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ARCHERY, HUNTING AND COCKFIGHTING

Local Sports and Pastimes

The "human touch" is so often absent from local history books that it is hardly surprising to find few references to the sports and pastimes of our ancestors. Everybody knows that cricket was once played by men in top hats, that footballers and boxers wore tight-fitting breeches, that a form of tennis was enjoyed centuries ago. Was not Henry VIII a keen tennis player?

But how many people realise how deeply rooted is the English sporting tradition? Hundreds of years ago, when Berkhamsted was a tiny town having few contacts with the outside world, organised games were enjoyed by local men and boys. It is possible to name some young men who played football in Berkhamsted as long ago as 1685.

CRICKET ON THE COMMON

The two-day cricket match on Berkhamsted Common between married and single men was so old an institution, even at the beginning of the 19th century, that no one could say when it originated. As far back as the 13th century a game with bat and balls was made illegal because it interfered with archery practice.

The variety of sports and pastimes enjoyed by our ancestors is almost bewildering. No one is sorry that Berkhamstedians no longer indulge in bull-baiting and cockfighting, two "sports" which once had a wide following. But various team games were available, some of them demanding great physical exertion.

An ancient rhymster mentions "foote-ball by the shinnes," sledge-throwing, jumping, leaping over ditch or hedge, wrestling, "leaping o'er a Christmas bonfire," "drawing dame out of the myer," "shoote cocke, gregory, stoole-ball, and "beshrew him that's last at any style."

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Est. 1826

Even the "Sunday sports" controversy is centuries old. Two hundred years ago William Ellis, a Little Gaddesden farmer-author, wrote: "I am sorry I have reason to say that by an ill custom of some parts of our county of Hertfordshire, we can hardly keep our servants at home on the Sabbath Day, because of the bad example of others, who go shooting of birds, or play at bandy-wicket, pitch and chuck, Hooper's-hide, pat-ball, etc."

THE CHASE

Oldest of sports—and perhaps the most controversial—is hunting. No one can say when hunting became a sport instead of a larger necessity. Often it was both. But men hunted with hounds before the Norman Conquest, and the dense forest land of the Chilterns was indeed a "happy hunting ground."

When Berkhamsted Castle was a home of royalty, hunting was a favourite pastime of its residents. And the Royal Family enjoyed the chase at Berkhamsted long after the Castle was in ruin. An item in the Privy Purse Expenses of 1530 suggests that Henry VIII hunted deer during his visit to Ashridge Monastery, for 7s. 6d. was paid to "the keeper of Berkhamstede parke," and a similar amount to a servant "for bringing of a bucke to the Kinge at Ashridge."

GAME PRESERVATION

Another royal hunter in Berkhamsted Park was Prince Charles (afterwards Charles I), who spent a day with the Murray family, of Berkhamsted Place, in 1616. In the afternoon, states a vestry document, "his highness hunted and killed a fat buck, which he gave to . . . townsmen that attended him."

Charles II granted a special warrant to the Earl of Bridgewater to preserve the game in Ashridge Park: "Whereas we are informed that our game of hare, pheasant, partridge, heron, and other wilde fowle about Ashridge . . . is much destroyed by divers disorderly persons with greyhounds, mongrells, setting doggs, guns, trammells, tunnells, netts, and other engines, contrary to the statutes of this our realme. For the better preservation hereof, and that our game may be the better preserved for our sport and recreation, at such times as we shall restor unto those parts: We do hereby will and command . . . that no person doe hereafter use any of the said unlawfull meanes . . . to hurt, or kill, our said game . . . within ten miles compasse of the said Ashridge . . ."

THE STAGHOUNDS

Later, when it was customary for landowners to keep a few hounds for hunting deer, fox and hare, Lord Brownlow established a pack of six couples of beagles at Ashridge. That was in 1852. Two years later he bought harriers from the Rev. Jack Russell, and with the new pack came huntsman Richard Rawle, who had whipped in

with his father to the famous sporting person who hunted his own hounds in Devonshire.

When ill health compelled Lord Brownlow to give up his pack, the hounds were removed to kennels on Berkhamsted Common, and grand sport was provided for visitors to Ashridge and for farmers and hard-riding sportsmen in the Vale of Aylesbury. In 1867, Richard Rawle purchased Sir Clifford Constable's staghounds and his pack rivalled in fame the only other stag-hound pack in Hertfordshire, the Enfield Chase.

Some notable runs were made under the expert huntsmanship of Richard Rawle and his son and successor, Jack Rawle. The Berkhamsted Staghounds (or Buckhounds) survived until the 1914-18 war.

CRACK SHOTS

Towards the end of the 18th century, a new sport began to rival hunting in the affections of well-to-do folk: game shooting. Good results were gained with quaint sporting guns that are now museum pieces.

In January, 1822, a royal party at Ashridge bagged 1,200 head in three days, the guns including the Duke of York, Duke of Wellington, Marquis of Londonderry, and Lord Verulam, with their host, the Earl of Bridgewater. The Duke of Wellington "brought down everything" (to quote a contemporary report) with one of the first double-barrelled guns ever made.

Game shooting, incidentally, brought a new industry to Berkhamsted: pheasant-rearing.

COCKFIGHTING

Not pleasant to recall is Hertfordshire's long, dishonourable interest in cockfighting. The district around Marsworth remained a stronghold of this "sport" long after it was made illegal, and tradition has it that this "No Man's Land" was chosen because the promoters of cockfights could easily dodge from Herts to Bucks, or vice versa, if pursued by the police.

In the bad old days, almost every common was the scene of cockfights on Sundays, and many an old inn had its main. Perhaps the long-forgotten "Cokke Inn" at Berkhamsted derived its name from the "sport." At St. Albans—a city once notorious for bull-baiting as well as for cockfighting—there is still an historic inn with the tell-tale name "The Fighting Cocks."

ARCHERY

A sport which was originally a military exercise still has its devotees: archery. Every parish was compelled to erect butts for archery practice, and we know where the bowmen of Berkhamsted attained the skill that made them "picked men" when the Black Prince set off from Berkhamsted Castle to fight the French. The practice butts disappeared long ago, but we still speak of Butts Meadow, known formerly as the Buttricke, the Buttfield, or simply as The Butts.

'BEORCHAM'

Next month: Football, Cricket and Golf.

EMERGENCY MEDICINE

Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted is as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening (6-7 p.m.) and Sunday morning (11.30 a.m.—12.30 p.m.) service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month:—

December 30—January 5: Figg
January 6—12: Dickman
January 13—19: Taylors
January 20—26: Boots
January 27—February 2: Figg.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

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

Mon., Tues., Thur., & Fri.—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.; 5.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—CLOSED ALL DAY.
Saturday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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