

IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

By "Beorcham"

KITCHENER'S FIELD

A newcomer recently asked if Kitchener's Field is named after Lord Kitchener, the famous soldier. Indirectly, yes. Old residents will not need reminding that shortly after the outbreak of the 1914-18 War, four of the first Kitchener battalions came to Berkhamsted for training, making good use of what is now partly a sports field beyond the Castle.

The new recruits, mainly from Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire, were all in mufti. Khaki was temporarily unobtainable, and there were no rifles with which to drill. Nevertheless, training was stiff and intensive. After some weeks the Kitchener battalions marched away to Halton Park, and for the rest of the War the Inns of Court Regiment continued Berkhamsted's history as a military town.

PETTICOAT LANE

Kitchener's Field, where hard courts have recently added to the sporting facilities, has a number of interesting features. A short distance west of the familiar footpath to Well Farm and the Common, you will see a slight ridge; this was part of an ancient track to Coldharbour Farm and was popularly known as Petticoat Lane.

For a short time golf was played in the Park. After the Berkhamsted Golf Club was formed

in 1890, some members disliked walking a mile to the Common, and obtained permission to play over the fields between the Castle and the Common. As G. H. Whybrow tells us in his "History of Berkhamsted Common", the golfers were allowed to erect a small hut in the Castle grounds, where clubs could be kept and where the members were served with tea by an old lady at the Castle lodge. But this golf course was soon abandoned.

Another interesting point is that a portion of a Roman wall was exposed when a deep trench was made through the Park for North Sea Gas. The site has yet to be properly explored.

"THE HUMAN FACTOR"

According to one London film critic, Berkhamsted is a suburb. Another described it as a place of impeccable green-belt respectability.

I refer to criticisms of Otto Preminger's film version of Graham Greene's masterpiece, "The Human Factor". Having seen some of the filming here eight months ago, I dashed up to London to see the first public performance, and came to the conclusion that some of the professional critics were rather inhuman factors.

Of course, I was especially interested in the local scenes, some of which involved numerous

technicians, actors and stand-ins for hours on end, only to be whittled down to a few seconds. But I was never in doubt where the scenes were filmed!

After seeing the film, I treasure all the more the signed copy Mr Greene gave me just before the book was published.

SWANNING AROUND

On one of the coldest days of the winter, when there was thin ice on the canal, I saw a number of sea-gulls mobbing a swan. Noisily and rapidly the gulls flew round and round, sometimes almost touching the swan, which, so far as I could see, did not flinch or move an inch.

I continued my stroll along the towpath and learnt from another walker that the gulls had similarly harassed a duck.

THE OLD RAILWAY STATION

To save a small patch of grassland from being chewed up by cars and lorries, stout logs now form a barrier on the Castle side of Whitehill railway bridge.

Next time you go that way, note the two bricked-up entrances in the high railway wall. The one near the bridge was a subway with staircases to the platforms of the town's first railway station. When the present station was opened in 1875, the local paper suggested that the subway should be kept open for pedestrians, but no action was taken. For 105 years walkers and vehicles have shared a very narrow bridge.

It was near this point where labourers started work on the building of the local section of the London and Birmingham Railway in 1834. A temporary bridge was thrown over the road to Whitehill, and for the first year or so all the soil was transported in wheelbarrows and carts.

There were station buildings on both sides of the railway. A long, very narrow building faced the canal, and was not completely demolished until 1932. On the Castle side of the railway stood the stationmaster's house and an outbuilding which was used by a wood-turner and then by a brush-maker.

A FAMOUS FAMILY

A short time ago I met a visitor whose home is in Gibraltar. He was seeking information about the Smith-Dorrien family, and told me that there is a Smith-Dorrien Avenue on the Rock.

The Smiths, the Dorriens and the Smith-Dorriens were in Berkhamsted for generations, living at Ashlyns, Harrafoot and New Lodge. The most famous member of the family, Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, had a distinguished military career which started in the Zulu Wars and ended in the first World War.

Locally, however, the best-remembered member of the family is Augustus Smith, who saved our Common from enclosure in 1866. As most readers of the "Review" know, he moved from Ashlyns to the Scilly Isles, and recently I came across a letter, written many years ago, saying that Augustus found employment for a number of Berkhamstedians on the island flower farms. Some, said my correspondent, returned home after a time, but others remained in the Scillies.

A number of Berkhamsted people (including the boys and girls of Augustus Smith School) spend their holidays in the Scillies, and perhaps they will make enquiries to see if any of the islanders of today are descended from Berkhamsted families.

(Continued)

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OUT OF SIGHT

Here is a postscript to a short piece I wrote some time ago about the Rev. G. S. Cautley, a 19th century vicar of Nettleden. He was a short, deformed man who, in the pulpit, stood on a

stool or wooden box. On one occasion the box collapsed, and a Potten End reader has just told me that the vicar could not have had a more appropriate text for his sermon: "A little while and ye shall not see me." (St. John, xvi, 16).