

How the Town was Governed—2

THE CORPORATION OF BERKHAMSTED

By 'BEORCHAM'

FROM EARLY TIMES Berkhamsted was a borough. As was stated in last month's article, the last of several royal charters was granted to the town in 1618. But the Corporation declined during the Civil War and Commonwealth; two or three years after Charles II was restored to the throne, Berkhamsted elected His Worship the Mayor for the last time.

Much imagination is needed to picture the scene in the Court House, sometimes called the Town Hall, when the bailiff (mayor) and chief burgesses (aldermen), accompanied by the clerk, recorder and mace-bearer, attended courts and meetings. They also met in the Guildhall, which I imagined was another name for the Court House until I saw an entry of 1660 which mentions 'the Goyldhall, the stayres leading thereto and the Goale (gaol) underneath the same.' This can

only be identified with the Market House which was burnt down in 1854.

Twelve chief burgesses were to serve for life, 'as long as they are well behaved.' Each year they chose the bailiff and elected 'one recorder, learned in law,' 'one common clerk,' and two sergeants of the mace. The bailiff and burgesses constituted the common council and were empowered to make laws for the borough, hold courts, impose fines, penalties and imprisonments, maintain a gaol, collect market tolls and rents of stalls, and enjoy certain other privileges.

MARKET TOWN

Thus the Corporation was closely linked with the everyday life of the town, in particular its fairs and markets. Sources of income, however, seem to have been small from the start and very small indeed during the Civil War and

Commonwealth. It seems that there was a general decline in trade after an expansionist period which was helped by the 'disparking' of much of Berkhamsted Park in 1627. Many hundreds of acres of land were freed for cultivation, a vast amount of land trading took place, and many local men were able to start their own farms or smallholdings or add to the acres they already farmed.

CORPORATION RECORDS

Many burgesses were also vestrymen, serving as churchwardens, sidesmen, overseers of the poor, and surveyors of highways. They knew how great was the difference between the revenues of the two units of local government. The Vestry was the rating authority, able to raise money for the maintenance and repair of the church, the relief of the poor, and the upkeep of highways. The Vestry held sway over the whole parish, a larger area than that of the Corporation, which had good cause to wish that its boundaries could be extended.

A number of Corporation documents, including a copy of the charter of 1618, survive in the church chest. I have not been able to locate the first court book of the Corporation, which if it still exists is probably much more informative than the book for the years 1637-63. After 1641 little was recorded beyond the election of officers. Looking like a cheap little exercise book, it seems to symbolise the poverty of the Corporation; the Vestry could afford handsomely bound books for the churchwardens' accounts.

BEORCHAM (Contd.)

It is always tempting to seize upon interesting but unimportant tidbits. In 1638 the bailiff and burgesses discussed the plight of Joane Brookes, a servant girl who was turned out of Nicholas Moore's house four years before her contract had expired. Moore had kept some of the girl's clothes, and the burgesses thought it best to dissolve the contract provided that her former master handed over 'one linsey woolsey apron, one pair of shoes, one blacke hatte and two wollen wastcoates' which he had retained.

NOT A ROYAL WELCOME

From a humble servant to Royalty; in 1638 the Corporation acknowledged 'the blame that was laid upon us for neglecting our formal presents to the kinge and queene' when they passed through Berkhamsted two years earlier. Then, in August, payment of Ship Money was 'longe behynde,' and the Corporation was required to pay on September 2 'or else to appeere before the Counsell the same day to answer the neglecte.' A resolution was passed to the effect that it was the bailiff's 'forbearance to distrayne that causeth the non payment, therefore he resolveth to distrayne.'

In 1638, one of many refusals to take office was recorded. Robert Darvell was warned to take his oath of admission to be a capital burgess in place of William Axtell. Darvell declined to appear, and 'the company present adjudged him to pay an amercement of 5£ and wee doe thinke it necessary that Mr. Bailey (Mr. Bailiff) take a speedy course to levy the same.'

Whether Darvell paid the fine is not recorded; he emigrated to America, as did Thomas Axtell, son of William Axtell (mentioned above) and brother of Daniel Axtell, who stayed in England, fought for Cromwell, and was hanged as a regicide.

