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We should like to thank all those who supported the St. Peter's and All Saints' Missionary Guild coffee morning in November, and also those who continue to knit bandages, vests, blankets etc. As a result of the morning we were able to send £16 10s. to the U.M.C.A.

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A 17TH CENTURY RAID TO SAVE THE COMMON

William Edlyn of Norcott

DO YOU RECOGNISE the name Northcote? It is the earliest known spelling (1300) of the name of an ancient manor at the north end of the parish of Northchurch. The geographical meaning has been blurred by the later spelling Norcott, and when we hear the name today we think of two mansions called Norcott Hill and Norcott Court. But these are also the names of two manors which were created nearly 370 years ago by dividing the original manor of Northcote.

The mansions we know today are fairly modern. Norcott Hill, breezily sited beside the south-west edge of Berkhamsted Common, belongs to the 20th century. Tradition has it that the manor house stood on the site afterwards occupied by Norcott Hill Farm.

Lower down the steep hill stands Norcott Court, built in late Victorian times by John Loxley, who replaced a smaller house that was probably as old as the 17th century dovecote which still stands in the beautiful grounds. This dovecote figures in the Royal Commission's book on historical buildings in Hertfordshire.

LORD OF THE MANOR

The mansions are too young to attract much attention from local historians, but there are names and facts galore in manorial history. The long list of lords of the manors includes the name of William Edlyn (or Edlin), who should be remembered with pride by everybody in the district.

There were two William Edlyns, the first of whom bought Norcott Hill when the old manor was divided towards the end of the 16th century. He died in 1606 and was succeeded by his son, the second William Edlyn.

For saving Berkhamsted Common from enclosure, this sturdy farmer is as deserving of honour as Augustus Smith, whose night raid on Lord Brownlow's fences in 1866 is a hundred times better known than Edlyn's courageous campaign. Here we have a remarkable instance of history repeating itself, though there were some important differences. It was more dangerous to be defiant in the 17th century than in Victorian times, especially as the quarrel was with the Crown, not with a wealthy lord. Edlyn went to prison on three occasions; Smith suffered no such indignity.

Let us set the scene by going back to early Stuart times. Land was increasing in value, and in this district, as in many others, the Duchy of Cornwall looked enviously upon waste land, wishing to improve it and at the same time increase the rent roll.

COLDHARBOUR ENCLOSURE

So, in 1618, the Duchy proposed enclosing 300 acres of Berkhamsted Common, and the people of Berkhamsted, favoured with a new charter, were in no mood to oppose the enclosure.

The inhabitants of Northchurch, living outside the borough but also possessing ancient rights on Berkhamsted Common, were antagonistic—and not without good reason. They made greater use of the Common than their Berkhamsted neighbours.

The loudest protests came from William Edlyn, whose hilltop farm and manor adjoined the Common. Admittedly he was not without self-interest, for he personally claimed common right of pasture for 120 sheep and two colts. But he was not the only man to use his rights, and he became the village spokesman.

Protests, however, were made in vain. Three hundred acres were enclosed and remain enclosed, comprising the land between Stony Bottom and the present edge of the shrunken Common. This is known to historians as the Coldharbour enclosure.

REBELLION!

Northchurch grudgingly accepted defeat more or less on the understanding that there would be no further "improvements" or loss of common rights, the two meaning the same thing.

But twenty-one years later the Crown was desperately in need of further revenue, and the Duchy proposed the enclosure of rather more than half of the Common, leaving the two ends open. Once again the people of Berkhamsted offered little opposition; some, in fact, foresaw distinct benefits to themselves.

The spirit in Northchurch was now really rebellious. The times were rebellious, too; the year was 1639, and Civil War was to erupt in 1642. Edlyn, the "village Hampden" of Northchurch, believed in straight talking, and for making speeches against the Duchy's proposal he was taken into custody. A short spell

of imprisonment did not dampen his fighting spirit; words were followed by daring action.

The Common was now enclosed, but one night the fences, hedges and rails were smashed down by a force of about a hundred men, including a dozen soldiers from various parts of Hertfordshire who were billeted at Hemel Hempstead. The King's men (who afterwards gave evidence against Edlyn) said they had been promised meat, drink and payment for their pains.

AT THE HOUSE OF LORDS

Far from being kept secret, the raid of 1640 was watched by a large crowd. Shortly afterwards, William Edlyn and several Northchurch tenants were arrested, and petitioned the Council of the Duchy that they should be placed on trial, to fight out the whole question of the legality of the enclosure. They were released, and William Edlyn next petitioned the House of Commons against "grand and arbitrary oppression."

The Commissioners, instead of obeying the House of Commons' summons to produce witnesses and records, petitioned the House of Lords, stressing the "violence" that had been used by Northchurch tenants. William Edlyn, his son John and Francis Fenn were arrested and brought before the Lords, and their Lordships, though satisfied that the men were delinquents, were pleased to "remit their offence" with a caution that if they or others offended again they would be severely punished.

Our heroes did, in fact, figure in

another incident by freeing twenty acres which had been enclosed by the rector of Berkhamsted, Thomas Newman. But by this time there were troubles everywhere, and no further action was taken. The victory of Edlyn and his fellow parishioners was complete. The Common remained unenclosed until 1866, and it was then Augustus Smith's turn to have the fences thrown down.

The fighting spirit of Northchurch men, contrasting with the readiness of leading Berkhamsted residents to accept enclosure, caused a rift between the parishes of St. Mary and St. Peter. But for this bitterness and lack of mutual trust it is possible that Northchurch would have been amenable to a proposal to amalgamate town and village in 1664, when Berkhamsted sought a new charter for a larger borough. But our borough status was never regained, and it was not until 1935 that the greater part of Northchurch came under the control of Berkhamsted Urban District Council.

THE CHURCH HOUSE

A memorial to the Edlyn family is in the nave of St. Mary's Church, but a finer monument is the lovely Church House, now used as almshouses. Until 1654 the Church House and certain church lands had been conveyed in trust to several inhabitants, "and to the survivor of them and his heirs." William Edlyn, who died in 1649, was the last surviving trustee under the old order, and his son and heir, John Edlyn, granted the property to new trustees, whose successors still administer the charity.

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If you wish to know more about Edlyn's efforts to safeguard our common rights, please study the late Mr. G. H. Whybrow's masterly "History of Berkhamsted Common". This book appeared nearly thirty years ago and is already scarce.

Having devoted so much space to Edlyn, I have strayed somewhat from the subject of the current series of articles on old local houses, but there will be an opportunity of returning to Norcott Hill and Norcott Court in a later article.
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