

## Who Planted the Lime Avenue?

AT THE VERY TIME when the fate of Berkhamsted Place is in the balance, the future of the lime avenue below the mansion has become another controversial subject. The possible loss of one of the two rows of trees has been strongly criticised, though so far there has been no recurrence of the bitter indignation aroused when the lower part of the avenue was slaughtered just before the war.

The lime avenue has been a right of way as long as anyone can remember. Spurning the use of a carriage, Mr. Gladstone loved walking down the avenue on his way to morning service at St. Peter's Church, King George V, as Duke of York, admired the trees when he stayed at the mansion.

The limes are thought to be not less than 100 and not much more than 150 years old. No doubt they replaced an earlier avenue indicated on Dury and Andrews' map of c. 1766. The oldest known pictures of Berkhamsted—John Wycke's painting of the late 17th century and an illustration in Dr. Stukeley's 'Itinerary' of 1724—show a wide track between low hedges.

### ALMOST A HAMLET

The present avenue was probably planted by General Finch, though it is just possible that the trees date from the time of the Roper family, briefly introduced in last month's article.

The Ropers lived at Berkhamsted Place from 1718 until the early 19th century. A second glance at the 1766 map shows that even then the hilltop was studded with various buildings—the mansion, the home farm (rebuilt in 1863), large outbuildings and perhaps cottages for some of the workmen. It was almost a hamlet, and to this day its rustic atmosphere pleases passers-by and detains artists and photographers.

'Extensive' outbuildings are mentioned in a Duchy of Cornwall survey of 1805, two years before John Roper assigned his interest to the Earl of Bridgewater, of Ashridge. Reference is made to a great barn, 'an immense pile of building consisting of eight bays . . . supported by large buttresses without and a vast quantity of timber within'. John Roper was considering re-siting another barn 'to save carriage of corn and dung'.

The survey goes on to state that local farmers purchased coal ashes from London 'to sow in young clover, ten or twelve sacks to an acre; the present price is 1s. 11d. per sack of four heaped bushels'. Chalk was also used, the custom being to sink a pit and draw up the chalk in buckets. 'But the labourers will not wheel to any great distance; they sink three or four pits in a field of two acres. The present price is 8d. for digging and wheeling 22 wheelbarrows and a halfpenny for spreading. It is usually laid on from Michaelmas to Christmas, about a barrow-full to a perch of ground.'

### HOUSE WITH A VIEW

From the mansion the Ropers viewed a small, slow-changing town with coaches and wagons grinding slowly along a highway thinly lined with houses, inns and shops. Then, early in the 19th century, the canal added interest to the scene. Quoting again from the 1805 survey, horse-drawn narrow boats carried 'cotton towards Manchester, flints to the Potteries, Staffordshire ware, timber and coal to London.'

From the Canal Company John Roper 'obtained every advantage and convenience to the estate by bridges, roads, etc.,' drew an annual rent for the land covered by the canal, and found the view enhanced by 'a very handsome sheet of water' and a drawbridge over the canal. A pity we have no pictorial record of that drawbridge.

### ASHRIDGE LINK

As already stated, the Earl of Bridgewater became lord of the manor in 1807, and this Ashridge link was consolidated in 1862, when the second Earl Brownlow purchased the manor from the Duchy of Cornwall, thereby securing the Common, park, Berkhamsted Place, and many other properties, including the Court House and market rights.

Lord Brownlow was a minor, and it is known that the acquisition of so vast an estate was largely due to the efforts of his mother, Lady Marian Alford. Four years after the purchase the notorious enclosure of the Common was made, and everybody knows the story of Augustus Smith's raid on the fences.

Not so well known is Lady Marian's claim, made in a book printed privately in 1878, that other persons hoped to purchase the Duchy lands and make a large profit by cutting up the park and demesne and common lands into small holdings, and then building villas.

It therefore seems that worse things could have happened than an abortive attempt to enclose the Common. If Augustus Smith saved the Common, it may also be thought that Lady Marian Alford saved the park from some ghastly Victorian developments. It was not until 1934, long after the Ashridge estate had been broken up, that the first 'For Sale' notices went up at the park gates; and so far houses have encroached upon only the southern extremity of the park.

### GENERAL FINCH

We have wandered a little from the subject of Berkhamsted Place, but the histories of the mansion and park are closely interwoven.

In early and mid Victorian times Berkhamsted Place was tenanted by General Finch, churchwarden of St. Peter's from 1847—61, donor of over half the cost of new classrooms for the Bourne Charity School, and a generous contributor to the cost of building the Town Hall, where his portrait hangs to this day. Eight indoor servants ministered to the needs of the General and his wife; nearby, at the home farm, Noah Newman kept five indoor servants, and paid his 16 farm labourers a total of £11 a week.

In later Victorian times the mansion was the home of Lady Sarah Spencer and Gertrude, Countess of Pembroke. Later on, Mr. S. J. Ram, K.C., moved in, to be followed by his son, Sir Granville Ram, First Parliamentary Counsel to the Treasury in 1937, and always actively interested in local church work.

In 1946 'the very choice and compact freehold residential property' was offered for sale, with lounge hall, drawing room, library, study and dining room on the ground floor, nine bedrooms and three bathrooms on the first floor, and five staff bedrooms on the upper floor.

But times had changed; in 1946 it was not easy to find even one servant, and the mansion became the home of several families. Empty, it now has scarcely a window intact.

Perhaps it may yet be possible to add a pleasant postscript to a story which began nearly 400 years ago.

'BEORCHAM'

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