

# THE STORY OF OUR SCHOOLS—I

By "BEORCHAM"

Even if education were not one of the major problems of the day, it would be easy to find a topical introduction to this short series of articles on the development of education in Berkhamsted. For this is a year of two notable centenaries. Exactly 400 years ago the town was mourning the death of the founder of the Grammar School; and exactly 100 years ago a group of public-spirited men established the Berkhamsted Institute, which, by organising lectures and the first evening classes held in the district, has had great influence on adult education.

On the whole, Berkhamsted has been fortunate in its educational foundations. There were probably not more than 300 grammar schools in England when Dean Incent founded his "Free Schole." Then, in the first half of the 18th century, Thomas Bourne gave Berkhamsted one of the earliest elementary schools in Hertfordshire. At this period the Grammar School, in common with many similar foundations, was totally inefficient, and private enterprise stepped in to provide a number of "academies" in the town. These, however, were for children of the well-to-do only; and as the Bourne Charity School was limited to twenty boys and ten girls, the majority of the poorer children had no schooling whatsoever until the public conscience was aroused by Augustus Smith, who did more for education in Berkhamsted than anyone else, not excluding Incent and Bourne. He not only led the campaign that rescued the Grammar School from mismanagement but took the initiative in the founding of the first parochial schools (successively known as the National, Board and Council Schools) in 1834. Two years later the first Church of England Schools were opened.

## "Fairest in the Land"

It is not strictly correct to assume that education in Berkhamsted began with the foundation of the Grammar School in 1541. Although evidence is incomplete, it is believed that for some twenty years before that date a school was established through the joint enterprise of the townspeople and Dr. John Incent, son of a "gentryman servant" of Cicely, Duchess of York, the last tenant of Berkhamsted Castle. About the year 1522, this rising young churchman was elected President of the Berkhamsted Brotherhood of St. John the Baptist, an obscure institution probably associated with the Hospital of St. John the Baptist, founded for aged and infirm persons by Geoffrey Fitz Piers, Earl of Essex, in the reign of King John. Whatever purpose the Brotherhood originally served, it had apparently outlived its usefulness, and the townspeople agreed to devote the income to education. Dr. Incent sent a schoolmaster to his native town and contributed generously to the funds.

In 1541, a year after he became Dean of St. Paul's, John Incent obtained a licence "to make, erect and found . . . a schole for boys not exceeding 144."

It is ironical that the man who helped to save the Brotherhood from neglect did not live to ensure the continued prosperity of his own foundation. The Dean died in 1545, only a short time after the completion of what a contemporary writer described as the fairest school building in the land. Sixty years later a visitor said that the Grammar School was the only thing worth seeing in the town!

The record of the Grammar School in the 17th and 18th centuries is dismal indeed, but no worse than that of many similar schools elsewhere. Most of the trouble arose from the fact that the master and usher were also the trustees. Their word was law, and they pleased themselves whether they carried out their duties faithfully and well. Some did not, hence a "great scandell" in 1668, when parents complained that they either had to get strangers to come into the town to teach their children or send them to schools elsewhere. The headmaster was at least candid. "The School is my freehold, and I will not leave it, whether I have nine scholars or none," he said. "The fewer I have, the less trouble I shall have."

## 17th Century Boarders

It was not only the School that suffered. Even in the 17th century it was customary to have boarders, and poor Martha Field, whose "chief subsistence was the boarding of scholars," was reduced to dire straits by the failure of the School to attract scholars from beyond the town.

There would be no point in dwelling upon this depressing period but to show that Berkhamstedians were sufficiently interested in the education of their sons to protest vigorously, and often bitterly, about the abuse of School funds. In the 18th century the Rector, the Rev. John Cowper, was so infuriated by masters who did little to earn their stipends that he organised a petition to the Courts of Chancery, but its sole effect was to benefit the lawyers at the expense of the town. The Rector did not send his poet son to the Grammar School, but to a private school in the High Street, mentioned in William Cowper's lines:

... the gard'ner Robin, day by day,  
Drew me to school along the public way . . .

Incidentally, the Grammar School masters were legally bound to teach Latin and Greek only, and an annual fee of five guineas was charged for each additional subject, including English. The writer has seen an advertisement in *The Whitehall Post* of 170 years ago which quotes reading and writing as "special subjects."

Not until the 1830's was a new system of management evolved, and in the next decade Berkhamsted School began to develop into the respected institution we know to-day. This more cheerful story, and accounts of the Bourne School, private "academies," straw-plaiting schools and elementary schools, will be told in later articles.

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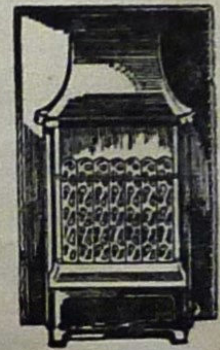
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