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"OLD BETTY," ABRAHAM BUNN, JACK ROSE—AND OTHERS

Queer Characters in Local History

THE OTHER DAY an elderly parishioner remarked: "When I was a boy we had lots of queer characters in Berkhamsted. They were quite harmless, really, and were known to all and sundry by their nicknames. They undertook all sorts of curious jobs, such as removing moss which grew between the pebble-stones on footpaths and carriage drives. But those queer characters have died, and nowadays everybody seems to be normal—or fairly normal!"

That, ladies and gentlemen, is Progress. But in years gone by Berkhamsted certainly had its share of eccentric characters, and one of them, Peter the Wild Boy, is perhaps the most famous congenital idiot in English history.

"Old Betty"

More than sufficient has been written about Peter the Wild Boy. It is high time we recalled a curious character of 19th century Berkhamsted—Betty Leatherland. The name will be familiar to old inhabitants, but I doubt whether anyone alive today can remember seeing "Old Betty."

A gipsy, she made her home on the Common and lived entirely by her wits. No wedding was considered complete unless she was present at the church door to bestow her blessing upon bride and bridegroom; similarly, at every funeral she offered condolences to the bereaved. In return, her palms were crossed with silver, and she lived happily, if not comfortably, on the proceeds. Colonel Smith-Dorrien periodically gave "Old Betty" a red cloak, recognising her as one of the ancient institutions of Berkhamsted—and ancient she certainly was, for she died at the age (unauthenticated, of course!) of 104.

A Blind Guide

In his "Reminiscences of Berkham-

Poor Mary Hall

sted" (1890), Henry Nash recalls another remarkable character, Abraham Bunn. He was employed at the King's Arms as a messenger. If a stranger required a guide to take him to Ashridge, Ashlyns, Haresfoot, or some other country seat, Abraham Bunn's services were usually sought. Yet the old fellow was totally blind! To quote Nash: "He could identify every house and recognise almost every person by the sound of the voice, and many by the footsteps alone. . . . Many curious stories used to be told of the alarm that sometimes seized those under his care when they by accident discovered that their guide was blind."

Treasure-Hunt

We must not forget Jack Rose, of Frithsden, who sought wealth in a gravel-pit still known as "Rose's Hole." He dreamed that a large chest of gold had been buried at the bottom of the pit and that it would be his if he could get it up without speaking a word to break the spell. He took into his confidence a young neighbour, and in the evening they shouldered their spades and proceeded to the pit. After hours of hard work their spades struck a metal object. They cleared away the gravel and there, plainly enough, was the top of a large iron chest.

The young man was so overcome that he forgot the silence rule and exclaimed: "Blow it, Jack, here it is!" (To be perfectly honest, the first word wasn't "blow"!) Immediately the sides of the excavation caved in and the men had to scramble out to escape premature burial. It was too late that night to renew the task, but next morning they removed the loose soil and found—nothing!

The Eccentric Duke

From the humble to the mighty—to no less a personage than the third Duke of Bridgewater. Every schoolboy knows him as "father of inland navigation," and most of us have climbed the monument erected to his memory on Moneybury Hill, above Aldbury. But what a queer fellow he was! Though one of the richest men in the land, he wore the oldest and ugliest clothes, usually a shiny suit in the outmoded style of Dr. Johnson. Jilted by a famous beauty in his youth, the crusty old bachelor refused to be waited upon by a maid-servant in his own home. Sometimes he did not wash for weeks at a time (a common failing of his contemporaries in many walks of life), and when a friend tried to brighten the garden by planting flowers he whipped off their heads with a stick and ordered the roots to be taken up.

Yet the Duke was less eccentric than the eighth Earl of Bridgewater, who,

at his home in Paris, had favourite dogs dressed as human beings; they sat at table with him and were waited upon by powdered flunkies!

Poor Mary Hall

But the most fantastic characters of all were perhaps those mentally ill and physically weak persons who were said to be victims of witchcraft. There was Mary Hall, daughter of the Little Gaddesden blacksmith, who, in 1663, started having violent fits, accompanied by "strange ejaculations." She made noises like "mewing of cats, barking of dogs, and roaring of bears." Sometimes strange voices, either "shrill and drawing," or "great and sonorous," were heard issuing from her throat, saying that they were two little imps who had come down the chimney to torment her! The poor girl was obviously demented, but her friends were convinced that she had been bewitched and paid tiresome visits to drive out "evil spirits" by prayers, incantations and charms.

In those days old ladies of forbidding aspect were often regarded as witches. One poor Berkhamsted woman, suspected of having poisoned her husband, was burnt alive at Hertford in the 17th century.

The Last Witch

Hertfordshire has the unenviable reputation of hounding Britain's last "witch" to death. It is a grim story, but worth telling as a reminder of the brutality and gullibility of country folk 200 years ago.

Careless talk started a witch-hunt which cost three people their lives. In 1751, a farmer refused some buttermilk to an old crone of Long Marston named Ruth Osborn, adding insult to injury by saying that he had not enough milk to give his hogs. Ruth thereupon expressed the hope that the Pretender would "come and take the hogs and you as well."

The farmer was plagued with fits, and some of his calves fell ill. Putting two and two together, superstitious folk concluded that Ruth had bewitched the farmer, and they took the law into their own hands by holding a trial by ducking. A frenzied mob dragged the "witch" and her husband to the village pond, wrapped them in sheets, and hauled them through the filthy water. Ruth was drowned, and her husband died shortly after he was taken out of the pond.

Roman Holiday

A scapegoat had to be found, and it came to the notice of the justices that Thomas Colley, the drunken village sweep, had delighted bystanders by prodding the "witch" with a stick, afterwards taking his hat round for pennies in the manner of a street entertainer. Soon it was his turn to provide a Roman holiday for the villagers, Colley was executed near the scene of the drowning.

This triple tragedy taught country-folk that they could not take the law into their own hands. And if this story has a moral for us, too, it is that the old days were bad rather than good.

—"BEORCHAM"

MEDICINE AND PETROL

Local arrangements to meet
emergencies

Emergency arrangements for the supply of medicine and petrol are now operating in Berkhamsted as follows:

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening and Sunday morning service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the month of August—

July 29—August 4: Taylors
August 5—11: Dickman.
August 12—18: Boots.
August 19—25: Figg.
August 26—September 1: Taylors.
September 2—8: Dickman.

On week-days the respective shops will open from 6 to 7 p.m., including Wednesdays, and on Sundays from 11.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.

GARAGE OPENING

One garage will open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on each Sunday, during the summer months. The duty roster has been arranged as follows—

August 5—Snoxall's Garage Ltd., Chesham-road.
August 12—Underhill & Young Ltd., High-street—east.
August 19—Callaghan's Garage, High-street—east.
August 26—Dwight Bros. Ltd., High-street.
September 2—Kingsway Garage Ltd., Upper King's-road.
September 9—Berkhamsted Motor Engineering Co., Gossons End.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:

Monday and Friday—2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.; 5.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 5 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Thursday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Saturday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

The admission charge to Berkhamsted football ground next season will be raised from 9d. to 1/-, in accordance with the suggestion of the new Delphian League to member clubs that the minimum charge should be 1/-. Stand charges are not affected.

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