

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BERKHAMSTED

By R. J. Aitchison, F.R.I.C.S.

Berkhamsted was relatively insignificant in the Middle Ages because the Castle was the important feature and the town was literally overshadowed thereby. The great entrance to the Castle was on the south side and led by a bridge across the water through ground now occupied by the railway to Castle Street, which was more important than the High Street.

When the Castle fell into decay in early Tudor times Castle Street still retained some importance by reason of Dean Incent's foundation of a Grammar School.

There were one or two minor lanes in the town shown on the copy of a medieval plan which I have, such as Elwynslane, otherwise Chesham Road.

By the reign of Henry VIII, and the advent of the School, the population was only around 800. Indeed, there was little in the way of expansion until the 19th century. Nevertheless, Berkhamsted was created a Borough in the reign of James I, but the Corporation seemingly derived no benefits from its privileges and ceased to exist as such in the reign of Charles II. Writing in the 17th century, Norden says that malt making was the principal trade of the town, followed by wood industries.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Grand Junction Canal was newly in being to be followed by the railway and opening of the first station in 1838.

Trade and population increased to the extent that during the second half of the century it was necessary to build a new station around 1875 to replace the old one and to provide for adequate coal sidings. All of this is graphically described in Mr Birchnell's 'Short History of Berkhamsted'. In those days there was no Lower Kings Road and the road did not materialise until about 1885.

In 1946 I took over the residue of the practice of Messrs Robinson & Mead, Hemel Hempstead, one of the oldest firms of Land Agents and Auctioneers in the Dacorum District. Having returned from War Service, there was no time to go through a large collection of papers of historical interest. Nevertheless, I discovered an old Ordnance Map (I believe the date is 1868) and this clearly shows the centre of Berkhamsted with no Lower Kings Road or Prince Edward Street. The site of the first gas works in The Wilderness is indicated, also the existence of a Brewery in Water Lane and another at The Swain.

Craft industries in the shape of wood have long been a traditional feature of the town. Agriculture

also made an important contribution to local business in the past.

One important industrial development in the 19th Century, of purely local origin, was the manufacture of sheep-dip by William Cooper. From the first mill in Ravens Lane, there grew a firm with 120 employees in 1885. In 1925, the business amalgamated with McDougall & Robertson and twenty years ago, the firm of Cooper, McDougall & Robertson became part of the Wellcome Foundation.

Turning to the housing side, and quoting from Mr Birchnell's excellent Short History, building on a large scale did not start until the Pilkington Manor Estate east of Castle Street was sold in 1862. New roads were created between the High Street and Canal and some years later George Street and Ellesmere Road came into being.

Following the sale of agricultural land at Kitsbury in 1868, housing development started in the western part of the town and with the revival of Berkhamsted School and improved train services to London, other parts became ripe for development, such as Steel's Meadow and Doctors Commons Building Estate.

The first gas works commenced operations in 1849, piped water supply in 1864 but there was no main drainage system until the latter part of the 19th century. Berkhamsted Urban District Council came into being in 1898.

In Edwardian times, further development took place, mainly infill sites, and one can see examples in a number of roads in the area from Kings Road to Shrublands Road. Incidentally, Shrublands Avenue is almost one hundred per cent Edwardian.

Then came the Great War but soon after house building resumed. Berkhamsted Co-operative Society carried out some development in Greenway and David Pike launched the Ashlyns Road area. Other projects were undertaken by firms such as Bunn & Green, the Gilberts and Charles Harrowell.

In this period of the 1920's, the eastern end of the town became a focus of interest leading to the initiation of one large area of development, by the Berkhamsted U.D.C., namely the Swing Gate Lane Estate.

In the Particulars I have there is a lay-out plan indicating 250 plots of land for sale in roads such as Swing Gate Lane, Chestnut Drive and Woodlands Avenue.

Unsold plots and surplus land prompted the Council to provide Council houses.

