

Relics of Bygone Local Trades

IT IS AN ASTONISHING FACT that three businesses which closed down many years ago are still being advertised in Berkhamsted. Wandering around the town, we see the work of Victorian or Edwardian signwriters who adorned three buildings with the names of a brewer, a brush-maker, and a harness-maker.

The lettering is a little faded now, but anyone with a taste for local history is pleased to be reminded of Mr. Foster, Mr. Nash, and Mr. Walklate. Each gave employment to fellow townsmen and enjoyed a high reputation for his products.

Let us set out on a short tour to see the writing on the wall—or, in one instance, the writing on the name-board.

JOHN WALKLATE'S SHOP

First, in Prince Edward Street, we peep over a gate just beyond the County Library. A decaying outbuilding, once used as a stockroom for a small shop in the High Street, proclaims 'Walklate, Harness Maker.'

Walklate's was the last of several similar businesses which flourished when Berkhamsted had many more horses than cars. The shop (afterwards Ford's the dry-cleaners, and now empty) was a joy to visit. In its heyday half a dozen craftsmen worked there, and several complete sets of harness were usually hanging from the many hooks around the shop.

It was a shop with a manly tang of leather and simple but specialised equipment, such as the ski-shaped double pieces of wood which held the leather straps in a firm position while they were being worked on.

The landed gentry called regularly to see Mr. Walklate and his successors. The Smith-Dorrien family placed orders for shooting bags, and once a year the Colonel himself called to order cartridge cases, which he gave to his friends. These cases were made from the skins of seals caught off the Scilly Isles, where a branch of the family still has large interests.

I know little of John Walklate, the founder. His name was retained when the business passed to 'Teddy' Wingfield, who often had to down tools to captain the fire brigade. After his death

another man who played a useful part in local life was in charge of the shop—Mr. Levi Newell, conductor of St. Peter's Town Band and a member of the choir. On his retirement in 1946 the business was closed.

FOSTER'S BREWERY

Now we move to Chapel Street, where we can scarcely miss seeing the words 'Foster's No. 2 Malting' on a building which has been occupied by the Boy Scouts for as long as I can remember. I am glad no one has ever attempted to obliterate the Victorian inscription, for it is our only reminder of a family of brewers who, rare among tradespeople of their generation, were socially accepted by the landed gentry. Foster's brewery, behind the Swan Hotel, was a large one—so large that the malt-house in Chesham Road had to be supplemented by the 'No. 2 malting' in the valley. Eventually the business was sold to the Chesham Brewery, which has itself been absorbed by a larger group.

From Chapel Street we continue our tour of inspection to George Street, where, on the side wall of a house, an attempt has been made to clean off an old trade mark. But we do not have to look really hard to decipher the words 'T. H. Nash, Brush Manufacturer'.

A BRUSH FACTORY

Mr. Nash was one of several master brush-makers. Specimens of his work were shown at the 'Bygone Berkhamsted' exhibition, and it was hard to believe that the brushes were 70 years old. Mr. Nash obtained his brush-backs and handles from local timber merchants and employed up to thirty people, some of whom were out-workers. He closed the factory a few years after the first World War, and the building survived until it was burnt down about nine years ago.

A rival brush-maker, Mr. Goss, of Gossoms End, continued trading for some years after Mr. Nash. This old local industry then died out completely.

Before leaving George Street, we should look at the wall of the first of several large terraced houses at the west end of the street. The roof of a former adjoining building—a very low one—has left its mark on the wall, and old inhabitants will tell you that the long-

lost neighbour was a mission room where services were held before Sunny-side people worshipped in the 'iron' church (now the church room) and its successor, the modern church of St. Michael and All Angels.

STONE SLEEPERS

Now for a steep walk up Whitehill, so named from the chalk which once whitened the banks of this deep-cut road. We shall not find a trade mark here, but a relic of something which had a major effect upon local life and trade, the London and Birmingham Railway.

Near the top of the hill, against a flint wall on the left, are two stone blocks, each about 2-ft. square and 1-ft. thick. Placed side by side, they formed a mounting block for horse-riders—but this was a secondary use that was made of the stones.

Their original purpose was to support the railway, and they were but two of many thousands of stone sleepers ordered by the engineer of the line, Robert Stephenson, son of the famous George. The stones were very costly, and to reduce expense they were laid diagonally, not square—a fact we may prove for ourselves by noting the position of the recess for the chair and the two holes for the bolts.

STEPHENSON'S MISTAKE

Robert Stephenson was a great engineer, but his choice of stone for the sleepers was not a wise one. It was soon found that the trains were pushing the rails outwards, and the stone blocks were replaced by wooden sleepers. Hundreds of discarded blocks were either sold or given away by the railway company for various purposes, such as road-making or for marking the edges of roads. A large number may still be seen in various parts of the district, but the two in Whitehill are probably the best specimens of all.

Incidentally, the modern vogue for concrete railway sleepers may suggest that Stephenson was right in preferring stone. The trouble with the blocks was that each rail had its own separate row of sleepers. Not being linked transversely, they tended to move outward and increase the gauge beyond the standard 4-ft. 8½-in.

Many other small but interesting relics of the past may be seen in the neighbourhood—a turnpike post, a memorial to a watermill, and a reminder of 'Happy Valley'. Perhaps you will join me on another tour next month.

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