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The extent to which Berkhamsted council houses are under-occupied, or over-crowded, is to be ascertained by a review which the Council have authorised the newly-appointed Housing Officer (Mr. L. J. Marvin) to undertake.

The object is to ascertain whether the best use is being made of available council house accommodation, and if not, to consider what steps should be taken.

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HISTORY IN MANSION, COTTAGE, SHOP AND BARN

Some Northchurch Stories

IN THIS SERIES of articles on old houses we shall soon return to the parish of St. Peter, where we have yet to visit the most historic mansion of all, Berkhamsted Place. But we must stay awhile in Northchurch, noting small as well as large houses and recalling some recent casualties. The village is changing more rapidly than the town, and historians must hurry to collect information before further links with the past are snatched away by the demolition squad.

We have already visited Edgeworth House, Woodcock Hill and the two Norcotts. What of the large house which, until a few years ago, stood near the west corner of Darrs Lane? Northchurch Hall was its name, and it had much in common with The Hall at the opposite end of Berkhamsted. Each of these Halls stood in magnificent grounds which, though large, formed but a small part of a well-farmed estate. When the two Halls were pulled down, the estates provided sites for hundreds of houses.

ELEVEN BEDROOMS

Northchurch Hall (more widely known as Northchurch House in its early days) began as a compact, gaunt, three-storeyed house which looked as if it had been designed for a small plot, not for broad acres. It was probably of early 19th century origin. In Victorian times the slate roof was lowered, large additions were made, and by spreading its wings the house achieved a measure of charm if not distinction.

The best feature was a handsome entrance hall with an enormous fireplace and an open staircase which led to eleven bedrooms.

Here for many years lived the Barnett family, who welcomed villagers to garden parties and horticultural shows in the grounds. Through the trees one saw the steeply rising fields of an estate which, in its heyday, comprised 143 acres, with its own model home farm. On the opposite side of the High Street a row of half-timbered Tudor cottages (recently demolished) housed some of the indoor and outdoor staff.

Before Northchurch Hall was enlarged to become one of the great houses of the village, a butcher's and grocer's shop stood at the corner of Darrs (formerly Daws) Lane and was replaced

by greenhouses. The shop was owned by the Ashby family, who, over 100 years ago, crossed the High Street to a shop newly built of good Shootersway bricks. The business, by far the oldest in the village, is carried on by Mr. L. Cook, the butcher.

ROSEMARY COTTAGE

And now Northchurch Hall itself has been replaced by shops and houses. The mansion, however, is survived by a smaller and much older neighbour, Rosemary Cottage, on the opposite side of the High Street. This is the home of a member of the Barnett family, Mrs. P. Satow, whose garden contains the ancient cast-iron pump which was used by Mr. Ashby in his original shop.

Many years ago Rosemary Cottage was known as Norris's Farm, bearing the name of a family who owned and farmed a large acreage and for a time made bricks at Shootersway.

Next door, west of the farmhouse, stood a great barn where Mr. E. G. Page employed a number of girls and women in the manufacture of straw cases for wine bottles, an unusual offshoot of the familiar old cottage craft of straw-plaiting.

TOBACCO "FACTORY"

Mr. Page had other interests. The very first issue of the *Berkhamsted Times* (17th April, 1875) contains this advertisement:

Tobacco! Tobacco! Tobacco! E. G. Page & Co., wholesale tobacco and cigar factors, Herts Tobacco Works, Northchurch, Herts. Good Fine Shag, 3s. 3d. per lb., in half oz. packets, 3s. 4d., best Cubas, 8s. and 8s. 6d. lb. box of 100. Publicans and the Trade supplied every week.

Unfortunately, Mr. Page died early in life and his family tried to carry on the business, without success. They moved to Castle Street, Berkhamsted.

Later, Mr. and Mrs. George Meager moved in and started a laundry which is remembered by older villagers. Norris's Farm then consisted of two cottages which were later turned into one and extended without destroying the many fine Tudor features. With its old beams, old-fashioned fireplace (with bread oven) and mellow entrance hall,

Rosemary Cottage is as delightful as its name.

A massive chimney gives character to the cottage, which has not always had a dwarfed appearance. In Northchurch, as in some parts of Berkhamsted, the level of the highway has been raised, so that people living on the north side either step down on entering the front door or walk down a sloping garden path.

The late Mr. Thomas Ashby, who for many years lived and worked next door, had a theory that Rosemary Cottage, or its adjacent barn, was at one time a tannery. This idea came to him when he levelled the ground behind the cottage to make watercress beds and dug up hundreds of ox skulls, horns, and hooves. But could not these have been a legacy of his predecessors' slaughterhouse?

SHEEP'S HEAD LOCK

Mr. Ashby was fond of recalling that his grandfather slaughtered 400 sheep a week, selling the whole of the carcasses in London and receiving 10d. or 11d. for a sheep's head and pluck. Later, he decided to sell them locally for one shilling each, thereby making himself popular with poor villagers and also with canal boatmen.

On one occasion Mr. Ashby's grandfather was travelling by train to Derbyshire when a man entered his compartment with a sluice handle in his wide leather belt—a sure indication that he was a canal boatman. Mr. Ashby, on learning that the man worked on the Grand Junction Canal, asked if he

knew Northchurch. He did not recognise the name, but in reply to a further question said he knew Berkhamsted.

"Well, Northchurch is a mile and a half above Berkhamsted, where the bridge goes over the canal," said Mr. Ashby. "Oh, you mean Sheep's Head Lock," replied the boatman. "There is a butcher around the corner who lets us have a lovely sheep's head for a shilling." Mr. Ashby was proud to know that his business had given a canal lock its name.

EARL BRIDGEWATER'S GIFT

To reach the canal we walk down New Road. This replaced a rough track and was a remarkable example of private enterprise on the part of the Earl of Bridgewater, of Ashridge. "The new line from North Church to Dunstable", to quote *Paterson's Roads*, 18th edition, c. 1831, was "executed at His Lordship's sole expense, an example well worthy of initiation, as it afforded employment to the labouring poor during periods of severe pressure, and effected at the same time a public improvement of great and acknowledged utility."

Previously, Billet Lane (called Gossons End Lane, c. 1612) was the start of the ancient road to Dunstable.

The track which preceded New Road was named Wood Lane in a map of c. 1612. Later, it was called Holliday's Lane, after Holliday's Farm, part of which stood on the land afterwards occupied by the village school. On the front of this site stood the old Post Office.

New Road can tell some good stories. No. 24 was once the home of a well-known local character, who made

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sausages and black-puddings. When he hung his delicacies on lines to dry outdoors, the lads of the village tried to shoot them with catapults!

The sausage-maker sold his wares in the Market House at Berkhamsted, where he was sometimes heard to order his wife to "Cut 'em shorter, we shan't have half enough."

BEORCHAM.

(To be continued).

[Beorcham] is preparing "A History of Northchurch" for publication in book form.]

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