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(PART 2 continued from January's edition)

Sometime later and beyond Swing Gate Lane, another Estate came into being, namely the Hall Park Estate. It originally formed part of the land attached to the Hall, the name of a Georgian mansion which stood very close to the main road, about 100 yards east of Swing Gate Lane.

The last owner of The Hall was the late Mr Edward Greene before it became the Preparatory section of Berkhamsted School. Owing to dry rot and other defects, the building was sold in 1937 and demolished.

Hall Park Estate extended from the road known as Hall Park to the track known as Garden Field Lane. This was a private enterprise project and plots were sold to those who wished to build. An average sized plot was around one quarter of an acre. Apart from the road known as Hall Park, development tended to be slow in the 1930's due to the sluggish economic climate that prevailed. Even in those days, I was firmly convinced that Hall Park Estate would come into its own and indeed lived there for some time. This pleasant residential area makes an excellent entrance to the town.

In time sequence and also in the same district, I will next speak of Cedar Road. Mr Edward Greene sold some land which he still owned to Mr C. L. Gorwyn in 1934/35. Mr Gorwyn was a speculative builder from Edgware and he carried out much of the Cedar Road development. As regards the actual road, Mr Gorwyn told me that it was Mr Percy Bilton's first road contract. Semi-detached houses on the left of Cedar Road sold for £895 and the slightly larger four bedroom types were priced at £995. Afterwards, Mr Gorwyn's son joined him and I was able to persuade him to build detached houses. Mr Gorwyn bought

further land and also started Hillside Gardens but building operations ceased in 1940, owing to the War.

Whilst in the Hall Park area, I would like to speak of the late Mr Edward Greene. He was the rich uncle referred to in Graham Greene's autobiography.

Mr Edward Greene was a Governor of Berkhamsted School and his brother was Headmaster from 1911 to 1927.

Shortly after I had opened an office in Lower Kings Road, a message was received to the effect that Mr Greene wished to see me. One can still remember the sense of excitement when the chauffeur opened the office door and in stepped a tall and aristocratic figure who looked at me with steely grey eyes. After making a comment on my age (the young were not emancipated in those days) Mr Greene said he had checked on my credentials and wished to appoint me as his Land Agent. Conditions were laid down. There must be no errors. No opinions were to be offered unless they were invited. Above all, I would be expected to 'jump to it' immediately instructions were given. It was evident he was a man of culture but a hard business man. It was a challenge to which I was glad to respond and Mr Greene became my first client.

It transpired he owned land and property in Berkhamsted, also certain business interests and was clearly endowed with the spirit of the entrepreneur.

Richard Betham, a young architect, was engaged by Mr Greene to draw plans for various projects and he was provided with an office over the Court Cafe, a building owned by Mr Greene. Mr Greene would visit Berkhamsted once a fortnight and we had to be standing at the ready. It reminded me of the

opening verse of a well-known Advent hymn – ‘Ye servants of the Lord, each in his office wait’. Very naughtily, my parody of the verse ran as follows:

‘Ye servants of Lord Greene
each in his office wait,
observant of his every word
and watchful never to be late!’

Betham has for some time practised as a Chartered Architect near Grays Inn. We both had a great respect for our mutual client.

Mr Greene was deeply attached to Berkhamsted School and I believe it was largely through his efforts that the playing fields at the top of Chesham Road were acquired. I certainly recall his gift to the School of the Greene Field between Lower Kings Road and Newcroft.

He also had a strong affection for the town and was keen to see it develop.

Pursuing my development saga and still at the eastern end of the town, Mr Greene built Hall Park Filling Station (later extended), also five shops and flats known as Hall Walk, almost facing Swing Gate Lane. At the rear, some lock-up garages were built, also Londrina Terrace, a block of six small houses.

