

When the Gasworks was in the Town Centre

New Lamps for Old

A FAMOUS piece of house-agents' shorthand, 'all mod cons,' has almost gone out of circulation. Such conveniences as piped water, gas and electricity are taken for granted and no longer regarded as modern.

Neither are they ancient. Although electric light was demonstrated in Berkhamsted for the first time at an exhibition in 1886, it was a nine days' wonder and many years were to pass before we had a public supply of electricity. We had no main sewerage until 1894, no piped water until 1864, no gas until 1849.

That gas preceded water is surprising, but no more surprising than the site chosen for the first gas-works. It was at the junction of Mill Street and the Wilderness, right in the heart of the town. For over half of the Gas Company's 100 years of life—it was nationalised in the centenary year, 1949—successive headmasters of Berkhamsted School complained of the smells and noise created by the gas-works.

A GROWING CONCERN

All through the summer and autumn of 1849, builders and engineers were busy in Mill Street. The townspeople were startled to see trenches being dug along the streets; nothing like that had ever happened before. By November, Mr. Atkins had laid 71 service pipes. In the same month, the Gas Company accepted Mr. Sewell's tender for 30 tons of coal at 21s. a ton, 'to be delivered dry at the works, having been landed over the towing path on the Moor.'

Formed with a capital of £2,000, wholly subscribed by local residents, the Company issued a report on the first six months' operations on 29th April, 1850, and paid the first dividend. Within a year of the Company's birth the directors were talking of an extension of

the works and 'the purchase of land beyond what was stated in the original contract.' A growing concern, indeed.

Among the first customers was the London and North Western Railway Company, which asked if the Gas Company could 'afford to light the railway station at the sum it costs the Railway Company at present, £26 a year.' Yes! A pipe was laid down Mill Street to the old station near the 'Crystal Palace', and of the 24 lights, three were to burn all night, the remainder for shorter periods.

The Lighting Inspectors, appointed to supervise public lighting, requested 'a trial of the quality for 14 or 16 days by

BY

'BEORCHAM'

lighting the public lamps.' The transition was promptly made from candles or oil to gas. At first the lamps were to be lighted from an hour after sunset until an hour before sunrise (but no lighting at all when there was a full moon); later on it was decided to light all the lamps 'before night gets dark' until midnight, 'except Saturday night, and on that night at 1 o'clock on Sunday morning.' Quite!

In 1851, the churchwardens agreed to use gas for heating St. Peter's Church, at a cost of £8 for 27 Sundays, including Christmas Day; for any additional day there was to be a supplementary charge of 5s. The churchwardens apparently disputed a bill for filling the church boiler and the Gas Company waived the charge of 4s. 6d. Incidentally, an employee at the gas-works, Frank

Stevens, was engaged at 12s. 6d. a week, his duties including supervision of the boiler at the church on Sundays.

Wages were low by present-day standards; a man named Miles was engaged as works superintendent at 15s. a week in 1851, and in the following year a 'second man' was engaged at 10s. a week. In 1855 it was agreed that '16s. a week be offered to the man doing the work at night.'

MANY COMPLAINTS

The complaints department was often busy. Mr. Bird, of Mill Street, complained that drainage from the gas-works rendered his well unfit for use; the Gas Company sank a new well for him. Mr. Skinner was assured that there was no variation in the quality of the gas. Dr. Bartrum, headmaster of Berkhamsted School, was told that the charge for gas compared favourably with that charged by other companies in neighbouring towns. Sometimes, it seems, customers could have been treated a little more politely; in 1877 the secretary and servants of the Company were ordered 'to do all in their power to prevent any unpleasantness to anyone concerned.'

The Company itself was often on the warpath, especially before the Railway Company built a new station and sidings. It was often difficult to obtain adequate supplies of coal. In 1855 strong protests were made to the Railway Company about 'the difficulties under which we shall have to carry on our concern unless some relaxation is made in orders prohibiting the delivery of coal at this station.' To make matters worse, shortage of water made traffic by canal very uncertain that year.

