

BERKHAMSTED REVIEW



In and around Berkhamsted by 'BEORCHAM'

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Question of Size

Which is the largest ancient parish church in Hertfordshire? When BBC1's "Songs of Praise" came from St. Mary's, Hitchin, a few weeks ago, it was claimed that the church was the largest in the county.

Several publications, however, have made a similar claim for Berkhamsted St. Peter's. For instance, old editions of Kelly's Directory state that St. Peter's is the largest in the county, "next to St. Albans." But the same directory credits Hitchin parish church with 1,300 sittings, compared with Berkhamsted's 1,100 — a number that has been reduced by the removal of many seats in modern times.

I am not sure how one measures a church for size. Cubic capacity? Floor space? It doesn't really matter. The two churches are quite different in shape, but both are very old and beloved by the parishioners. And it is pleasant to think that only a few weeks after the Hitchin broadcast we are to have "Songs of Praise" from St. Peter's.

Back Lane

It is high time the Council restored the surface of Back Lane (Church Lane). It is in a dreadful state, worsened by blocked drains which at times create enormous puddles.

With a central gutter (known in olden days as a kennel), Back Lane is a very interesting relic of the past. But heavy traffic has taken its toll, and one or two patchwork repairs are unsightly as well as dangerous. I doubt whether very much

has been done since the stones were relaid in 1884 at a cost of 8d. (4p.) per square yard.

Watch your step if you use this much neglected and badly lighted lane. It is disgraceful that such conditions exist in the very heart of the town.

General Post

No doubt you occasionally receive a letter with a strange postmark on the back, showing that it has been on a circular tour to Borehamwood or some other place before arriving in your letterbox.

On April 3rd I received three letters and one postcard, all of which had been on grand tours. A postcard posted in Dewsbury collected an extra postmark at Wakefield. And three letters, posted in Bodmin, Gateshead and Harrogate bore, respectively, the additional postmarks of St. Albans, Reading and Hertford.

The game of General Post, popular when I was a boy, is still being played.

Side by Side

"Why," a reader asks, "are most of the town's shops on the north side of the High Street, and most of the inns and public houses on the other side?"

I don't know. It is interesting to recall, however, that in years gone by the north side was known as the ladies' side, while the other side of the street was known as the men's (or gentlemen's) side. A matter of taste, perhaps?

It is certainly remarkable that there is a gap of a mile between the Bull and the Rose and

Crown on the sunny side, while seven licensed houses are on the opposite side. In 1920 the proportion was 8 to 5 in favour of the shady side.

Incidentally, I have been asked if I know the age of the stone horse trough outside the Goat Inn. It was certainly in existence in late Victorian times and may pre-date the present building, which replaced a straw-thatched hostelry that was much favoured by drovers who, on the way to London markets, penned their sheep and cattle in the three closes which gave a well known lane its name.

Local Names

We are fortunate to have an authority on place-names who has published a booklet of great local interest. In his "Place Names of Dacorum District" Mr. John Field, senior lecturer in English at Dacorum College, admits that several names are difficult to interpret. For instance, one set of early spellings suggests that Berchehamstede means the birch-homestead, while other medieval documents suggest that the first element was Old English *beorg*, meaning "hill."

As for the name of our district, Mr. Field recalls that the Dacorum Hundred was originally called Danais or Daneis, followed by Daneshundred and Daneys. "There can therefore be no doubt whatever that the name means "Danish" or "of the Danes."

Mr. Field deals with all the towns and villages in the district, and copies of his booklet (20p.) are obtainable at Dacorum College.

By the way, the Hertfordshire Library Service, in conjunction with the Thames and Chilterns Tourist Board, has published a booklet entitled "Places to Visit in Hertfordshire." Living as we do near the county boundary, we are apt to forget that Hertfordshire has many museums, old houses, parks and commons. Seventy places of interest are briefly described in the booklet, which costs 5p at our County Libraries.

Mobile Theatre

What is surely the smallest theatre in the world recently visited Berkhamsted. It was an unscheduled call; the Magic Lantern Narrowboat was forced, by an unexpected closure of the canal, to stop in Berkhamsted for a few days.

I was one of the few who occupied one of the 16 seats of this midget theatre. It is splendidly

equipped, and Doug and Anita Lear presented a wonderful programme of Victorian lantern slides and the very first film (French, 1896) ever seen in this country. The slides were "movies", too, in beautiful colours and as good as many modern film cartoons.

It is possible that the Magic Lantern Narrowboat will pay a return visit. I can certainly recommend the show to people of all ages.

Quick Change

A newcomer tells me that he likes Berkhamsted because it is so easy to leave bricks and mortar behind. He cited Swing Gate Lane as providing as astonishingly abrupt change from town and country. "At the top of the hill there is a wonderful and sudden prospect of open countryside—a truly startling change," he said.



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