

Berkhamsted's Ancient Monument—4

THE CASTLE'S DECLINE AND FALL

By 'BEORCHAM'

(Last month's article told the story of Berkhamsted Castle up to its abandonment as a residence in 1495.)

The wind whistled over the curtain walls and scattered the tiles of roofs which were soon open to the skies. It was a fate which befell many other castles; new weapons and new ways of waging war had greatly reduced the military effectiveness of castles; and as residences they were outdated, uncomfortable, very expensive to maintain and seldom capable of conversion. The castle had undoubtedly reached a state of senile decay.

Work in the park and in the castle fields went on much the same as before.

In 1502 the underkeeper at Berkhamsted sent a buck to Windsor for Henry VII's queen, to whom the honour and manor of Berkhamsted were granted. As a child she probably stayed with her grandmother at the castle, but it was in ruins before Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour, three of Henry VIII's wives, received grants of the honour of Berkhamsted.

'MUCH IN RUINE'

Builders visited the derelict castle and helped themselves to the masonry and timbers. By the time John Leland came to Berkhamsted in Henry VIII's reign it was already 'much in ruine.' Adding further to the destruction, Sir Edward

Cary's masons used much material to build Berkhamsted Place, a hill-top mansion a quarter of a mile from the castle. When the mansion was pulled down in 1967, many worked stones from the castle were exposed.

For the first time for 85 years the town again had a great house. Berkhamsted Place was sometimes called The Castle, but it never enjoyed a title of the fame of its namesake in the valley. Old people still dreamed of the good old days when Berkhamsted was a royal town. Over 120 years after the castle was abandoned, a survey of 1616 contains a wistful note about the town's 'great Trading and flourishing Estate at such Time as the Castle was maintained and inhabited or much frequented by the Kings of this Realm and concourse of People.'

'THE GLORY OF THAT PLACE'

In 1619 the town received a new charter and its first coat of arms. Again the castle was still very much in the minds of the townspeople. The design of the coat of arms was chosen 'upon deliberate consideration that the glory of that place hath proceeded from the ancient castle there, a principall seate of the Dukes of Cornwall.'

BEORCHAM (Contd.)

Camden, in the early 17th century, described the castle as a heap of stones and ruined walls; a survey of 1607 states that Cary, the builder of Berkhamsted Place, had built 'certain howses for his necessary use within the precincts of the said castle,' and a contemporary plan shows a brewhouse, a stable, and what seems to have been a lodge in the arena.

Salmon, in 1728, described the castle as 'a building with most of the outer walls and chimneys remaining, and all the windows opening to the inside.' Stukeley (1776) agreed that the windows looked inwards and said that the chapel seemed to have stood near the west wall, where there were signs of a staircase.

IDLE CURIOSITY

An orchard in the arena, shown in the plan of 1607, survived until the 19th century. In 1811, Dugdale wrote 'The inner court is now an orchard; the outer court is cultivated as a farm; and a small cottage with a few outbuildings now occupies a portion of the ground once occupied by princes and sovereigns.' A rare photograph of 1856 shows sheep grazing on the banks of the inner moat. It seems that the orchard had been cleared by that time; the arena was already being used for fetes, bazaars, cricket matches and archery meetings.

Until modern times the ruins and earthworks aroused little more than idle curiosity. Visitors wandered around, picking their way through the undergrowth, dodging heaps of stones, and musing, like Dugdale, upon departed glories. Archaeologists inspected the site and wrote learned reports, but there was nothing they could do to stop the rot. Great trees crashed down on walls that were infested with ivy. Nobody cared.

DIGGING FOR RELICS

In the early years of this century, W. Page and D. Montgomerie thoroughly examined the site and made some excavations. On the keep they found the well and the remains of stairs to upper

storeys of the tower; they also located the remains of a 15th century fireplace backed by tiles placed herringbone fashion. Except for the well, all these features have gone, largely as the result of damage caused by trees uprooted in a great gale. Deterioration continued all over the site, and a particularly sad loss was the crumbling away of two large pieces of wall on top of the rampart bordered by the flint wall of the road which runs parallel with the railway. In late Victorian times these two portions, about 8-ft. high and 5-ft. to 6-ft. thick, were conspicuous reminders of the ancient entrance from Castle Street.

In 1929-31, at a time of widespread unemployment, a large number of men tidied up the site and preserved what remained of the castle. On behalf of the Duchy of Cornwall, the site was taken over by H.M. Office of Works (now the Ministry of Public Building and Works). Many large trees were cut down, the walls were protected from further decay, and the moats, once full of coarse water-cress, were rendered hygienic. Steep banks on the east side of the arena were removed, exposing fireplaces and a recess in the curtain wall; under a hearthstone, a domino was found in mortar, a homely reminder of a fireside game of long ago.

13th CENTURY BOW

The famous Berkhamsted bow, now in the British Museum, was found in the east moat at a depth of 2½ ft. It is 4 ft. long with tapering sides, looking rather like the stave of a barrel. Although the wood on the outer curve is cracked and decayed, the inner face is perfect and the bevels are almost complete. It is the only bow of its kind extant, pre-dating the long bow which was first used by the English towards the end of the 13th century; perhaps the bow was used in the siege of 1216.

In the unpleasant work of cleaning out the moats, portions of the drawbridge, including a 20 ft. long beam, were found. The discovery of some 17th

century German ware in the sludge added nothing to our knowledge of the castle, which seems to have been a dumping ground as well as a source of building material. A strange find was a sealed jar containing gooseberries, still recognisable 300 years after the fruit was gathered and preserved.

The well on the keep was thoroughly cleaned out and pieces of marble were found in it, as well as lead which may have come from the roof of the long-vanished tower.

THE 'GAMMA' AIRSHIP

The castle site is now immaculate, a haven of peace that is admired as much for its beauty as for its historic interest. When fetes and concerts are held in the arena, the townspeople turn out in force. At rare intervals we hold historical pageants. One was held in 1922 to mark the sept-centenary of St. Peter's Church; it was repeated in 1931. An entirely new pageant, hugely successful, was held in 1966 to commemorate the 900th anniversary of the best-remembered date in local and national history.

A sensational event was the landing in the castle grounds in May 1913 of the Army dirigible 'Gamma', captained by an old boy of Berkhamsted School, J. N. Fletcher. Another great occasion was the visit in 1936 of the Prince of Wales, now the Duke of Windsor; he was the first Duke of Cornwall to pay an official visit to the manor of Berkhamsted since 1616.

During the second World War the castle was again the home of royalty. Great statues from the streets of London were evacuated to Berkhamsted. After the war they were returned, unharmed, to London, not greatly missed by the people of Berkhamsted.

The above is the last of four articles upon which will be based a chapter on the castle in a new History of Berkhamsted. 'Beorcham' will be pleased to receive corrections, criticisms, and suggestions.

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