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WHEN BERKHAMSTED WAS "TRULY RURAL"

**Farming — Our Oldest
Industry**

With the exception of Cooper's stand, the Berkhamsted Industries Fair told us nothing about our oldest and greatest industry—Agriculture.

That was perhaps inevitable. There was no room in either the King's Hall or the Town Hall for livestock and tractors, and a display of turnips would not have been very appealing even under fluorescent lights. But let it not be thought that local industries are limited to the factory, the workshop and the timber-yard. Within a five-miles radius of Berkhamsted there are many more farm-workers than wood-workers.

Taken for Granted

Not that we hear very much about farmers and farming in the town of Berkhamsted nowadays. Many residents are apt to take the countryside for granted—so much so that they could not name more than three or four farms in the district. And when the subject of picturesque old houses is discussed, few of us realise that Bottom Farm, Marlin Farm and Shootersway Farm are much more interesting than most of the properties recently scheduled as buildings of historic and architectural value.

Until Victorian days, no one doubted that Berkhamsted was essentially a country town. A stone's throw from the High-street stood Kitsbury Farm. Sheep and cattle grazed on land now occupied by Cowper-road and Torrington-road. A threshing barn stood at the corner of Rectory-lane. The town had a small cattle market and two water-mills for grinding corn. The hay, straw and corn merchant was a busy man, and there was always work for the saddler.

Who were Berkhamsted's first farmers? We cannot answer that question, but we know that agriculture was a well-organised industry before the Norman Conquest. Our Anglo-Saxon forbears carved arable fields and meadows out of the vast Chiltern forest, growing sufficient grain on fields south of the Bulbourne to warrant the building of the two water-mills mentioned in Domesday Book. Cattle and sheep were grazed on the water-meadows, and large herds of swine rooted among the trees and dense undergrowth of the waste land north of the town, of which the Common is a relic.

Food and Raiment

For four centuries after the Conquest our farmers probably enjoyed a prosperity equalled in few other communities. Sometimes, indeed, it may have been difficult to satisfy the demands of the Castle; and if there was a surplus after supplying the royal table and household needs, Berkhamsted market was available—the only one within a radius of eleven miles.

At this period, sheep-farming was especially profitable; as was shown in an earlier article, Berkhamsted wool was exported to the Low Countries.

It was not surprising that the prosperity of this self-supporting town declined when the Castle was left to fall in ruin. But increasing use was made of the packhorse and wagon, and our farmers began to benefit from their nearness to London, which imported Hertfordshire wheat in the 13th century, if not earlier. It has been said that the county's reputation for growing the finest wheat in England was due in part to the farmers' ability to market their produce in London and return with unlimited supplies of stable manure.

Local Pioneers

Traditionally, Hertfordshire has always been an arable county, with livestock playing a secondary role. Thus we have no special breed of cattle, horse, sheep or pig named after the county. On the other hand, Hertfordshire has been to the fore in cereal and vegetable production, and it is interesting to recall that at Broadway Farm red clover and swede turnips were grown for the first time in this country. Only a few miles away, at Rothamsted, near Harpenden, the research station founded by Sir John Bennet Lawes over 100 years ago has pioneered farming methods accepted all over the world.

Little Gaddesden, too, has some claim to fame. There, in the 18th century, lived William Ellis, a farmer with new ideas and the ability to describe his experiments and discoveries in a series of books. Like many another writer, it was said that he was better at offering advice to others than in running his own business successfully!

In one of his books, "The Practical Farmer; or the Hertfordshire Husbandman," we read: "In Hertfordshire we say a lousy plowman and a lame shepherd are the best of their sort, because by the plowman's scrubbing he riggles the plow, and thereby makes it go the easier after the horse; a lame shepherd because he cannot follow the sheep so fast as to surfeit them and breed the scab."

That saying was current two centuries before Cooper's experimental farm again put Little Gaddesden in the van of agricultural science!

William Ellis has some harsh things to say about gleaners who filled their baskets before the farmers had received their full share of the crops. He wrote: "I cannot but think it a double hardship to pay three shillings in the pound to a poor rate, as we at Gaddesden did in the year 1747 (and in some parishes they pay more) and be robbed by some of these poor we otherwise help to maintain."

Down in the Dells

References to local farm life appear in many another 18th and 19th century book. D. Walker (1795) explains why dell-holes are found in many fields in the district. Bell pits were sunk through the clay until the chalk was reached. The chalk was dug out, brought to the surface in baskets, dragged across the fields on sledges, and spread on the surface to increase fertility. Apparently it was in this district where the art of "chalking," or "liming," was first practised.

Now for the impressions of another writer—William Cobbett, our old friend of "Rural Rides." In 1822 he visited our corner of the county and wrote: "It is the custom in this part of Hertfordshire to leave a border round the ploughed part of the fields to bear grass and to make hay from, so that, the grass being now made into hay, every corn field has a closely mowed grass walk about ten feet wide in all round it, between the corn and the hedge. This is most beautiful! . . . And thus you go from field to field (on foot or on horseback), the sort of corn, the sort of underwood and timber, the shape and size of the fields, the height of the hedgerows, the height of the trees, all continually varying. Talk of pleasure-ground, indeed!"

Good Days — and Bad

Cherry trees, Cobbett noticed, were abundant in this district. "I saw the little boys, in many places, set to keep the birds off the cherries. . . . The children are all along here, I mean the little children, locked out of doors, while the fathers and mothers are at work in the fields. I saw many little groups of this sort, and this is one advantage of having plenty of room on the outside of a house. I never saw the country children better clad, or look cleaner and fatter than they look here."

Cobbett paid his visit when the fields—and the people—were smiling. But there were grim times when the crops failed and farmers and labourers had to ask for alms. The Berkhamsted church-

wardens' accounts contain references to "the heavy Hand of God" when the crops failed.

There were the lean times, too, when, in the words of Henry Nash, "the agricultural worker's lot must have been a hard one. It was customary for married men to let themselves for twelve months as ploughmen and horsekeepers for a few pounds as standing wages, and a few shillings weekly—in some cases scarcely sufficient to supply them with bread. Those were considered fortunate who could add to it a small portion of fat bacon; any other luxury was out of the question."

Three-Farthings a Day

Every labourer, from youth to old age, wore a smock (green was the traditional colour in this locality), often tastefully worked with the needle and "giving the appearance of homely comfort and contentment." Sheepskin leggings completed the outfit. Boys were set to work at a very early age, usually as bird-scarers and stone-pickers. They patrolled the fields singing this song of defiance to the crows:

I'll pick up me clappers
And knock 'em down back'ards,
E'you, E'you, E'you, E'you.
At Frithsden, children employed to scare birds off the cherry trees had a chant which ran something like this:
Shoo birds awa-a-a-ay
Fer tuppence a da-a-a-ay
Through hedges and ditches,
You little black witches—
Sha-lo, Sha-lo, Sha-lo!

How much were the farm labourers paid? In 1284 three-farthings a day was the payment for hoeing at Little Gaddesden! By the 17th century Hertfordshire shepherds received 4s. a week, and in Cobbett's day the amount was between 8s. and 12s. a week. The accounts book of a Berkhamsted farmer for the years 1850-1 has been preserved, and we learn that the total wages bill for 16 employees was £11 a week. Still, living was cheap, and no doubt the men were grateful to their employer for making a liberal allowance of beer brewed on the farm!

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