swan Brewery. Mr. David Pike, who bought and redeveloped the site, called it the Queen's Hall, and it still stands behind the buildings fronting Chesham Road. (Do not confuse it with the older and smaller Elvyne Hall.)

Dances, concerts, political meetings and the Sunday afternoon meetings of the Berkhamsted Brotherhood were held in the Queen's Hall. On one occasion it was a dormitory for unemployed miners on a protest march to Westminster. After the war the hall was acquired by Cooper's for industrial use.

Berkhamsted certainly did not lack halls before and between the two world wars. Many functions were held in Unity Hall, behind the old Co-operative shops which were replaced by Outspan House. Then



there was Progress Hall, reached by two flights of stairs in the tall Co-op building in Cowper Road. The top floor has not been used for many years.

#### GALLOPING TO THE FIRE

References in last month's *Review* to the horse-drawn fire engine, still in regular use until the late 1930s, have brought several comments.

A former member of the brigade recalls that 'Alice', as the engine was called, often attended fires many miles away. On one occasion the brigade was called to Croxley, a long, gruelling run for the horses. To lighten the load, most of the firemen were given lifts in private cars.

Another reader recalls that the purchase of a motor fire engine was delayed because it was thought that it might not have sufficient clearance in rough, rutted lanes, especially those leading to farmhouses.

A third correspondent remembers when dozens of people, if awakened by the hooter, would get up even in the middle of the night. There was a rush to see 'Alice' leave the fire station; the very rapid turn-out was

a matter of great local pride. My correspondent adds that thousands of people witnessed the great blaze at Kepston's Water Lane factory in June, 1929; the flames could be seen from miles around. In the same year a dispute over an appointment made by the Fire Brigade Committee led to the resignation of all the firemen.

#### PERIOD FILMS

Reverting to King's Hall, I suppose you know that the local Film Society holds its meetings there. How appropriate to show modern films in an old cinema! Nowadays the films are projected on a screen at the north end of the hall; in the days of the Picture Playhouse the screen was at the south end. The original projection box is now the ladies' cloakroom.

To recapture some of the atmosphere of the early cinema, the Film Society and Local History Society are holding a joint meeting in February at which it is hoped to screen films of the time when we went to 'flicks' in Prince Edward Street, paying 4d., 7d., 11d. or 1s. 2d., inclusive of Government amusement tax.

#### Berkhamsted's Guide Dog

Another generous gift has been provided towards the fund for Berkhamsted's next guide dog for the blind. The gift of £200 has been provided by a person who wishes to remain anonymous. This money—for which the organisers of the appeal are most grateful—has in fact enabled the payment for the fourth dog to be completed and over £50 to be put aside for the fifth dog. Hitherto the charity has had to provide £250 as its "share" of the dog, but this sum has been raised to £500 which is the full cost of dog and training. One pound is raised in cash for every 25 lbs of tinfoil, so please keep collecting in this worthwhile cause.

The main collecting points are: Mr. D. Pearce, Boys' School (Please NOT the Bursar's Office), Mrs. G. Hines, "Cranbrook", Hall Park Hill, Dinah's Wool Shop (opposite Swin-gate Lane), Public Library, King's Road, Collins (butchers), High Street, Mortimer (greengrocer), High Street.



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