

When Every Man was a Road-Mender

The Stonewardens' Accounts

IN YEARS GONE BY the least popular men in the parish were probably the surveyors of highways, or stonewardens, as they were sometimes called. Two 'honest persons' were appointed by fellow-parishioners, and later on by the justices, to see that the roads were kept in good order. They received no payment for this duty; neither did the men who repaired the roads.

In 1555, all able-bodied men were required to work four days a year on the roads or pay other men to do the work for them. Farmers had the special duty of providing a cart and two able-bodied men, also for four days a year. In the reign of Elizabeth I, the number of days of compulsory, unpaid labour was increased to six.

LIABLE FOR DUTY

The ancient obligation of 'statute labour' did not come to an end until 1835, although long before that time nearly all the work on the roads was done by paid labour. It was in 1654 when parishes were empowered to make a highway rate, and originally this was allowed only as a temporary measure in addition to 'statute labour.' In Hertfordshire, the justices occasionally gave orders for the number of 'statute' days to be increased.

A decrease to two days a year is indicated by a list of persons in Northchurch parish who were liable to do statute duty for repairing the village highways in 1786. Occupiers of property worth £50 were required to send a cart with three horses and two men for two days or pay 4s. 6d. per day.

The roads were often in a dangerous and filthy condition, for the duty never aroused enthusiasm and was frequently evaded. Conditions were not helped by such people as Richard Hardinge,

who, in the 17th century, put 'heapes of dounge and strawe' on the highway between Berkhamsted and Wistone. His namesake, William Hardinge, caused an obstruction in Shootersway when he 'dug up, ploughed and diverted a common highway there called Shookers Way.' Then, in 1678, Thomas Winters was summoned for 'annoying the King's way near the Church by littering it with straw, so that it was impassable for carts.'

Our High Street was so badly out of repair and dirty in 1758 that 'the principal inhabitants' could not walk 'without great discomfort and incon-

BY

'BEORCHAM'

venience.' William Bates was appointed scavenger for the year, but he could not perform his duties until the parish had levied a special rate of 6d. in the £ 'to repair and cleanse the High Street.'

Books recording the activities and expenses of stonewardens are rather rare, but in Berkhamsted we are fortunate to possess an accounts book started in 1828 by John Gomm and N. Norris, 'surveyors of the Bye Roads.' (The main road was then controlled by the Sparrows Herne Turnpike Trust.)

At that relatively late period it seems that a few parishioners still worked on the road without payment—possibly because they could not or would not pay the rates. We find references to men 'at Duty Cart' with blanks in the cash column. In another entry, workmen received beer to the value of one shilling.

The weekly accounts show that in 1828 D. Geary and J. Glenister were

paid 8s. and 7s. respectively for six days' work. The number of roadmen varied considerably; in one week of November 1833, seven men worked six days, two receiving 7s., four 9s., and one 10s. In addition, a man named Groves worked six days and four nights for 13s., and it would be interesting to know what special emergency made night work necessary.

WORKING AT THE STONE CART

Here are some extracts from the book started by Gomm and Norris in 1828:

	£	s.	d.
1828 D. Sills at stone cart		2	0
15 yards of stones from the wharf	2	5	0
Wm. Lay Boy breaking stones 2 days		1	4
2 load of stones from J. Bedford		4	0
1829 J. Sear for repairing drain at Mr. Mills		1	6
Jas. Dodd for turning arch at Mr. King's		3	0
J. Ward for 1 Day at stone cart for Duty		—	—
4 load of stones from Churchyard		6	0
Mr. Newman at Duty Cart 8 days		—	—
Mr. J. Stevens at Duty Cart 3 days		—	—
2 shovels from Mrs. Prudames		7	8
1829 Mr. Ridgways men at stone cart Beer		1	0
Five pound of white Paint for fence		5	0
1831 Oak Plank for Drain by Water Lane		2	0
Reporting to state of Roads on Oath		2	0
Summonses for Rates		6	0
Mending sieve		6	
1 Hammer		8	
1 Hammer and wedge		1	1
1833 Stevens Bill for Stones in Water Lane		15	0
Skinner for repairs at Castle St. bridge		6	0
Kings Bull Post and Rails corner of Grubbs Lane (Chesham Road)	3	18	8

NEGLECTED DUTY

A list dated 1829 gives the following list of tools belonging to the stonewardens: 1 wheelbarrow, 1 scraper, 1 pick-axe, 1 shovel, 1 hedge-trimmer.

