

"OLD BRUSHY"

By "BEORCHAM"

Recently, after referring to some of the unusual characters of bygone Berkhamsted, I was asked if I had ever heard of "Old Brushy". I hadn't; but apparently he was a familiar figure in this district sixty or so years ago.

He was an itinerant brush and broom vendor - not one of those smartly dressed salesmen who now go from door to door with branded products, but an individual who trudged around with ample stocks slung from his shoulders. It was a mystery how he managed to move at all, surrounded as he was by brooms and brushes of all shapes and sizes.

"Old Brushy" had his own street cry of old Berkhamsted, and, now and again, he would select a broom with a very long handle and prance around it. It was a highly individual performance, comic and yet graceful. The children were delighted, and good showmanship no doubt brought extra sales.

"Old Brushy", it is believed, came from Chesham, then as now a noted brushmaking centre. In a sense he carried his wares into the enemy camp, for many Berkhamsted people were brushmakers, too. According to Loosley's directory of 1892, 80 people were employed at the Berkhamsted brushworks of Messrs. Stafford, Nash, Flested, Goss and Sterne.

Mr. R. Flested's small brushworks were at the rear of one of the tall houses above the former "Prospect Place Chapel" (converted into two cottages a century ago) in Highfield Road. Here he employed a number of women, and when business was brisk he could also count upon the help of outworkers living in "The Row," the little turning off Highfield Road.

Stafford's brushworks were right in the heart of Berkhamsted - on the site of the Court Theatre. Here stood a half-timbered house, probably as old as the Court House at the opposite end of Back Lane. This building, for centuries hidden behind the old market house, had been put to many uses; old residents will remember it as "Go-ey" Adams' shop. Brushmaking was also carried on for a time in the old railway station, now completely demolished.

Brushmaking was linked with the traditional local woodware industry. In Victorian times brush-backs and handles were turned out by the thousand.

And now for one or two miscellaneous items. Many readers, it appears, were pleased to be reminded last month of Mr. W. Elliott, Berkhamsted's last town crier. I am told that his uniform is now in Canada. His bell is preserved at the Civic Centre. I am reminded that Mr. Elliott often lectured on "Towns I have cried in."

A reader asks if I can explain the empty niches in the wall of the Sayer almshouses. The late Mr. G. H. Whybrow, in a lecture given in 1912, stated that Mr. Sayer lived in troubled times, when no one knew whether England would again become a Roman Catholic country. Mr. Sayer thought it would, and to make his new almshouses fit the times he had niches made in the outside walls to be occupied by images of Saints and of the Virgin Mary.

When the "Review" resumes normal publication I hope to devote a series of articles to the Town Hall, Market Hall and ancient fairs and markets. The Town Hall is now rapidly approaching its centenary (it bears the date 1859 but was actually opened in 1860), and the question of its future ownership and management is likely to occupy a prominent place in local politics in the near future.