

BACK LANE—AND BACK AGAIN!

*"Beorcham" chats about the Court House
and its neighbours*

How old is the Court House? No one can give a definite date, but it was probably built in the first half of the sixteenth century, perhaps on the site of an older building at the east end of "le Shopperowe" (Shop Row), mentioned as early as 1357.

During the reign of Henry VIII some interesting changes were taking place in the heart of the old town. For instance, the tower of St. Peter's Church was raised to its present height, and shortly afterwards Dean Incent's grammar school was built. This school, the town's first large brick building, required skills far different from those of the men who used massive timbers for the Court House, but it is possible that the two buildings were erected within a few years of each other.

What was the town like when these changes were taking place? Apart from St. Peter's Church, Berkhamsted could not have been a very impressive place. The Castle was already in decay, and the town was really only a village, and a small one at that, by modern standards. The population was probably about 700 in the reign of Henry VIII.

Let us imagine that we are entering Berkhamsted from Gossoms End in those far-off times. What is now a wide, straight highway was a very rough track with lumpy grass verges, dusty or muddy according to the weather and at all times dirty and smelly.

There were few wagons and still fewer carriages to churn up a much neglected highway. However, much use was made of packhorses. Horse-riders and walkers pleased themselves whether they used the road or the verges, as did the cattle, sheep and pigs that were driven to local and distant markets.

Whether the great west front of St. Peter's Church could be seen from afar is doubtful, for there were many large roadside trees, but with the one exception of the quaint little Market House near the top of Water Lane, a view of the Church was not obstructed by buildings.

Now try to imagine the scene without the present row of shops between Water Lane and the Church. Here was a narrow village-type green where the weekly markets and annual fairs were held. The Court House and shops and houses on the same building line faced the green, and it was only when market stalls and shambles were replaced by permanent buildings that the Court House and its neighbours were consigned to the shadows of Back Lane.

Note the name. Back Lane is an ancient, honourable and appropriate name, but in its lack of wisdom the late Urban District Council cocked a snook at local history and installed new nameplates proclaiming Church Lane. I still hope that the original name will be restored.

In years gone by I had a great liking for Back Lane. It was a genuine bit of old Berkhamsted, down-at-heel perhaps but rather nice with its ancient cobble-stones from which the tradesmen's horses kicked brilliant sparks at night. So quiet was this lane that the High Street could have been hundreds of yards away. But times have changed and demolitions have done nothing to improve the scene. Today one is all too conscious of huge, ugly fire escapes and conspicuous drainpipes.

Back Lane, then, is not what it was, but let us take a short walk and stir some old memories. Next door to the Court House stands what many of us still call the sexton's house. It was built for the master of the first local Church of England school, which opened in the Court House in 1838.



Photo from "Bygone Berkhamsted"

I recollect the late Mr. J. E. Porrett, a former sexton, pointing out to me a little doorway, now bricked up, through which the master entered the school direct from his drawing room.

Next door to this house is an old building which, I understand, was once used by a tallow-chandler. He did a roaring trade making and selling "penny dips" and larger candles before everybody had gas or electric lighting. There was no need for the chandler to advertise; acrid fumes of his tallow could be sniffed far, far away!

Nearby were some old cottages and slaughterhouses. Then, at Water Lane corner, a half-timbered house, probably as old as the Court House, ended its days as a shop which had been kept by a famous local character, Go-ey Adams. It had also been used as a brushworks. The house was pulled down in 1916 for the Court Theatre

to take its place. At the same time, and for the same purpose, the old Salvation Army barracks, reached by a flight of rickety wooden steps, were pulled down.

Finally, let us return to the east end of Back Lane to renew acquaintance with our old friend, now in tip-top condition after many years of ill-health. In other words, the Court House, formerly known also as the Church House or Town House. The surviving name is a reminder of the manorial courts that were held in the Court House until the 1880s, when there was hardly any business to transact. The late Mr. G. E. Wingfield, who had a saddler's shop near Prince Edward Street corner, told me that the court elected him ale-taster in 1885 (probably the very last meeting); to his feigned disgust there was no pay—and no duties, either!

In early times there were rows about the ownership of the Court House, rival claims being made by the lord of the manor and the churchwardens. After a rumpus in 1680 the Court of Exchequer granted John Sayer, donor of the almshouses, a new lease of the manor with a special grant of the Court House at a peppercorn rent, "the better to preserve the King's right and title thereto, which the lessee is to defend at his own cost."