The continuing sluggish state of the national economy (there was little money around in those days) coupled with advancing years, led Mr Greene to decide to auction all his holdings in the town. He felt that a large auction was asking too much of someone in his twenties with the result that the sale was a joint exercise on the part of Messrs Knight Frank & Rutley and myself, in June 1937. There were twenty-eight Lots and I have a copy of the Particulars and Conditions of Sale, the latter drawn up by Mr Greene’s solicitors, Messrs Vaisey & Turner of Tring. Considerable money was spent on publicity and many of the Tube Stations in London carried the large posters advertising the sale. The national press contained write-ups and much effort was made.

On the great day, the Town Hall was full and the Auction was conducted by Colonel Gibson, then Senior Partner of Knight Frank & Rutley. Sadly, the Auction was not a success and only a few Lots changed hands. Mr Greene was much saddened and within a short space of time, he departed this life.

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(PART 3 continued from March's edition)

Moving round to the north-eastern side of the town, I will now refer to Meadway. It was known as the Berkhamsted Common Estate and came into being in the 1920's. The person largely responsible was the late Mr Harold Merriman, F.R.I.B.A., who lived at Earls Riding, Gravel Path and practised as a Chartered Architect in London. It was Mr Merriman's idea to sell plots to those who desired to build superior type houses and there were stipulations as to net prime costs. Due to prevailing conditions, progress was slow and many of the plots were sold after World War II according to my office records.

We next move to a larger complex of development. Much of the land northwards from Berkhamsted belonged to the Brownlow family - indeed they also owned land south of the railway. The vast Ashridge Estate was split up in the 1920's but the initial stages of a break-up relative to the development of Berkhamsted did not occur until the 1930's. Behind the station, land was acquired by Corolite Construction Ltd., and this firm constructed the first section of Bridgewater Road, Castle Hill Avenue and Close, also the lower part of Castle Hill. The consultant architect was Mr Bruce Burge, who still lives in one of the first houses built facing the Castle. Immediately before the last war my office was selling detached houses in Castle Hill Avenue at around £1,250 each.

The other area of development also on the north side that commenced in the 1930's was known as Dell Field Estate. Another section of

Bridgewater Road was formed, linked to Billet Lane. Amusingly, we had three Bridgewater Roads in the 1930's. Two I have just mentioned and there was a small cul-de-sac road off New Road, Northchurch, similarly named. Dell Field was the first development carried out by the Constantine family, then consisting of father and two sons, namely John Lupton and Harry Constantine. The family hailed from Blackpool and dull days were brightened by accounts of exotic illuminations in that resort. At Dell Field, semi-detached houses were built to sell at £550 each. Even at that price sales were inclined to be slow but thanks to an energetic assistant whom I employed, fair progress was made.

At this point and on a more general note, you may wonder why things were so slow before 1940, the time when building ceased on account of the second World War. Older property was very difficult to sell. Indeed, much of the business was concerned with unfurnished lettings as the majority of house seekers had little in the way of capital, although there was no problem over mortgages. Furthermore, the demand was largely restricted to two categories, those coming to Berkhamsted for the Boys' School or the Girls' School, and employees of Cooper, McDougall & Robertson. Unfurnished rents ranged from £50 to £75 per year. Those coming to Berkhamsted for Schools found it an advantage to rent because there was no problem over selling when children had finished their education.

1936 was an interesting year. There was a sudden demand for cinema sites. Shipman &

King owned the Court Theatre, now replaced by the Tesco Supermarket. They were concerned lest another firm should step in and through my introduction they bought a large and very dilapidated period property known as Egerton House, a photograph of which appears in Mr Birtchnell's 'Bygone Berkhamsted'. After demolition, the Rex Cinema was built and opened in 1938. At the time of dealing with Egerton House, I had no idea that the property had former connections with the Llewellyn Davies family and James Barrie. It was then that I learned that Berkhamsted could be volcanic! Imagine my horror when a local resident stepped into my office and the following dialogue ensued - Are you Aitchison? Answer - Yes sir. How long have been open?

Not very long, sir. Then you won't be here another year, you young vandal!

