

IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

By 'Beorcham'

STRANGE CLAIM

Not for the first time I have been asked to comment on two statements in a book by Kevin Fitzgerald entitled 'The Chilterns', published in 1972.

On page 44 the author writes: 'At Northchurch is a building said to be the oldest Christian church in the world.' On page 103 he writes: 'There is the oldest church in Europe (it is said) at Northchurch.'

Most of us are aware that experts have located Saxon walls in St Mary's Church, but there are many other churches (not in the immediate district) which pre-date the Norman Conquest. One should always be cautious of writers who use the words 'it is said'.

HENRY NASH

When, in eight years time, Berkhamsted School for Girls celebrates its centenary, I fancy that much more will be said and written about Henry Nash than appeared in the 50th anniversary book.

At a recent meeting of the Local History Society, Dr Sheila Fletcher said that she doubted whether there would have been an endowed school for girls in Berkhamsted without Henry Nash's persistence year after year. Known in late Victorian times as Berkhamsted's Grand Old Man, Nash was a splendid example of the self-taught man. His

own education was minimal; he attended Sunday School and as a youth received some tuition from a man who had a small private school. Yet Nash became a splendid writer and speaker, a founder of the local Mechanics' Institute, a vestryman, and a pillar of the Congregational Church. He kept a small leather shop in Castle Street and although a cripple from birth he enjoyed long walks over the Common.

Henry Nash's 'Reminiscences of Berkhamsted', published in 1890, is a fascinating account of the town and townspeople in Victorian times, and some thought is being given to reprinting the book.

POTTEN END 'OBSTACLE'

Looking through some old copies of the Berkhamsted Parish Magazine, I found a rather strange news item of 1880.

A Temperance Society meeting was held in Potten End schoolroom, and the chairman, the Rev. J. H. Skinner, brought a deputation of Berkhamsted men. The report continues: 'At the close of the meeting . . . several new members joined the Society, and one man declared his willingness to sign the pledge, but unfortunately he had ordered in a barrel of beer that very day, which he could not return, and he was loathe to dispose of it otherwise. He was advised temporarily to attach himself to the red-ribbon section until the obstacle was removed'.

CHRISTMAS IS COMING

With the Town Council's sponsorship of seasonal decorations in the High Street, we should have a Brighter Berkhamsted this Christmas. That's the spirit!

Meanwhile, I have been asked to say something about the way Berkhamsted celebrated Christmas in years gone by. Perhaps the most notable change is the extension of the midwinter holiday. For many people it was formerly limited to Christmas Day and Boxing Day. Few shops staged Christmas displays until mid-December, but parents and children started thinking about Christmas months ahead; many presents were home-made and very simple. Now we live in a do-it-yourself age, but how few of us ever *make* a Christmas present?

As soon as one Christmas was over, hundreds of people started thinking of the next, joining coal and clothing clubs, usually run by a church or chapel, and paying a few coppers weekly or fortnightly for a spending spree at Christmas.

And there was a rather special sequel which was discontinued many years ago. After the watchnight service at St Peter's on the last day of the year, worshippers (and revellers!) would gather under the yew tree, and as the church clock struck twelve everybody joined hands and sang 'Auld Lang Syne'.

THE HORSE BRIDGE

Did you see the Dacorum Canal Exhibition, sponsored by the Dacorum Advisory Committee? It was on tour for six weeks, first at Hemel Hempstead, then at Berkhamsted, and finally at Tring.

With over 200 exhibits of great variety it was the next best thing to a visit to the canal museum at Stoke Bruern. But the attendance could and should have been much larger.

What especially interested me was a map showing Castle Street bridge with the following information: 'Bridge No. 141, new brick bridge 1819, new iron bridge added for horses 1876, erected by the parish and agreement entered into for the parish to keep same and brick bridge in repair'.

ROYAL VISITORS

In last month's *Review* a request was made for photographs of the London statues which were evacuated to Berkhamsted Castle as a precaution against air raid damage in the Second World War.

For security reasons that was a tricky time for photographers, but in 1942 the *Illustrated London News* was able to print three photographs of the statues which had been evacuated to 'the grounds of a ruined castle in the Home Counties'. No names, no pack-drill; all signposts were taken down, and Berkhamsted's fair name was erased from shops and other buildings.

From St James's Square came a statue of William III, attired as a Roman general. It was so tall that 'the normal approach through a well known country town was impossible and a long detour had to be made.' Obviously he was too tall to go under the railway bridges.

William III stood near George III's equestrian statue from Cockspur Street and Field Marshal Lord Wolseley from the Horse Guards Parade. But the most popular evacuees were the Burgurers of Calais from the Victoria gardens near the Embankment.

The statues were surrounded with barbed wire 'because irrepressible excursionists were wont to carve their initials on them'. But even in wartime the statues were 'looking across finely kept grass lawns' and the castle grounds remained open for the public. Soon after the war the statues were returned to London.

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COINCIDENCE IN CANBERRA

How's this for a coincidence? Writing from his home near Canberra, Mr Arthur Mayling tells me that he enjoyed reading an article in the August *Review* entitled 'An Outsider's View of Berkhamsted'. The article was written by David Alexander, a graduate of Sydney University, who taught at Berkhamsted School for two terms before leaving the town in August.

'Of all things,' Arthur writes, 'on Thursday evening, while at the Royal Canberra Golf Club, I was introduced to David Alexander's father, who had also received a copy of the *Review*.'

Known to hundreds of Berkhamstedians as a former active member of the Citizens' Association and a very keen golfer and amateur

archaeologist, Arthur recently received an invitation from the Governor General and Lady Cowan to a garden party at Government House, Canberra. Arthur is no less proud to know that the Herts Artisan Golf Union has donated the Arthur Mayling Trophy for annual competition.

GRAHAM GREENE

For some time Professor Norman Sherry has been collecting material for the authorised biography of Graham Greene. There are still many people in this district who remember Graham in his early years, and personal recollections and the loan of any relevant letters will be gratefully received by Professor Sherry at the University of Lancaster.