In 1761 the manor was leased to the third Duke of Bridgewater, whose successors at Ashridge were benevolent supporters of elementary schools and consented to the use of the Court House for the school that was opened in 1838. A few years later the Court House was also used for evening classes for men and women. It is interesting to find that when Lord Brownlow's trustees bought the manor and honour of Berkhamsted for £43,682 in 1863, the Court House (and the market rights) were singled out for special mention.

For over 60 years the Court House was a schoolroom. Since then it has been used for many purposes—sales of stock, lectures, and goodness knows how many grave and gay functions. And now the Court House begins a new lease of life, more useful than ever in a town that is desperately short of halls for meetings large and small.

An extract from PETERBOROUGH'S column in *The Daily Telegraph*, 24th March, 1975:—

In September 1914 the then Rector of Berkhamsted Mr. Hart Davies put the Court House at the disposal of the Inns of Court Officers Training Corps as orderly room for 26 days. It duly remained the orderly room until the Armistice in 1918. By the end of the war 13,800 had passed through the Corps, some of them going through the orderly room more than twice. Of these, between 11 and 12,000 received commissions, 2,100 were killed, 500 wounded and 2,800 gained honours including three V.Cs.



Halfway through restoration.

Hemel Hempstead Gazette photo.

THE STORY OF THE RESTORATION OF THE OLD COURT HOUSE BERKHAMSTED

As a Practice we have been concerned with the Court House since 1970 when plans involving its restoration and extension were first discussed in conjunction with the conversion of St. Peter's Hall into offices.

The Court House was then badly in need of repair and the careful observer could see its imminent collapse was bravely held at bay by one solitary acroprop, planted by Donald Lockhart Ltd, at the south west corner.

As the winters passed the acroprop stood courageously against the elements, but the endurance of the cardboard lining to the roof weakened to the point of collapse and the wet rot mushrooms in the north west corner began to flourish, not to mention the trees which were sprouting in the gutters at the rear. "Don't clear the gutters now—keep the brickwork wet" advised the experts, "otherwise the wet rot will turn to dry rot and go through the building like wild fire." Yet the legal machine was unperturbed and, proceeding on its way at normal speed (which is half the speed of time), the sale of St. Peter's Hall receded into the distance. The rotting timbers of the Court House groaned and people were heard to say "she won't last another winter."

Then, suddenly, the town could stand it no longer: "It has to be saved! We'll find the money somehow!"

We were instructed to proceed. The plans were completed. The builder gave his price in record time. It was acceptable and work began.

It is an invigorating but breathtaking experience to dismantle piece by piece and re-erect a building which has been around for so long, which means so much to a whole town. To the onlooker the work has gone quietly and smoothly, thanks in no small part to the constant care and diligence of Ron Smith, the Foreman, and his men.

In this day and age it is joy for an Architect to see how, given the opportunity, our tradesmen and workmen can respond to the challenge of real craftsmanship.

To those intimately involved with the project it contained many surprises and required a constant alertness to new situations. The work below ground and the insertion of the new damp-proof course went as planned although the cutting of the brick and flint south wall required great care.

The east wall, however, had its problems. It had been clear from the outset that this wall had to be completely demolished and rebuilt, but it was hoped that some 50% of the framing timbers could be re-used. For this reason the details of the new wall could not be finalised until the old wall was down, and at that point the first shock came: the decay of the timbers was considerably further advanced behind the facing pieces than had been expected. Some of the members literally disintegrated when touched. In addition to the decay, it came to light that many of the timbers had cuts and notches unrelated to the construction around them, indicating that they had already served their time in some other construction, such as a barn or ship, before they came to the Courthouse. Portions of some of these members were later re-used in other parts of the building but the east wall had to be constructed of entirely new timber. Details were rapidly worked out in conjunction with the builder to arrive at the most economical solution which would be in keeping with the character of the building. Obviously money would not allow a complete and faithful copy of the original carpentry detailing but the solution finally agreed upon maintains the spirit of the old wall and recreates its original strength (which did after all last for some 400 years) only this time the

timbers have been thoroughly impregnated against insect attack, rot and decay. The new wall went together like a dream. The carpenters showed their skill.