Also in 1938 the Civic Centre was opened.

On the opposite side of the road another change was in progress. In 1939, on behalf of Mr W. F. Matchett, Ladies Outfitter, I arranged the sale of his premises for the site of the present Woolworth Store. This was a pointer in the central zone for the shape of things to come.

Talking of the shape of things to come, leads me to refer to planning matters. Berkhamsted had been involved in town planning matters before the War and I recall the existence of Joint Planning Committee with Tring.

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(PART 4 continued from April's edition)

During the War, planning became a centre of interest by reason of Professor Abercrombie's Greater London Plan which was produced in 1944. The whole of Hertfordshire was included in the Greater London Plan as Professor Abercrombie considered that the County should be planned as part of the Metropolitan problem. His report dealt with Green Belt issues, new roads, etc., but the most momentous proposal was the suggestion that over a million people should be moved from the more densely central parts of London, mainly to New Towns and overspills.

Locally, planning had also been a topic for consideration during the War. A Reconstruction Committee had put forward a proposal that all premises between Water Lane and St Peter's Church should be demolished to open up the view of the Church as it used to exist before what is referred to by Mr Birtchnell as 'Grab all row' came into being. Having moved to my present office just before the War, I was much concerned. Water Lane area was suggested for a boulevard and water gardens. However, having been retained by Clients to oppose, I recall the battle which I had in this Chamber with Mr Harry Hill K.C., who was acting for the Council at a Public Inquiry soon after the War. From the evidence it seemed that the economics of the scheme had not been fully considered and nothing more came of the matter.

Returning to the housing side, the War had left various areas partly developed. Castle Hill Estate was a case in point. Corolite

Construction Ltd., had been wound up and the undeveloped land was bought by Constantines. This firm also acquired what used to be known as The Park, consisting of the land between Dell Field Estate and Castle Hill Estate as shown in a post-war aerial photograph. The intervening link of Bridgewater Road was formed, also other roads and the area became fully developed in the 1960's. Constantines also bought the uncompleted upper sections of Hall Park Estate as the former owners had died and the purchase also included five acres at the eastern end which they did not develop but which was sold to other Contractors when they ceased operations in the late 1960's.

In the Hall Park area, I was also engaged in the sale of uncompleted sections of the Cedar Road Estate to Wimpey Ltd., who later developed Lombardy Drive and completed Hillside Gardens.

Generally speaking, the property market in the 1950's was steady as development got going in various parts of the town. Millfield House, Gravel Path with its adjoining land was bought and developed by Prowting Ltd., and in the Shootersway area, Barncroft and its land was developed by a builder from Bushey.

Berkhamsted had its first car park in 1953 following negotiations which I had with the U.D.C. concerning land belonging to Kepstons both sides of Water Lane. Incidentally, the U.D.C. had also been engaged in housing development for Durrants Farm was bought in the immediate post-war era (now the Durrants Estate) and later they acquired Stoneys Farm, now Westfield, although the Abercrombie

Report had recommended a 'green wedge' between Berkhamsted and Northchurch. In 1957 and acting for the owners, I negotiated the sale of Lagley to the Council.

The town did not 'take off' until the 1960's due in some measure to the electrification of the railway. Economic conditions had improved.

Infill sites began to attract attention. For instance, Shootersway was static, apart from Barncroft, until 1960 but as soon as one owner found it profitable to sub-divide land or garden, others followed. Indeed, it became highly contagious. Nevertheless, development kept house prices steady and it was not until the

1970's that we had to face up to road and house spirals.

In order to promote a balanced community, I have always believed that every town should have some degree of industry. Older crafts tend to die out and new processes need to be accommodated. Northbridge Road came into being soon after the last War and I well recall acting for a Client in the purchase of the land from Lord Brownlow's Agent at Grantham and taking levels for the road. Development has steadily proceeded and the final stage has now been reached.

Robert Aitchison

