

# IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

By 'Beorcham'

## THE IMPERSONATOR

In 'Ways of Escape', the newly published sequel to 'A Sort of Life', Graham Greene recalls an incident at Berkhamsted in the 1920s. Outside the Town Hall, he states, a fellow Oxford undergraduate 'wore a heavy false moustache and appeared as Rudyard Kipling making an appeal for the Boy Scout movement and a retired admiral called Loder-Symonds took the chair until he noticed that something seemed somehow to be wrong.'

The impersonator, Graham Greene adds, was Sir Robert Scott, who became High Commissioner for East Africa and then Governor of Mauritius.

Mr Greene's recollection of the Town Hall incident varies from an account given to me some years ago by the late Mr Charles Whybrow, son of the author of 'The History of Berkhamsted Common'. Charles wrote: 'A well-known impersonator was enlisted to impersonate Rudyard Kipling and visit Berkhamsted, where he was to be received by the late Rear Admiral A. H. Smith-Dorrien, and escorted to the Town Hall to address a patriotic meeting. But in the small room off the main hall, the impersonator was rumbled. Apologies were made to the Admiral, who, though very annoyed at first, saw the funny side and laughed at the whole affair.'

## ASKING THE WAY

Isn't it time we had a large street map of Berkhamsted in the town centre? Drivers are forever hailing pedestrians to know the way to this or that street. Sometimes several people have to be consulted before the driver knows which turning to take. These kerbside conferences sometimes slow down and even stop the traffic.

I am told that many enquiries of this kind are made at the County Library, which displays a small street map in the window. But now that we have over 200 named streets, roads, lanes, drives, rides, closes and ways, a large map which doesn't strain the eyes would be welcome.

## HORSE SENSE

A reference in the October *Review* to 'Alice', the town's former horse-drawn fire engine, reminded Mr William Smith, of Durrants Road, of an incident when he was a schoolboy in the early 1920s.

At Gossoms End a dust-cart (one horse power) was unattended for a short time while the refuse collectors were fetching or returning the dust-bins. The fire hooter was sounded, and immediately the horse galloped to the fire station half a mile away. The refuse collectors returned in time to see the horse and cart far, far away.

The strong, intelligent cart-horses were greatly admired, especially when they were seen hauling the heavy steam fire engine called 'Alice'. Berkhamsted was one of the last towns to have a horse-drawn fire engine; some of our councillors feared that a motor fire engine might not have sufficient clearance in the rough, rutted lanes leading to some of the farms around Berkhamsted. The change was made in the late 1920s.

## AMERICAN VISITORS

Once again I have had the pleasure of meeting American visitors who are descended from the 17th century Axtells of Berkhamsted.

One of my callers, from Illinois, has just written to say that he and his wife had a wonderful time in England despite the fact that is now 'a little costly'. He adds: 'We attended our first Soccer game in Berkhamsted. The staff was very gracious, as they invited us in for tea at half-time and we enjoyed their hospitality.'

I gladly pass on this compliment to Berkhamsted Town Football Club.

## HOT NEWS

On one of his fairly regular visits to Berkhamsted, Mr Herbert Porrett, who moved to Holmer Green some years ago, kindly gave me two bound copies of old Berkhamsted parish magazines, one for 1875, the other for 1885.

The hot news of 1875 was a fire which destroyed William Cooper's printing works in Raven's Lane, where the parish magazine was printed. The editor wrote: 'We were afraid that for some considerable time at least we should not be able to issue the June number; but so expeditiously has Mr Cooper taken steps to replace the beautiful machinery destroyed by the fire, that we were agreeably surprised to learn that the magazine could be printed as usual.'

An account of the Sunday School outing to the London Zoo in 1875 tells us that in the monkey house 'many were the remarks that were made by the children as to likenesses with persons of one's own acquaintance.' The 221 children had hot dinners at the Zoo, and there was a 'distribution of buns' before their departure to Berkhamsted from Chalk Farm station.

## NEAR AND FAR

If you read Richard Hough's new book, 'Mountbatten: Hero of Our Time', you may be surprised to read that 'Lockers Park ... was a preparatory school for the rich and well-born near Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire.'

Lockers Park School, of course, is still going strong at Hemel Hempstead.

## JOHN OF BERKHAMSTED

After a first visit to St Albans Abbey, a reader tells me that she was especially interested to see the name John de Berkhamsted in the long list of abbots. Why is he more or less ignored in local history books? Well, Cobb, our Victorian historian, does at least state that John was a native of our town who was promoted to the pastoral staff of the Abbey of St Alban. Cobb adds that Weever, a 17th century historian, described John as a man who applied his mind wholly to works of piety and to prayers for the health of his soul.

The Victoria History of Hertfordshire tells us that John of Berkhamsted, the 25th abbot, was installed in June, 1291, and that he gave a splendid feast. But he had financial anxieties and began his rule in pecuniary embarrassment. His shortcomings apparently arose from financial straits, and though kind and affable he was hated by many because he removed the priors of cells for very slight reasons after he had received large sums of money from them. John died, worn out by cares, in October, 1301.

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For more information, I recommend a visit to the local branch of the County Library. In the reference section you will find all four volumes of the Victoria History of Hertfordshire; the references to John are in volume iv, pp. 383-4.

### THE TOWN'S NAME

In a new book, 'Place-Names of Great Britain and Ireland' (David and Charles, £8.50), Mr John Field says that our town's name means 'homestead by a hill', not 'birch-tree homestead' as has sometimes been suggested. Hemel Hempstead's name means 'homestead in district called Hamel'.

Mr Field, who lives at Boxmoor, has given talks to our Local History and Archaeological Societies, and currently he is the very busy honorary secretary of the Dacorum Museum Advisory Committee.

### RIGHT NUMBER

In a recent reference to the town's first telephone exchange in the front room of a house in Chapel Street, I mentioned that children attending the nearby infants' school often gazed in wonder at the young lady who operated the switchboard.

Mr P. White, of Ellesmere Road, tells me that the operator was his sister, who is delighted to be remembered after all those years. She married a telephone engineer who called at the Chapel Street exchange and has lived at St Albans for many years.

Since writing about the 55 local telephone subscribers in 1906-7, I have ascertained that a few people in Berkhamsted had telephones before the turn of the century. In 1897-8 there were seven local subscribers, three of whom had two numbers, one for business and one for the home.