Of course, the roof had to be stripped. First the eastern half. That produced the second shock: the space between the ceiling lining and the roof tiles had been filled with straw, presumably to give some heat insulation. On the north side the rain had penetrated the roof tiles. The straw had soaked up the water and created the perfect rot bed for the main rafters. These were softwood and not very old. The whole roof had been remade in the thirties. No one expected the rafters to be rotten but in the end some 15 had to be replaced.

In the meantime, the plaster was being removed from the walls internally. The original intention was to replaster the whole building. However, when the first areas of internal brickwork were exposed it was clear that these were in reasonably good condition and of very pleasant colour. On enquiry, the contractor confirmed that it would be cheaper to clean the bricks down carefully and re-point them, than to re-plaster. Hay was made while the sun shone.

Of course, there wasn't a great deal of sunshine since it was not exactly the driest of all winters.

There was, however, more good news in store for us. It was anticipated that the bottom ends of several of the main framing posts were badly rotted internally and would therefore have to be cut short. Special metal shoes on engineering brick piers had been designed to cope with this situation. However, when the bottoms of the posts were exposed they were found to be quite sound and as hard as iron. They did not have to be cut.

Next came the north wall. The east wall was rebuilt and of course it had to be erected vertically and straight. But this showed up how far the north wall was out of plumb. In addition the north east corner had suffered at some time from faulty

gutters which must have dripped the brick-work below. It was in a very poor state and had to be taken down and replaced.

The greatest challenge was yet to come. By now the timbers of the main part of the south wall facing the High Street had been exposed. At some time in the past, probably when the original first floor was removed, the original wall plate, which can still be seen in its proper context at Dean Incents opposite, was replaced by a beam, which was allowed to project some 3" out from the face of the wall, thus catching all the rainwater from the face of the wall. This beam was rotted right through its middle in places but there was nevertheless enough sound timber left to consider its retention. Similarly nearly all the vertical members were badly decayed at their bottom ends but most were reasonably sound otherwise.



And now for the Porch

attempt to keep the expenditure to a minimum a complicated detail was worked out involving fibreglass filling to the bottom half of a new projecting cill and various special connections of new to existing timbers. It did not seem wholly convincing.

The Architect of the Historic Buildings Council paid a visit at that time. The Grant the Council had agreed to make towards the restoration of the building was in the form of a fixed sum and not their more usual full Grant in the form of a percentage of the restoration costs. For this reason their Architect did not insist on the normal very stringent requirements regarding historic authenticity in detailing.

However, he expressed concern that the detail for the south wall would prove a short term expedient which will later be regretted, besides taking the construction further away from its proper historical context. The subject was considered in depth by members of the P.C.C. resulting in clear decision to rebuild this facade with new timbers and retain as far as possible the authenticity of the construction. Again, it was encouraging for the Architect, in these times, to see the courage of a client's decision in favour of quality for the benefit of future generations.

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If we turn our eyes to Berkhamsted it has been sadly treated by the passage of time. Of all the Chiltern towns it has the least look of possessing a sense of personal pride with its decaying and shabby town centre. The reasons for this cannot be explored in this article but one contributory fact is that many of those who could most easily do something have turned their backs on it. However, one little step in the right direction is the restoration of the Court House, at the heart of the designated Conservation Area.

In a way this courage was rewarded when the last area of potential trouble was opened up, namely the west wall abutting the Court House Cottage. There was a strong possibility that this might involve a considerable amount of work within the cottage. In the event this was not necessary and the work to this wall proved simple and straight forward.

The existing shell of the building was now restored in a way which would give it a new life for a long time to come. There remained only the insertion of the new ground and 1st floors, staircase and access balcony, heating and lighting installations. All the woodwork had already been treated against rot and decay and now the treatment is being completed by the application of a preservative water repellent.

Soon the final touches will have been carried out and the people of Berkhamsted will have regained the use of a most pleasant, attractive building for all kinds of small gatherings. Of course much of the work has yet to be paid for. And one day the building can be extended on the north side to greatly increase its flexibility in use and make it capable of coping with large gatherings as well as small ones.

P. F. E. MARK,
MELVIN, LANSLEY and MARK

Here is a scheme which requires no agonising decisions:—

It inconveniencés no-one;
It can benefit many;
It improves the appearance of the town and brings life to it;
It is not preservation for preservation's sake but it brings back into service a building which will have a use for as long as one can foresee.

Support it!
CHRISTOPHER MORRIS