

From Market Stalls to Supermarkets

SHOPS IN BYGONE BERKHAMSTED

By 'BEORCHAM'

SUGGESTING AN ARTICLE on the history of shops and shopping in Berkhamsted, a reader posed three questions: At what time was Berkhamsted large enough to have its first shops? Who were the first shopkeepers? What were their trades? These are unanswerable questions.

Little is known about shops here, or for that matter anywhere else, in early times. Perhaps this is why so few historians, national or local, attempt to trace the evolution of department stores and supermarkets from medieval workshops and market booths.

Fortunately, a great deal of information may be gleaned from 17th century and later documents. By the time Napoleon decided that we were a nation of shopkeepers, directories were appearing with the names of shopkeepers and other tradesmen in every town.

SELF-SUFFICIENT

Some readers have doubtless visited Pompeii and other ancient sites where shop counters used by the Romans are still standing. One imagines that shopping in Roman times bore some resemblance to present-day shopping; the counters, though of stone, certainly have a familiar look.

But it is quite impossible to identify ourselves with our ancestors of Norman times. They depended almost entirely upon the things they grew or could make for themselves. Berkhamsted, like other little towns, was practically self-sufficient. Fortunate indeed were the few who had money to spend. No doubt there was a great deal of bartering among neighbours.

Of course, some men were better than others at making things, and some farmers had surplus produce to sell. Markets came into being, probably at a very early date in Berkhamsted, for we

know that our market day was changed from Sunday to Monday in 1216. Some of the more successful stallholders probably became shopkeepers. This still happens!

SHOP ROW

What may be the earliest reference to shops in Berkhamsted appears in the Register of Edward the Black Prince, dated November 3, 1357:

'Remission and quit claim to Henry de Berkhamstede, the prince's yeoman and pantler, and his heirs, for good service rendered by him in Gascony and especially at the battle of Poitiers, of all the rents and works which he was bound to render to the prince yearly for the following lands in Berkhamstede which he holds of the prince . . . 3s. for two shops in Le Shopperowe, part of a tenement once belonging to Matthew Turiet and afterwards to John Berthelot . . .'

This was one of several grants to Henry, and the 3s. quit rent mentioned above was the rent paid by a freeholder or copyholder in lieu of service. A slight indication of the cost of living at that time is provided by another entry in the Black Prince's Register. William de Wolston, of Berkhamsted, annually rendered the following for three messuages and two virgates of land: 35s. rent; four cocks, price 4d.; four hens, price 8d.; 40 eggs at Easter, price 2d.; etc. These were not necessarily shop prices!

CRAFTSMEN'S SHOPS

Where was the 14th century Shop Row? In all probability it was between what is now Tesco's store and the Court House, and faced the highway and market place. It is thought that Back Lane was not created until Elizabethan times, when market booths and butchers' shambles may have been converted into permanent buildings, forming a new

Shop Row in front of the old Shop Row. But Back Lane could be of much earlier date than the late 16th century.

We may assume that the 14th century Shop Row consisted mainly of workshops where all the goods sold were made on the premises by tailors, shoemakers, weavers, carpenters and others. No doubt we had butchers, bakers and grocers at a very early date. But shopkeepers who did not produce anything

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at all themselves, but merely bought and sold other people's goods, were few. They were probably still in the minority until fairly modern times.

A tailor's shop, probably a very old-established one, was in existence in Shop Row in 1582, when 'a message which is situate and standyng in Berkhamstede aforesaid by the high streate there and in a rowe of howses there called Shoppe Row, abutting south upon the highway and north on Honey Lane,' was conveyed from John Surman, a tailor, to William Roger, also a tailor. Was Honey Lane an early name for Back Lane, or was it perhaps behind Back Lane?

In 1616, Norden and Salter's survey of the manor mentions 'three tenements in Shoprow with a garden and backside in the Back Lane,' and there are references to other freehold tenements in Shop Row.

QUALITY AND QUANTITY

From early times tradesmen were required to give customers a fair deal. Tasters of flesh, bread and beer were appointed annually, and men found guilty of selling bread, meat, fish and beer of insufficient quality or at too high a price were punished at the Portmote Court. As long ago as the 13th century an inspector known as an 'alnager' examined and measured every length of cloth, fixing upon it a seal if satisfactory and confiscating defective or short lengths.

An old document in St. Peter's Church chest, copied from 'the warrant of the Maior of St. Albans,' tells us that all bakers, brewers, alehouse-keepers, tipplers, taverners, mercers, drapers, grocers, chandlers, butchers, smiths, weavers, millers, glovers, etc., were required to 'appear with weights and measures to

have them tested by the Standards.' In the 17th century the Corporation of Berkhamsted kept a brass ell (the ancient cloth measure still used by crossword compilers) at the 'Towne Hall' (Court House), as well as a brass half pock, a brass pint pot, etc.

NOT APPRENTICED

Men who traded without having served an apprenticeship were often in trouble. In 1658 Henry Sears (shoemaker) and John Bilby and Stephen Stanley (bakers) were prosecuted, as was Charles Edge, a yeoman, who, in 1663, evidently thought he could make a better living by dyeing. But he had never been apprenticed to a dyer. Another man prosecuted for lacking an apprentice's indenture was George Verney, a baker (1665). It is interesting to recall that Mr. H. J. Verney was a popular and highly qualified baker in Berkhamsted within the memory of many older residents; perhaps he was a descendant of the un-indentured George.

Incidentally, small change was so scarce in the 17th century, that tradesmen issued their own tokens, usually to the value of a halfpenny. John Seeling (1665), John Carvell (1667), William Babb (1667) and William Preston (1668) issued tokens in Berkhamsted. At a much later date, in 1794, a halfpenny token bearing the words 'Lace Manufactory', with 'Pay at Leighton, Berkhamsted or London' on the obverse side, were in circulation, proving the importance of the lace trade at that time.

To the best of my knowledge, we have no record of the number and variety of shops in Berkhamsted until directories were published. We shall draw upon these interesting sources in a later article.

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