

Phaetons, Broughams—and then the Petrol Age

Berkhamsted's First Motor-Car

IN LAST MONTH'S article we recalled the great day when Berkhamsted railway station was opened. Trains provided a speedy means of travel and transport which was not seriously challenged for some eighty years. Wherever there was a railway the stage coaches were withdrawn. But for short journeys, and for longer journeys that could not be made by train, the country still depended literally upon horse-power. Even on the canals, most of the barges and narrow boats were horse-drawn. Road traffic increased year by year, and coach-builders were busier than ever before.

Broughams, bouches, phaetons, raleighs, landaus, victorias, governess carts, four-wheeled dog carts, and goodness knows how many varieties of trade vehicles rattled over the roads of Victorian Berkhamsted.

THE COACHBUILDERS

Our leading firm of coachbuilders, E. King & Sons, with High Street premises now occupied by Donald Lockhart Ltd., enjoyed the patronage of 'the nobility and gentry.' The coaches have gone, but some of the coats of arms which decorated the woodwork have been saved. Another coachbuilder, Mr. Pethybridge, paraded his latest models outside his works near the corner of Cowper Road. A rival coachbuilder, Mr. Holliday, whose name survives in Holliday Street, had the sagacity to cater for the town's cyclists, a steadily growing band from 1870 onwards.

In those clippity-clop, bone-shaking days there were cursing matches in narrow, winding roads between drivers of long timber carts and common carriers with wide, heavy wagons. Boys climbed on the back of the carts for free rides, and shouts of 'Whip behind!'

brought a stinging sequel. There was a horsey smell in the streets, and cottage gardens never lacked manure.

Road accidents were frequent. So were prosecutions for careless driving. Many a local man appeared before the magistrates on a charge of being 'drunk and incapable' while holding—or, if asleep, perhaps not holding—the reins. Some of the worst offenders were saved from prosecution by the homing instinct of a faithful, sober horse. And bolting horses caused many a scare.

Morning and evening, top-hatted season ticket-holders rode to and from

BY 'BEORCHAM'

the railway station in their own carriages. Lord Brownlow's arrival at his own private entrance to the station was almost a state occasion. At the opposite end of the social scale, a few local men earned a meagre living by pushing hand trucks loaded with luggage from station to house or shop.

CABS AND TRUCKS

It was a joy to behold a top-hatted commercial traveller striding along, followed at a respectful distance by a porter pushing a truck-load of samples, usually in wicker hampers. Top salesmen hired cabs and arrived at the shops in grand style.

Cabs were available almost as soon as the railway was opened. Mr. H. Lane, of the King's Arms, ran a horse omnibus 'to and from the railway station and principal trains.' The fare was sixpence, and orders for passengers

and parcels were 'punctually attended to.'

Mr. Harvey Bedford took over this thriving business from Mr. Lane. He kept a dozen horses in stables behind the King's Arms and owned wagonettes, a 31-seater four-horse brake, landaus and victorias. In the early years of this century the omnibus fare was still sixpence per person to any destination in Berkhamsted, or a shilling to Northchurch. The one-horse vehicle had six inside seats and space on the roof for luggage.

MAN WITH A RED FLAG

The horse remained supreme because a Highways Act of 1865 restricted mechanical traction on public highways to a maximum speed of four miles an hour and insisted upon a flag-bearer. We still have old residents who recall seeing steam rollers and traction engines, and a few early motor cars, chugging along the highway at speeds limited to the pace of a man who walked in front carrying a red flag.

Because of these restrictions, we lagged behind countries where inventors made great progress first with steam cars and then with motor cars. Frenchmen were speeding from Paris to the seaside and even holding speed trials while Britons broke the law if they exceeded walking pace. But the speed limit was raised to 14 miles per hour in 1896 and to 20 miles per hour in 1903.

SOLID TYRES—AND CANDLES

It was just sixty years after the railway was opened at Berkhamsted that a pioneer local motorist, Mr. J. W. Wood, bought a second-hand 4½ h.p. Benz from a St. Albans doctor. If it wasn't the first car seen in Berkhamsted, it was almost certainly the first car owned by a Berkhamstedian. It was tall, sturdy, noisy, with solid tyres, large wire suspension wheels, coach-style brass lanterns with candles, and no windscreen.