Henry Nash, whose *Reminiscences of Berkhamsted* appeared in 1890, remembered the 1830s and said that the stonewardens 'totally neglected their duty. If attention was bestowed upon

any favoured spot, say, the front of their own doorways, it was to pave them with small round pebbles.' Some of these pebbles survived on the High Street footpaths until modern times.

The roads remained in a poor state throughout the 19th century. As late as 1899 the *Berkhamsted Times* reported that there was so much mud and filth in the High Street between the Town Hall and King's Road corner that the nuisance was not abated until someone had shamed the authorities by sticking a placard in the mud, calling it 'The new sewage farm.'

THE PARISH SHOP

The many interesting changes which took place when the Urban District Council was formed in 1898 will be dealt with in a later article. Meanwhile, let us turn once more to the Churchwardens' Accounts for details of a remarkable enterprise of 1799. A vestry meeting was held to consider ways of helping the poor 'in consequence of the present high price of Provisions.' It was decided to establish 'a Shop in the Parish for the sale of good meat, soup, rice puddings, etc., at a very reduced price.'

This shop, the Vestry agreed, would prove a great benefit to 'our Poor neighbours, to whom 'potatoes and other substitutes for bread and flour' were to be sold.

'Taking into their most serious consideration the present price of Bread and Flour,' the Vestry stated, it was 'incumbent on every individual to lessen their consumption of these articles' by one-third of 'the usual quantity.'

CHURCH TO SPEND ANOTHER £1,106 ON MAINTENANCE

IN ACCEPTING the finance committee recommendations, the Parochial Church Council decided at its last meeting to spend £1,106 on essential maintenance. The amount is made up as follows: £106 on a path for the north side of All Saints' Church; £500 on implementation this year of the architect's quinquennial report recommendations; £500 on the same next year.

It was also decided to give £25 to the diocese of Nagpur.

OVERDRAFT PAID OFF

The hon. treasurer, Mr. Cyril Langley, reported that the overdraft on St. Peter's House had now been paid off, but that £2,683 was still owed on All Saints' House.

At the end of August this year the annual amount pledged under the stewardship scheme was £4,777—only £1 less than the amount at the corresponding period in the first year of stewardship.

COMMEMORATIVE TAPESTRY?

The Rector and Mr. W. Moss, vice-chairman and chairman of the Pageant Committee, gave details of an outline proposal put by that committee that a tapestry commemorating the pageant should be worked in the parish church, under the guidance of the Royal School of Needlework, and eventually hang permanently in the church.

Views both for and against the pro-

posal were given. On a point of order raised by Mr. R. J. Aitchison, the council voted to continue the discussion, even though the matter had not appeared on the agenda.

Eventually it was agreed to examine the proposal, though the council reserved the right to reject it at a later stage, and diocesan authority would in any case also have to be obtained.

ARE YOU A BUILDER?

There are two interesting posts waiting to be filled in the Diocese of Zambia. A Diocesan Builder is needed, preferably with tropical experience, able to supervise a series of building programmes in the diocese.

—OR AN ACCOUNTANT?

The other vacancy is for a Diocesan Accountant; someone with good accounting experience, able to cope with all the accountancy work in the diocese.

Both these posts need to be filled very quickly.

If you want to know more about these two jobs, write to the Rev. Maurice Wheatley at U.S.P.G., 15 Tafton Street, London, S.W.1. Are these the jobs for you? If so, write now. If not, pray that the right persons will respond soon.

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