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## TWO SCHEMES BERKHAMSTED REJECTED

# No Recreation Ground, No Trams...

HAD A "FREE GIFT" offered in Victorian days been accepted, one would have been able to step out of the railway station and, on either side of Lower King's-road, survey a recreation ground stretching all the way from Castle-street to Billet-lane. And if certain plans prepared by an enterprising group of business-men had been adopted, rails would have been laid along Lower King's-road and the High-street for a steam tramway linking Berkhamsted with Chesham.

Dreams, idle dreams! The recreation ground offer was rejected, and trams were never seen in Berkhamsted. But in the 'sixties and 'eighties these two schemes were the "talk of the town" and received much support from townspeople who considered them progressive.

### A BAD BARGAIN

First, the recreation ground. Surely, it will be asked, a gift of 43 acres was worth accepting? As a matter of fact it was accepted—but a few far-sighted townspeople realised that Berkhamsted was making a bad bargain and promptly "killed" the scheme.

Our story starts nearly 90 years ago, when Lord Brownlow, the lord of the manor, was sufficiently ill-advised to enclose Berkhamsted Common. The dramatic sequel is well known, but few residents of today are aware that many months before the fences were put up, Lord Brownlow offered to give the town land for the purpose of recreation (provided that it was on the south side of the railway) as "a just and liberal compensation for the loss of common rights."

### The Vestry Approved

Many people at once "fell" for the idea, and an enthusiastic vestry meeting decided that the most eligible site was the land between the railway and the

canal, stretching from Billet-lane to Castle-street. No fewer than 186 signatures accompanied the letter of acceptance, which stated that the proposed recreation ground would be "a permanent source of health and enjoyment to present and future inhabitants of Berkhamsted."

### Loss and Gain

Lord Brownlow subsequently signed an indenture of conveyance of the 43 acres to trustees acting on behalf of the inhabitants of Berkhamsted. The conveyance, however, was not to become operative until the commoners had waived their rights—and, thanks to Mr. Augustus Smith's bold action in

By 'BEORCHAM'

sending a gang of London navvies to smash down the fences on the Common, those rights were never waived. The 43-acre recreation ground was lost, but the Common was saved from enclosure.

Nevertheless, two parts of the proposed recreation ground have since been used for the purpose suggested by Lord Brownlow. The Moor, an ancient common used in Victorian days as a timber yard, has for many years been a public recreation ground. On the opposite side of Lower King's-road, the Sports Ground, though not a public space, has become the home of Berkhamsted's chief sporting activities. Incidentally, soon after the first World War, the Sports Ground of approximately 10 acres was purchased for roughly the same amount as the Golf Club paid for the freehold of 500 acres of Berkhamsted Common.

### A STREET CAR NOT DESIRED!

Now for another and perhaps even more interesting scheme—the steam tramway. It was in 1887 when the Chesham, Boxmoor and Hemel Hempstead Steam Tramway Company was formed, the intention being to lay the rails along existing roads from Marlowes to Bourne End, and then along the Bourne Gutter valley to Bottom Farm, Ashley Green and Chesham. Scenically, it was a wonderful route.

In their first flush of enthusiasm, the tramway promoters favoured a branch

line along the main road from Bourne End to Berkhamsted railway station. At a meeting of the Northchurch Vestry in December, 1887, Mr. J. G. Knowles (surveyor) stated that the tramway company's engineer originally proposed taking the trams along King's-road, but this part of the scheme was abandoned.

However, the company was empowered by an Act of Parliament to construct certain tramways between Chesham and Hemel Hempstead, and at one period the scheme was so far advanced that additional powers were sought to increase the gauge and lay a double track in Marlowes, Hemel Hempstead.

### £10,000 a Year for Transport

It should be explained that in those days Chesham had no railway. Residents of that town and neighbouring villages used the London and North Western Railway stations at Berkhamsted and Boxmoor, and all goods sent by rail had to be carted over the steep hills. In 1887, carriage between Chesham and Berkhamsted alone was estimated to cost £10,000 a year, and complaints were made that King's-road and Grubb's-lane (Chesham-road) were being worn away by the Chesham traffic. Our Buckinghamshire neighbours acknowledged their debt to Berkhamsted when they made handsome contributions towards the cost of making Lower King's-road, opened as a "short cut" to the station in 1885.

Meetings supporting or opposing the steam tramway were held in several parishes, and the scheme was the subject of a very long meeting of the Northchurch Vestry. A report in the *Berkhamsted Times* of December 16, 1887, tells us what local people were thinking.

### Pity the Poor Horses!

Some of the objections were not dissimilar to those raised when the London and Birmingham Railway was being built fifty years earlier. Many parishioners feared that the trams would fill the streets with smoke and frighten horses. Mr. G. Bailey told the meeting that he might get thrown off if his horse met a tram on a bridge. Mr. Edward Jones asked how he would fare if he met a tramcar when out with his trap, and condemned the scheme as "preposterous."

Certainly it was not a pleasant prospect for horsemen, for the rails were to be laid along narrow roads. Major Granville was applauded when he stated that residents could not quietly acquiesce in a tramway being run along main roads. Not twenty people went from the parish of Northchurch to Chesham in a week, and he did not see the need for a tramway for them. Besides, it was well known that in some places tramways did not pay.

### Mixed Feelings

Major Granville had many supporters. Mr. J. Ashby did not see, the more he thought and heard, how there was to be any advantage at all if they did get the

tramway. Mr. Girdwood said the proposal was made in total disregard of public rights or convenience, and another speaker complained that it was unfair to run trams along roads which could hardly accommodate a timber-carriage and a trap.

But opinion was not wholly against the tramway. Mr. R. R. Norris said that so far as the parish of Northchurch was concerned, the line would run over only 200 yards of a public highway. Were they going to set themselves against Hemel Hempstead and Chesham? They might receive no benefits, but the tramway would do them no harm. He considered that the scheme should be supported by the people of Northchurch. Mr. W. D. King spoke of the great number of people the tramway would employ, and Mr. A. Pocock said that at Birmingham and in Lancashire, where trams were common, "the people would not give them up for anything." To say that only a few people went from Northchurch to Chesham reminded him of the opposition to the railway when that was proposed.

### A "White Elephant"

So the debate went on, Mr. J. G. Knowles stressing the need of the proposed tramway for goods traffic. But in the end the "Noes" had it. The authorities ruled that the roads were too narrow for trams, and the promoters, though disappointed at the time, soon realised that the tramway would have proved a "white elephant." The people of Chesham eventually had their own railway station and no longer made use of the London and North Western Railway.

It is interesting to recall that when the Great Central Railway was built, it was proposed that the branch line from Chalfont Road to Chesham should be continued to Berkhamsted. Had the directors adopted the suggestion, we can be sure that British Railways would today be burdened with an uneconomic and utterly unnecessary branch line!

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