

Berkhamsted's Men of Iron

A FASCINATING corner of the recent 'Bygone Berkhamsted' exhibition was devoted to an old local business which still bears the founder's name—J. Wood & Son (Berkhamsted) Ltd. Specimens of ironwork made by this firm were shown alongside early account books and advertisements. Appropriately, the exhibits were arranged by one of the founder's great-granddaughters.

James Wood hailed from Marlin Chapel Farm. He became a highly skilled wire and ironworker, and lived with his family at Monk's House, then one of the most westerly houses in the parish.

In the nearby yard, in 1826, he started manufacturing and repairing various kinds of ironwork and wirework. This yard, opposite Park View Road, is still occupied by workshops and the iron and glass fronted showroom erected over a century ago.

LARGE CONTRACTS

James Wood was a versatile worker. He made candle-snuffers, rat-traps, hurdles, skewers, meat safes, dish covers, cork-drawers, fire-guards, sieves, iron and wire fencing, greenhouses, and all sorts of garden ornamental ironwork. His day book of 1829 onwards tells us that his clients included Countess Bridgewater (Ashridge), Lady Cooper (Gadebridge Park) and Lady Essex (Watford).

James Wood died in 1861 and for a time the business was carried on by his widow, who traded under the name of F. (Fanny) Wood & Son; but when her eldest son James became the owner, the business reverted to its original name.

During his long regime (James Wood II died in 1908) the firm expanded and won handsome contracts from the landed gentry, who lavished large sums on iron fencing. From Bierton, Bucks, came at least one order for Leopold de Rothschild. But the best customer was undoubtedly Lord Brownlow, of Ashridge.

In 1865 his lordship's trustees placed a huge order. It was for iron fences to enclose a large part of Berkhamsted Common, over which Lord Brownlow owned the manorial rights.

By February of the following year James Wood and his men had erected

across the Common two long fences, 5-ft. high with seven horizontal rails. The sequel to this enclosure is famous in local and national history. Augustus Smith, championing the commoners' rights, chartered a midnight train to convey a horde of specially recruited labourers from Euston to Tring, where they were armed with crowbars and marched to Berkhamsted Common. Before dawn Lord Brownlow's fences had been wrecked.

SECRET ESTIMATE

Here is an interesting footnote to this oft-told tale. James Wood, having put up the fences, was asked to repair two miles of twisted, battered ironwork. The following correspondence is published for the first time:

Ashridge Estate Office.
Mr. Wood. Mar. 10th, 1866.

Sir,—I wish you to go to Berkhamstead Common to examine carefully the iron fencing you recently erected there, and to report to me at your earliest convenience the amount of injury that has been done to the fence; that is the actual cost necessary to restore the fence to its previous state. If you do not think yourself quite competent to do this, be good enough to obtain assistance from the firm who supplied it to you. The damage will have to be proved in a court of law, therefore the estimate of cost must be accurately made.

You will not of course say one word to anyone about this business being done by you. (Signed) WM. PAXTON.

Great Berkhamstead.
W. Paxton, Esq. Mar. 14th, 1866.

Sir,—I have according to your instructions carefully examined the present state of the iron fences I erected for the Right Hon. the Earl Brownlow on Berkhamsted Common, and I beg to inform you that the lowest sum for which I would undertake to repair and reinstate these fences to as *good condition* as they were in when I finished putting them up (is as follows):

For the whole ..	£184 14 2½
Valuing ..	6 15 0
Old Enclosure ..	22 8 9

(Signed) JAMES WOOD.

Mr. Wood's estimate was accepted, and the fences were straightened and afterwards re-erected on various parts of the Ashridge estate. But some years elapsed before all the fences were used.

From a day book started in 1883 it is interesting to compare the work done at that time with present-day jobs. Items such as hot-water installation, overhaul and repair of lawn-mowers, church and school heating, shear-sharpening, etc., still have a familiar ring, but many years have passed since the firm received an order for milk carts complete with 12-gallon cans. And there is positively no demand for those dangerous playthings of yesteryear, boys' iron hoops.

WORK FOR THE WORKHOUSE

Many orders were received from the workhouse, where oakum-picking was a compulsory task. We find these entries:

Repairing and grinding oakum chopper, 10d.

10 oakum beaters, 9d. each.

10 T-hooks to oakum ropes, 4s.

Anyone who imagines that washing machines are modern luxuries may be surprised to know that there was one at the workhouse in 1884. James Wood adjusted the spindle of this machine, at a cost of one shilling. He also repaired beds at the workhouse. On one occasion 17 beds were repaired, involving 24½ hours of labour. The size of wage packets in those days is shown by the charge of 19s. 5d. for this work. Another repair job took two men 14½ hours, plus 'self 1½ hr.'; but Mr. Wood's charge was only 12s. 2d.

Berkhamsted then possessed an indoor swimming bath in the Waterworks' High Street premises, and repairs and painting took two men 33 hours. The charge for this work was £1 7s. 6d.

TRICYCLE, TOO

Mr. Wood supplied G. Chilton, grocer, with six strong sugar scoops with wooden handles for 7s. 6d.; installed a strong oven range in the police station for £1 9s.; repaired Mr. Edwards' beer engine at the Castle Hotel for 6s. 3d.; repaired Mr. C. Morton's teapot for 4½d.; altered and repaired a stove pipe at the Baptist Church for 7s.

We must not forget Henry Geary's tricycle; it was 'altered' at a cost of 4s.

Although the last family link with this business was snapped a few years ago, it is pleasant to know that the name has been retained by the present owner, Mr. K. Barratt.

'BEORCHAM'.

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