

BERKHAMSTED REVIEW



In and around Berkhamsted

by 'BEORCHAM'

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High Time

If we all gave a penny for every time we have looked at St. Peter's Church clock, the appeal for £2,000 for a complete overhaul would be subscribed many times over. One of the town's most familiar features, it is now in its 140th year and nearly twice as old as the Town Hall clock. Thanks to good Victorian workmanship, it still keeps good time and seldom stops unless its far from tiny hands are frozen after a heavy snowstorm.

As we know from the churchwardens' accounts and old illustrations, there was an earlier clock which was kept going at very low cost. For instance, in 1770 a local clockmaker Bucknall cleaned the clock and chimes for sixpennyworth of beer!

Today, when even tiny tots have their own watches, we can scarcely believe that until Victorian times many cottagers could not afford a clock or watch. But most of the labourers lived within the sound of St. Peter's chimes, and a nightwatchman patrolled the streets, calling out the time and perhaps the state of the weather.

Incidentally, the clock often reminds me of one of the town's odd characters, Johnny Rippon, who pumped the church organ and always stood at the top of Castle Street at 6 p.m. to make sure that the church clock agreed with his watch. That was long before the BBC gave us the pips.

Town or Village?

The *Gazette* recently printed a letter from an Essex "transport archivist" who referred to Berkhamsted as a village and thought that we had our first buses as late as 1935.

A village? In years gone by I would have reached for my popgun! Berkhamsted was a town when it was only half as big as Potten End. What's more, I sometimes receive enquiries from Americans who call Berkhamsted a city!

As for the suggestion that we had our first buses in 1935, I imagine that a village would have been very small and remote not to have had public transport by that date.

By the early 1920s several motor bus services were operating in the district; the "golden age" of frequent and reliable buses was from 1928 to 1955. We all know how the services have declined and the fares gone up, a typical example being 40p from the County Library to Chesham Broadway.

Berkhamsted Place

Eleven years ago the hilltop Elizabethan mansion known as Berkhamsted Place was pulled down, and it is now likely that houses will be built on this historic site and the accompanying narrow strip of woodland. Several people have mentioned that developers should be advised of an ancient well which was covered over during the 1939-45 War.

To my regret, I never saw this well, which was worked by a horse or donkey, as was the great

well at Ashridge, which always arouses the curiosity of visitors to the college.

It was always difficult and expensive to supply water to houses on high ground — for instance, there is a well 200-ft. deep below Woodcock Hill — and I hope that someone familiar with Berkhamsted Place in the old days will tell me more about the well.

Much more familiar are stories about a secret tunnel from Berkhamsted Place to the Castle. How these stories originated I cannot imagine; they are all as false and stupid as the tales that are told about secret tunnels between St. Peter's Church crypt and houses and inns on the opposite side of the High Street. Still, what is a secret tunnel if it isn't secret?

Looking Around

Speaking of Berkhamsted Place, a fairly frequent visitor to this mansion was Mr. W. E. Gladstone, the famous Victorian Prime Minister. The Grand Old man, as he was popularly called, regularly walked down the lime avenue to attend matins at St. Peter's Church.

Now I must tell you about a compliment with a string in the tail. The following appeared in the *Herts Guardian* in 1883:

"No wonder Mr. Gladstone likes the neighbourhood of Berkhamsted; the wonder would be if he or any other person of common sense did not like it. As for his being the object of much attention at church, people should recollect that they go to church to worship and not to stare at a man because ill fate has made him a Prime Minister."

A Guide for Visitors

A reader has shown me a pamphlet published by the Amersham Society, entitled "A Walk Around the Old Town." It contains a map of useful notes on the architecture and history of churches and old houses.

"Why cannot we have a similar pamphlet for Berkhamsted?" my correspondent asks. "Many people come to our town and I am sure that they would appreciate some hints on where to go and what to see. Not only visitors would be helped; many residents do not know very much about their own town."

This is a suggestion that might be considered by the Citizens' Association and the Local History Society. We do not have to go as far as Amersham for an example; two years ago the Northchurch Women's Institute brought out a

very useful pamphlet entitled "Visitors to Northchurch: we invite you to look around."

Here and There

A reader has brought along an envelope addressed to "Berk Hampstead." This must be the 999th version!

Another reader, referring to a recent item of mine, asks which public-houses in the High Street were closed between 1920 and the present day. They are the Bell, the White Hart, the Stag, and the Queen's Arms.

Volunteers who are gallantly trying to save the Market House and Town Hall have brought along two calendars found behind a bookcase — for 1888 and 1889.

STEWARDSHIP

The amount contributed to the St. Peter's and All Saints Stewardship Fund in March was £1,472.33.



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