

Looking for Local Relics

REFERENCES to the two stone railway sleepers in Whitehill brought many comments from readers who have identified similar relics of the London and Birmingham Railway in various parts of the district. One man said he would like to buy a stone sleeper for use as a garden ornament, doubtless to give him something more interesting than a gnome to boast about when the roses are off colour.

I have nothing against the honest acquisition of interesting relics, but some curio-hunters do not play fair. Who made off with the enamelled recruiting sign of pre-1914 vintage, which formerly adorned a wall in Castle Street?

VANISHED SUBWAY

Last month we ended our little tour of discovery in Whitehill. Retracing our steps to Castle Street, I invite you to pause a moment before going through the little railway bridge to note the bricked-up subway in the wall to the right of the bridge.

This is our last surviving reminder of the original railway station, which was opened in 1837 and closed about the year 1874. The very first issue of the *Berkhamsted Times* stated, in 1875, that the town authorities had asked the London and North Western Railway Company to permit walkers to use the subway, 'to obviate the danger arising from contact with vehicles coming to and from the Ashridge New Road in the somewhat contracted railway bridge.'

The authorities had the right idea, but their efforts to save the subway were thwarted. It was blocked up, and with the passing years the traffic dangers have increased a hundredfold.

BEHIND 'THE BOOTE'

From the bridge it is a short walk to Happy Valley. If you are young or a newcomer to the town, the name may puzzle you. But older residents need no reminding that Happy Valley was the name of a cluster of cottages behind 'The Boote' and the adjoining house.

Just above this house, at the entrance to an alley, you will still see 'Nos. 39-44 Castle Street' in raised characters. But the six cottages were pulled down years ago, to be replaced by a garden. Here, as on the opposite side of the road, where the 'sunken' cottages were

swept away a year or so ago, one wonders how so many dwellings were crammed into such small areas.

Two minutes' walk away, in Mill Street, we have a memorial to a water-mill. On a low wall near the mill-stream you will see an inscription which states that the mill which gave us bread for a thousand years has been replaced by a school which feeds the mind. The point would be more widely understood if it were made in English and not in Latin.

SPARROWS HERNE TRUST

But a sign in English can also create bewilderment. Outside Underhill and Young's shop and garage at Gossoms End there is a black iron post inscribed 'Sparrows Herne Trust'. As the trust is being advertised (or, I prefer to think, commemorated) 90 years after its death, it is not surprising that enquiries are regularly made about Sparrows Herne.

It was in 1762 when private enterprise, in the form of a turnpike trust, took over the highway between Stanmore and Aylesbury. The Sparrows Herne Trust was empowered to collect tolls and in return keep the road in what, at the time, was considered good repair.

At various points along the 30 miles route, iron posts bearing the trust's name were erected, but one by one they disappeared and I believe that the post at Gossoms End is the sole survivor. It stands beside a white stone which, I imagine, has some special significance. But what? Perhaps a reader will supply the answer.

On the opposite side of the road, the wall facing the derelict site at Cross Oak Road corner bears the inscription:

'This party wall divides the property of the Corporation of the Free School of King Edward the Sixth and of Wm. Grover. Wm. Grover and his heirs and assigns are to keep this wall in repair. 1847.'

This has sometimes been misinterpreted as evidence of the former existence of a school on the derelict site. Nothing of the kind. The inscribed stone denoted the ownership of the land by Berkhamsted School.

THE MEETING HOUSE

While checking my facts in this part of the town, I had the good fortune to visit the Friends' Meeting House at the very time when workmen had just

removed a piece of timber bearing this pencilled inscription: 'E. Griffin, William Sterne (?), John Costin. In the year 1818 this place was built.'

All through the ages carpenters and masons have left signatures, marks and dates on new or restored buildings, and it is interesting to know that the men who built the Meeting House nearly 150 years ago bore names which crop up regularly in our registers. Costin, for example, was a member of a family which started a barge-building works in the town.

So far, apart from one trifling intrusion upon private property, I have kept to relics which are accessible to all. Canon Brown, I am sure, will not mind my referring to a stone which stands near the Rectory and proclaims that the Rector has the right of way along Green Lane to Grubbs Lane. It ends with the initials 'J.H.' (James Hutchinson, rector from 1851-71).

Grubbs Lane was one of the old names of Chesham Road, and Green Lane runs from a point just above Incents to the Rectory. It is not, and never has been, a public right of way.

Formerly, at the Chesham Road entrance to this little lane, there was a little pond which was fenced in and, later on, filled in. A similar pond was on the opposite side of Chesham Road, half-way up the steepest part of the hill. These ponds served a dual purpose; they helped to drain the road and, before being fenced in, enabled wagonners to water their horses on the gruelling haul up Chesham Road.

ON THE COMMON

Over a mile away, on Berkhamsted Common, Moor Cottage bears the inscription: 'This infirmary was built by the Parish of Berkhamsted, 1774. Robert Bates, William Billington, Churchwardens. Robert Hold, ———, Overseers.' (The second name is obliterated by a water pipe.)

Moor Cottage started its life as a pest house, or, as it would have been known in more modern times, as an isolation hospital. As late as 1856 it was let on condition that the tenant received into his house 'any case of infectious diseases that the parish, or a medical practitioner, may think fit to send thither.'

To conclude, do you know where, on the wall of the Town Hall and Market House, the names of the architects may be seen? The hunt is on! If you haven't a clue, I will supply it next month.

'BEORCHAM'

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