

BERKHAMSTED REVIEW



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In and around Berkhamsted

by 'BEORCHAM'

Outside Views

In the course of my work I meet a large number of people, and at this time of the year I often have short chats with former residents and others who are spending a few days in the district.

Inevitably there are comments, not always flattering, on the way the town has changed. But I also meet people who like what they see. For instance, a recent caller thought the new buildings were in very good taste, a refreshing change from the ones she had seen in many other shopping centres. "There is still great variety here," she added.

Nice things are said, too, about the eye-catching Court House, the peaceful churchyard, the splendidly maintained Castle grounds, and the surrounding countryside. Turning to the debit side, our very noisy High Street surprises and startles many visitors; there are also regrets that we still lack pleasant gardens with lots of seats for the public.

No complaints, however, from a young couple who were on their third canal cruise. They had stopped here for the night on two previous occasions and preferred Berkham-

sted to any other port, despite the numerous locks!

Heber Mills

My thanks to readers who answered a request for information about an old character, Heber Mills, who was well known in the early years of this century. A correspondent recalls that he was seldom without a clay pipe as he trundled a truck laden with firewood, furze or flowers from door to door. Every springtime Heber went to Gaddesden Row and brought back a truckload of daffodils.

He lived in a hut or tent on Long Green, but slept in a Berkhamsted doss-house if the weather was very bad. Many happy hours were spent in Pockock's forge, where Heber found warmth, conversation and no objection to his foul pipe.

Another reader tells me that every autumn, Heber called to beat the walnut tree in his father's garden. Which reminds me of that callous old rhyme: "A woman, a dog and a walnut tree/The more you beat them, the better they be."

A Famous Tree

Speaking of walnut trees, the August number of "Hertfordshire Countryside" contains a reference to the very fine tree which formerly stood behind the Crooked Billet. There was an outcry when it was felled in the 1930s, and some highly exaggerated tales were told about the high price that was paid for the tree.

Mr. Humphrey Williamson tells me that when the tree was lopped of its limbs the huge log was shipped to France to be cut into veneers, as the French, through their vast experience, could cut two more leaves to the inch than was then possible in this country. But in this particular skill we have now caught up with the French!

Walnut trees, alas, are now very rare in this district. Do you remember the splendid row which lined the lane near Bottom Farm? And the very fine tree in the Council yard?

On Stony Ground

"How old are the cobblestones in Back Lane?" This question was put to me the other day, and all I can say is that in 1884 the highway surveyors accepted a tender for relaying the stones at eightpence per yard super. That must have been hard work!

As you may know, the shop on the east side of Post Alley (from High Street to Back Lane) was formerly the Post Office. It is interesting to find that in 1886 the postmaster was reprimanded for allowing a truck to obstruct Back Lane. In those days the Post Office was open from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., and there were four deliveries of letters and parcels on weekdays, plus one (letters only) on Sundays. Oh, the speed and service we had for a penny stamp!

Ashridge Observed

I have just received a copy of "Ashridge Observed", a new book written and illustrated by Brian J. Bailey. He provides a concise history of Ashridge before commenting on the neighbouring countryside and its wildlife. The line illustrations are very good, too. In fact, it is a well produced book, but readers who are more interested in quantity than quality may like to know that it can be read in about twenty minutes.

There have been many short histories of

Ashridge. I wrote one in 1931, and doubt whether anyone has a copy today. I cannot help thinking that the time has come for a long, not a short, history of Ashridge: there hasn't been one since 1823—and many things have happened at Ashridge since then!

100 Years Ago

Exactly a century ago the Berkhamsted Parish Magazine published a charming report of a children's outing. After a short and cheerful service in St. Peter's Church, the children walked to the station, "and thanks to the exertions of the station-master and his officials, they all were started safely by the 11 o'clock train. The day was lovely,

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and the rapid motion through the air, an unwonted feeling for many of the little travellers, seemed to have an exhilarating effect on their spirits, for until the train reached Chalk Farm their cheerful voices were heard even above the hissing and clatter of the engine and carriages. From Chalk Farm, by a short walk skirting Primrose Hill, they soon arrived at the new entrance to the Zoological Gardens, and then as they passed one by one rapidly through the turnstile they numbered exactly 221."