The whole town turned out to see this strange contraption. And while Mr. and Mrs. Wood drove around in the Benz, their son added to the wonders of the age by riding what was probably the town's first motor-cycle, a Kerry.

Mr. Wood's car tackled the steepest Chiltern hills and then disgraced itself on a level stretch of the road at Broadway. After a damaging swerve into the roadside verge, it was necessary to hire one cart horse to tow 4½ horse-power to

Berkhamsted's first garage, a greenhouse. Neddy was still supreme.

A great hazard in those early days was dust—dust which rose from rough, unmetalled roads and justified the use of those fetching veils worn by women passengers. Dad, with no windscreen and not very effective goggles, braked hard and waited until visibility was restored.

Mr. Wood paid 10d. a gallon for 'Bowley' spirit, which was supplied in cylindrical tins of the type used for paraffin.

It was customary to take delivery of a new car at the works. Many a pioneer Berkhamsted motorist travelled by train to Coventry and drove home in the family's new pride and joy.

FIRST TAXI-CAB

Coachbuilders, hay and straw dealers and harness-makers were still doing brisk business when George Loosley's Berkhamsted Directory of 1903 announced that William Foster, a Chesham cycle dealer, had opened a Berkhamsted branch and 'gone into the motor trade.' This branch shop became Dwight's Garage, offering 'first class garaging for ten cars, repairs, wash down, inspection pit; motor driving taught.' Dwight's introduced the town's first motor taxi-cab in 1913 with a stand at the railway station, and the first taxi-driver was Jack Tooley. His first fare in the seven-seater Darracq asked to be taken to Whetstone.

A pity there isn't space for anything more than a passing reference to Southey's garage in Elm Grove, where 'Southey' motor-cycles were assembled. I am still hoping that someone, somewhere, has one of these veteran machines.

BELFRY PIGEON LOOKS AT THE

Flower Ladies

AS I FLY through the Nave to my perch in the Belfry, I see them, and so alight on the window-sill high up in the roof to watch for awhile and listen.

They come in singly, with arms full of flowers, and go to their own particular corners. They are quiet and yet bustling with enthusiasm, one thought in mind—to make our church beautiful for Sunday.

They put their flowers in a heap on the floor and go to find vases with fresh water, and then the work begins. Each in her own way arranges the flowers to best advantage, with great care and patience, standing now far off, now near, to observe the effect. At last, when all is finished, they are looked at as a whole, to see how they fit in with all the other flowers, and to see the general impression.

Last of all (but not least) the dustpans and brushes come out and every fallen petal and scattered leaf is brushed up, ledges are dusted and water splashes mopped away.

Quietly they leave, just as they came, but the church is no longer the same—it is transformed, beautiful again with flowers, for Sunday, for the Glory of God.

This happens every week throughout all the year, year after year; in some cases throughout the whole of a lifetime. Such devotion will surely reap reward (although this is not sought).

At Easter, Whitsun, Harvest Thanksgiving and Christmas, other, extra ladies are invited to help with the decorations and at such times there is tremendous activity, even husbands coming along to lift heavy vases and carry water. After such industry, the church is a splendid sight, smelling most fragrant.

I fly now to my secret entrance to the Belfry to tell my friend Nancy about all this, and she in turn, tells me that she saw some of these same Flower Ladies, our own Berkhamsted Flower Ladies, arranging flowers in St. Albans Abbey for the great Festival of Flowers that has just been held there. They had been asked to work with a colour scheme of red and against the grey stone of the Abbey their flowers showed to great advantage. Nancy liked their arrangements better than most, the others being chiefly professional and far more formal in their work.

What an honour for our Flower Ladies to help decorate the Abbey! and how beautifully they did it!

And 'tis my faith that every flower enjoys the air it breathes.

I told Nancy that it was fashionable these days to quote poetry, even from Wordsworth, but she just stuffed up her feathers and said 'Coo'.

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