

## IN THE WILDERNESS

By 'Beorcham'

Why is one of the town's oldest roads called the Wilderness? This question was put to me recently, and I could not give an answer. The name has several meanings—a desert, a garden left to run wild, an uncultivated or uninhabited area, and so on. No one lives in the Wilderness today, but certainly it was not uninhabited in years gone by.

Now seldom visited and the least inviting of all our side streets, the Wilderness runs from Back Lane to Mill Street. Like Water Lane, it is much shorter than it was before the car park was made.

Formerly, the Wilderness had a rather unsavoury reputation. Older residents may recall being told, as children, to stay away from what was considered a very rough quarter. Earlier still, when street lighting was almost non-existent, it required no small amount of courage to make one's way through the Wilderness. Here I quote our Victorian chronicler, Henry Nash, who adds that there were many places of evil repute that were dreaded by timid folk.

Dread, yes, but "evil repute" is a little unkind, for some worthy people living in the Wilderness could not afford to go anywhere else. The cramped, neglected cottages had ghastly surroundings. At the Back Lane end of the Wilderness were stables and slaughterhouses; then, on the right, was a burial ground, followed by the gasworks, belching flames, smoke and fumes. Between two groups of cottages on the left was a gasholder; two more gasholders were on the opposite side of the road. Farther on, near the junction of the Wilderness, Water Lane and Mill Street, was another burial ground and the Black Ditch, an open sewer.

In 1851, 38 people lived in eleven small, dilapidated cottages in the Wilderness. A twelfth cottage was unoccupied at the time of the census. An average of a little over three persons per cottage does not suggest overcrowdings, but one cottage was occupied by seven people—a labourer, his wife and 14 years old son, a widow and her 16 years old son, a labourer aged 46 and a tailor aged 20.

Rents were low—a little over a shilling a

week. When five freehold cottages in the Wilderness were sold by auction in 1875, they were recommended to "small capitalists, members of building societies and others seeking a safe investment to pay good interest." But all they could look forward to was £29.5s. a year, the total rental of the five cottages.

A mildly sarcastic comment in the Parish Magazine (1874) suggested that the Wilderness was giving "signs of becoming a most fashionable quarter." A new building in the little road had just been rented by the rector, the Rev. J.W. Cobb, for use as a Mission Room for all parochial purposes—parish library, mothers' meetings, classes, library, etc.—as accommodation at the Rectory for such meetings was no longer adequate. The new room must have been capacious to hold 70 mothers, some with their babies, who attended the opening ceremony. They took tea, sang suitable hymns, and after a little advice on the theme, "a stitch in time saves nine," the mothers left, saying they had had a pleasant time.

But the Mission Room in the Wilderness had a short life. Within a year the Bourne scholars were transferred to the National School at the Court House, and parochial gatherings were transferred to the Bourne School, which later became the first home of Berkhamsted School for Girls and is now the National Westminster Bank (220 High Street).

The gasworks was transferred to Billet Lane in the early years of this century, and a further improvement came in 1916-17, when the Court Theatre was built between Water Lane and the Wilderness. Further slum clearance took place when the theatre was enlarged in 1934.

For many years both roads have been dilapidated, but many older residents remember the slums which Edward Greene, of The Hall, described in 1918 as "a reproach to the town that has allowed several areas of the worst character to exist for so long in its midst." The Wilderness, he added, was "an insanitary agglomeration of dilapidated cottages unfit for human habitation."

All the same, I hope we shall always keep the name, The Wilderness.