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## THE MAN WHO SAVED THE COMMON

# Berkhamsted's Debt to Augustus Smith

WHO IS THE GREATEST FIGURE in local history? "Greatest" may be interpreted in many ways. William Cowper, the poet, is undoubtedly Berkhamsted's most famous son, but his associations with the town of his birth were short lived. Dean Incent, as founder of Berkhamsted School, holds a high place in our affections, and we may reel off an imposing list of kings, queens, princes and statesmen who lived at Berkhamsted Castle.

But if we seek the man who did more than anyone else for the town and its people, we can scarcely go wrong in calling Augustus Smith Berkhamsted's greatest figure. Mr. George Whybrow, in his "History of Berkhamsted Common," states that Augustus Smith "will not be forgotten so long as Berkhamsted Common exists"—but the spectacular saving of that great open space from enclosure was only one of his many bold deeds.

### A Born Fighter

Augustus Smith was a born fighter, and in Victorian England he found plenty of good causes to champion. From his home, Ashlyns Hall, he pulled many of the strings which re-awakened local life in the years when the railway was a novelty.

Born at Ashlyns in 1804, Augustus Smith was a descendant of Thomas Smith, founder of the Smith Bank at Nottingham in 1699. The family was in due course united by marriage to the Dorriens, who were also bankers; George Dorrien was Governor of the Bank of England in 1818-19. Until a few years ago the Smiths and the Smith-Dorriens had an unbroken association

with Berkhamsted for a century and a half.

As a young man, Augustus Smith decided that it was high time Berkhamsted's educational institutions were put in good order. The Grammar School was still the victim of abuse and mismanagement by masters and ushers who, as trustees of the school property, did little and sometimes nothing at all to earn their salaries.

### School Revival

Augustus Smith conducted a long campaign and eventually succeeded in changing the old order. In 1841 the management was vested in a board of governors, and Augustus Smith had the satisfaction of hearing himself described as the re-founder of Berkhamsted School. As he was an intensely practical man, it is not surprising to find that when the school was flourishing again he tried to thrust Greek and Latin in the background in favour of modern subjects.

Having helped the children of more well-to-do residents, Augustus Smith championed a scheme for providing a good parish school for poorer children. Here again his pugnacious "do it now" policy succeeded. At a vestry meeting in 1833 he proposed a resolution in favour of a scheme whereby "boys and girls shall be taught reading, writing and arithmetic and other useful work." Prompt action was taken. A wretched, verminous, straw-thatched workhouse was pulled down and replaced in 1834 by a parochial school. The original building still stands, having been known successively as the Board, Council, and now Park View School.

Many years later, Augustus Smith helped to pave the way for the re-organisation of the Bourne Charity School.

### "Lord" of the Scillies

At Berkhamsted, he had to be content with the current system of voluntary school attendance. But when he became "Lord" of the Scillies, and was virtually dictator of his island estate, he introduced what was probably the next best thing to compulsory education. His method was to charge scholars 1d. a week and non-attenders 2d. a week. As parents had to count their coppers, it can be imagined that absentees were few.

Before Augustus Smith acquired the Scillies, in 1834, the islanders were so poor that a Government relief ship called fortnightly with food and other necessities. Old island industries were dying, and even the time-dishonoured "rackets" of wrecking and smuggling yielded small profits, despite a tradition that lanterns were tied on cows' horns to lure ships on the rocks on stormy nights!

Augustus Smith brought prosperity to the Scillies, and all because he noticed that narcissi, growing wild on the islands, bloomed several weeks earlier than those on the mainland and even in Holland and the Channel Islands. As an experiment, he sent a box of "Scilly White" narcissi to Covent Garden, completely surprising buyers with such fine spring flowers in the middle of winter. More were demanded, and from that day onwards neglected potato fields were ploughed up and the cultivation of winter flowers became the leading industry of the Scillies. Over 1,200 tons of blooms have been exported to the mainland in a year, and in a single day as many as a million and a half flowers have been cut and packed.

Meanwhile, Augustus Smith extended his interests and influence. While Member of Parliament for Truro, he attracted much attention every year by asserting the rights of the public against the claims of the Crown and the Duchy of Cornwall to own the foreshore on our sea coasts.

### Battle of the Fences

This keen desire to protect public rights impelled Augustus Smith to take up the cudgels on behalf of the townspeople when Lord Brownlow was so ill-advised as to attempt the enclosure of Berkhamsted Common in 1866. He did his utmost to dissuade Lord Brownlow from interfering with ancient rights, but to no avail. Tall iron fences were erected, and the public no longer had access to the Common.

Augustus Smith decided upon drastic action. He gathered together a miniature army of Cockney "toughs" and Irish labourers, and chartered a special train to convey them from Euston to Tring in the dead of night. On arriving at 1.30 a.m., they were armed with crow-bars and marched to the Common. By dawn every yard of railing had been smashed to the ground, and newspapers made the incident famous.

While Berkhamsted folk gave themselves an unofficial holiday to celebrate the re-opening of the Common, Lord Brownlow instituted legal proceedings against Augustus Smith. But this staunch defender of ancient rights won the day, emerging from a long law-suit with his reputation higher than ever before.

### Persistent to the Last

The fighting spirit was alive in Augustus Smith to the last. Fiery, hard-working, persistent, autocratic—these were the qualities of a fine old English gentleman who liked to have his own way—and usually had it!

When he died, in 1872, an "Augustus Smith" memorial fund was opened in Berkhamsted, to which men and women in all walks of life contributed. They raised a total of £267, which was applied to the purchase of book prizes for children of the Church and Council schools—schools which, but for the timely intervention of Augustus Smith, might not have been established until a much later date.

—'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 September—  
September 2—8: Dickman.  
September 9—15: Boots.  
September 16—22: Figg.  
September 23—29: Taylors.  
September 30—October 6: 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:—  
September 2—Kingsway Garage Ltd., Upper King's-road.  
September 9—Berkhamsted Motor Engineering Co., Gossoms End.  
September 16—Snnoxall's Garage Ltd., Chesham-road.  
September 23—Underhill & Young Ltd., High-street—west.  
September 30—Callaghan's Garage, High-street—east.  
October 7—Dwight Bros. Ltd., High-street.

### 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.

Children's lack of courtesy and their parents' responsibility, was a subject which brought forth cutting criticism, at the annual conference of the Association of Headmistresses, from Miss Lucie E. Savill, O.B.E., a retired Headmistress of Lincoln High School for Girls, who is now a Governor of the Berkhamsted School for Girls, of which she is an old girl.

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