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AN OLD-TIME "COST-OF-LIVING" INDEX

The Churchwardens' Accounts

By 'BEORCHAM'

In the year 1584, a London wine merchant presented a handsome account-book to the parish of Berkhamsted St. Peter. Over a century and a half elapsed before successive clerks had filled its 366 pages, recording how many shillings the churchwardens paid the sexton for twelve months' work, how many coppers were spent on oil for the church bells, and how much was paid for the hire of a "hoss" when official visits were paid to other towns.

When the weighty tome was filled, in 1746, a new "Church Book of Accounts" was started. These two volumes are perhaps the most interesting of Berkhamsted's ancient documents, but the older book, unfortunately, is no longer in its rightful home. In early Victorian times it was borrowed and never returned to the parish church chest; eventually it was offered as "Lot 49" at a London auction-room in 1851 and, thanks to the public spirit of the purchaser, entrusted to the safe keeping of the British Museum. There, from time to time, it has been inspected by a number of Berkhamstedians, who have followed up the "first instalment" by perusing the more modern account-book still preserved in the church chest at Berkhamsted.

Wages and Prices

The first pages of the earlier book are fragmentary and difficult to read, but from 1603 onwards the entries are more easily deciphered. Many are trivial, but, like so many trivial things, they are highly interesting. Collectively, the churchwardens' accounts provide a very good guide to wages and prices ruling generations ago.

The first entry for 1603 tells us that "Goodman Scotte," the sexton, received £1 19s. 4d. for twelve months' devoted

service. At that rate of remuneration—about 9d. a week—he must have been a part-time worker! A carpenter who put in seven days' work "to make ye staires that go up to ye pulpitt and ye flower of ye seat appointed for ye minister to sitt in" received 7s. 6d.—just over a shilling a day. A bolt for the chancel door cost 1s. 4d.; 10d. was "paid for an houre glasse"; and "a yarde and an yalfe of bayes [baize] for ye pulpitt" cost 4s. A curious payment is 4s. to Thomas Flatyer for "whippinge ye dogges."

Most of the entries concern the parish church. But the churchwardens had wide powers and responsibilities, and in turning the pages of their account-books we find that payments were made to a variety of people for a variety of reasons.

The Maypole

Simple rustic pleasures are suggested by the payment, in 1622, of 1s. for "cutting and carrying in the maypole." While carefree lads and lasses danced, destitute old soldiers passed through the town and blessed the churchwardens for their gifts from parish funds. Two poor men "who had been taken prisoner by the Turks" were given a shilling apiece; a similar coin was handed to a man who had been "in the warres of Bohemia."

In 1622, 3s. was paid for "three quarts of wyne at Whitsontide," and twopenne for "oyle for the bells."

A memorandum dated July 7, 1628, tells us that a master man could earn 2s. a day—if he worked speedily. "Yt ys this daye agreed between the Churchwardens and parishioners and Richard Poolye of Wendover in ye Countye of Bucks . . . after this manner that the sayde Churchwardens shall pay him 2s. for evary dayes work about the mendinge of the leads and 12d. for his man, and 9d. a pound for every ponde of soder [solder] that he shall spend tharon . . . All which work shall be speedilye performed by him . . ." Lead (for the roof) cost 1s. 9d. per lb., for nearly £200 a ton, so it was a "precious metal" three centuries ago!

The Ringers' Reward

By 1634 the sexton's wages for the year had risen to £2 8s. 8d. The bell-ringers were paid 12s. "for ringinge when ye kinge [Charles I] came through ye towne." They also received 2s. 6d. on November 1, and 1s. 6d. on the king's birthday.

A particularly interesting entry, dated 1634, is as follows: "Pd. for bread and wine to make ye children drinks when they went on procession, 4s. 8d." For making "ye little longe ladder," James Baker received 6s. 6d., and men who carried "stones into ye Church which were blown off with ye great wind" were paid 3d. In the same

year (1634), 1s. was spent on "2 iron barres to stay the glasse in ye schollers chappell."

During the Commonwealth, entries were few. But on the restoration of the monarchy, the churchwardens spared no expense. A barrel of beer (10s.) and powder and match (15s. 2d.) were purchased—the latter for a primitive fire-work display—and the bellringers received £1. Royal and loyal Berkhamsted also celebrated the occasion by having the king's coat of arms in the parish church cleaned; Thomas Bonning received 4d. for this work.

Pork for the Minister

Here are a few more quaint entries of 1660-1:

Item for a journey to Hempstead with hoss, 1s. 6d.

Item pd. for a joint of pork for a Minister that preached on Lords Day, 1s.

Item pd. to Richard Baker for 6 daies and a halfe's work about the church wall, 9s. 9d.

Item pd. for beer for the workmen, 1s. 10d.

Item pd. in the 2 yeares to poore travellers that were distressed, £1 3s. 1d.

The bellringers were kept busy during the last two months of 1691. They received 12s. "at the News of Limerick Surrender"; 8s. "at Return of the King from Holland"; 13s. 4d. for ringing on December 4 and 5; and 6s. 8d. on Coronation Day, towards the end of the month.

Weeding the Churchyard

So much for the first account-book. Let us now turn to the second "Church Book of Accounts," which cost two guineas and was started in the year 1747.

No heavy expense was involved in keeping the churchyard tidy in 1747. John Hill received 2s. for "weeding the Church Yard and Rails," and George Hollis was paid 2s. 10d., plus fourpennyworth of beer, for "cutting [sic] the Yew Tree."

In the following year (1748) George Hollis again trimmed the yew tree, but on that occasion he had to be content with half-a-crown and no beer. Here are some more entries of 1748:

To Expences at opening the Church Chest and Oyling the locks, 1s.

To Horse-hire for Mr. Austin [a churchwarden] to go to Hempsted at Easter, 1s.

To Nath. Humphry for Beer to the Men that Brought home the Engine from Leatherland fire, 5s. 4d.

To Beer when the Bell Ropes were put on, 1s.

It is interesting to note that the multifarious duties of the churchwardens included the destruction of vermin, and men were paid for exterminating such pests as sparrows and polecats. Here are some typical entries, dated 1750:

To 20 Polecats, 6s. 8d.
To 442 Sparrows, 9s. 2½d.

(To be continued)

CHEMISTS' ROTA

Local arrangements to meet
emergencies

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

September 30—October 6: Dickman.

October 7—13: Boots.

October 14—20: Figg.

October 21—27: Taylors.

October 28—November 3: 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.

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.

Marriage Guidance

PUBLIC MEETING AT
BERKHAMSTED

Broken marriages are becoming more and more a problem in the work of the Berkhamsted and District Council for Moral Welfare Work. It has accordingly been arranged that this subject shall be the theme of a public meeting, to be held in Berkhamsted Town Hall on Wednesday, October 31, at 7.45 p.m.

The speaker, who has been recommended by the Marriage Guidance Council, will be the Rev. K. Macfarlane Harley, of Radlett.

It is hoped there will be as large a gathering as was the case at the public meeting a year ago. The work of the local Council is urgent and vital, and deserves the unstinted support of the community generally.

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