REFUNDS FOR ALL

The situation worsened in 1873, when the Gas Company advised the chairman of the Railway Company that it was useless to order coal unless it could be unloaded. Two hundred tons were required immediately, otherwise 'the town, the station and signals, also the public buildings, including the Town Hall and churches, will be in darkness.'

The late 1870s were very difficult years for the Gas Company. Mr. Miller, the Lighting Inspector, declined to pay the gas bill, a sure sign that there was considerable feeling in the town against the Company. Legal action was taken against Mr. Miller, and the judge ruled that 'under the circumstances' payment

of a sum one-fourth less than the amount claimed by the Company would be sufficient. This decision at once prompted other consumers to demand a refund.

What were the circumstances mentioned by the judge? A very revealing statement was issued in 1879, stating that 'the works handed over to the present Board in the middle of last December were thoroughly out of repair and with a most inefficient plant totally inadequate to meet the increased demand for gas during the late severe winter...'

'During the six weeks from mid-December to end January (when the requirements of the town were greatest), the works only upon two occasions failed to afford a full supply of gas, although as happened when hard pressed once or twice, by accident or some unexplained cause, gas passed into the mains in an impure state. They consider therefore that the deduction of one-fourth of the price of the total amount of the gas supplied from September to April is far in excess of the loss or inconvenience which any consumer actually sustained.'

MOVE TO BILLET LANE

It was a costly crisis for the Company, but thereafter its troubles waned and business boomed. Early in the present century a move was made from the centre of the town to Billet Lane, and one does not have to be old to remember the many extensions that were made there until nationalisation and centralisation left us with only the two large gas-holders.

What a lot of gas has passed through the pipes of Berkhamsted since those early days in Mill Street, 1849!

Bottle Tops

NOW FOR THE SECOND DOG!

HAVING SAVED enough foil, and collected enough money for a Guide Dog for the Blind, Berkhamsted is swinging into action to obtain another dog. Mrs. J. B. Gardner, the new local collector, has arranged for another collection point: Messrs Ward and Sons, Fishmongers, of the Old Town Hall, will be pleased to receive bottle tops on behalf of the scheme.

We reprint the details of how every reader can help. If you are not yet collecting, now is the time to start!

Have you really got the heart to throw away a single milk bottle top, when by collecting them you can help to obtain a companion, and virtually a pair of eyes, for a blind person? Shut your eyes for a moment, and think what it must be like to live in perpetual darkness. Then decide that you will save every milk bottle top you can lay your hands on—ask your friends to save, too.

Last time Berkhamsted raised enough for a dog in a little over a year and a half. This time it should be only a year! Go to it, tattle boppers!

All contributors are kindly asked to note that contributions must be sent in by the 15th of the month.

Matter for publication should please be written on one side of the paper only.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Do you drink milk? Then you can help. Save milk bottle tops. Never throw a milk bottle top away. Clean aluminium is worth £75 a ton.

Put a jam jar by the kitchen sink. Put the used tops on the draining board. Pop them in the washing-up water next time you do the washing-up. So that they become clean. Then when they are dry, put them in the jam jar. When the jam jar is full, tip them into an old cereal packet or polythene bag or what have you.

When the packet or bag is full take it to one of the following:

COLLECTING POINTS

- 1—Mrs. J. B. Gardner, 23 Ashlyns Road (Tel. 3715 for substantial collections).
- 2—Mrs. J. Crisford, 57 Greenway.
- 3—'Diana', High Street, nearly opposite Swing Gate Lane.
- 4—Unit Stores, Lower Kings Road.
- 5—Mrs. J. Mortimer, Grocers, Kitchbury Parade.
- 6—Mr. L. Cook, Butcher, Northchurch.
- 7—Ward & Sons, Fishmongers, Old Town Hall.

Please Note

Bottle tops and other aluminium foil are now sent to one another, and 'silver paper' to another, so they must please be kept separate. And, please, TOPS AND FROZEN FOOD CONTAINERS MUST BE WASHED CLEAN, AND WRAPPERS MUST BE FREE OF ORDINARY PAPER.

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