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

It is interesting to find the burgesses debating, in May 1639, the question of sending 'boyes beyond the seas to some of the American llandes.' Robert Newman, son of the Rev. Thomas Newman, rector of St. Peter's from 1597-1639, said he had conferred with a merchant who was prepared to take a dozen boys 'if we will clothe them or gve the merchante 20s. apiece and he will clothe them himselfe.'

The scope of the Corporation is better

indicated by a document which states that the bailiff, on taking office, was required to swear that he would execute justice without partiality, execute writs, warrants, and precepts, maintain the grants, rights and liberties, provide necessary prisons, and 'see that the assize of bread, drynck and all other victuall . . . and weights and measures . . . be good, lawfull and allowable.'

The Corporation's standard weights and measures, kept either in the Guildhall or Court House, were itemised in 1642 as follows:

- It. a brass halfe pecke.
- It. a brass pinte pott.
- It. a wayte of brass being 14 pd.
- It. a 7 pd weighte of brass.
- It. a pyle of brass weightes being 8 in number.
- It. a brazen Ell.
- It. a box of brass weightes.
- It. a holdefast and hammer.
- It. 3 seals to seale Measures.

The ell (the ancient cloth measure, 45-in.) was given to the Corporation by the rector, the Rev. Thomas Newman.

HANDCUFFS AND CHAINS

Besides the standard weights and measures, the inventory of 1642 mentions the charter, the mace, the common seal with a silver head, the arms of the borough, 'the widdowes Almes,' two pairs of handcuffs, a shackle, a table with a frame, a green carpet and twelve cushions, and three pay books.

An earlier inventory (1626) records 'Impliments belonging to the Goale and the house of Correction' and mentions 'too (2) prisoners.' Fixtures and fittings included '3 lockes, 3 keyes and a whipping stock; 6 cayens (chains), 3 greater and 3 lesser; 6 staples; 2 payre of gyves; 1 anvill to fasten the irons; 4 rounde locks with 2 keyes apiece, one of them doble bowed; 2 stayples and a haspe for the counter doare; 2 blocks and 2 belles to beat hemp; a mault mill given by Mr. Wethered; a new padlocke for the handcoffes.'

Everything, then, was done to ensure that prisoners would not escape. But all was not well: 'There were lost in Mr. Wethered his tyme 3 chaynes, 3 greater and 1 small; 1 payre of gyves and 1 round lock; lost more this yeare, one payre of gyves.' Gyves, if you are not acquainted with the word, are shackles or fetters. I wonder who made off with them?

(To be continued).

BOUQUET

Through the seasons of the year, the message of the flowers
Brings God's presence all around, from dawn till evening hours.
Here, snowdrops cluster in a ring, and drifts of crocus blaze,
There, in the cool, pine-scented woods, violets' perfume sprays.
In hedgerow seek the primrose bud, its curling heart unfold,
And daffodils' swathed trumpets flow a tossed bouquet of gold.
Laburnums' feathered tassels dance the pipers' tune of breeze,
Which stirs the varied leaf of summer's plumage in the trees.

The pansies and the tulips, then the tender fragrant rose—
In contrast spreads the peonys' exotic, petalled pose.
The zealous raindrops drench as dew, on hawthorns' cream-laced bloom,
And bluebells shimmer in a sea—in spears of misty plume.
The sugar-frosted almond in its blossomed pink array.

And lupins standing tall, to greet the sunshine every day,
Flowers as God's sentinels in every season's stage,
Changeless in a changing world, they rule our heritage.
God sends His rainbow arcade, on earth shared far and wide—
And in the heart of every flower, He walks close by our side.

ELIZABETH GOZNEY.

GIFT DAY 4th JULY

Once again, a church roof is a cause of anxiety and expense. This time, it is the turn of our friends of the Congregational Church to worry about the timbers and slates of their building.

In 1867, when the church was built, building and maintenance costs were not the problem that they are today and the architect was exceptionally generous with the height and size of the roof. The expense so far of renewing defective woodwork and slates has been £800, and the estimate for completing the work is a further £750.

On Saturday, 4th July, the minister, the Rev. G. Tegryn Williams and the deacons will, in turn, be at the West door of the church, in Castle Street, when they hope to receive gifts towards the £1,000 which they need to keep a roof over their heads.

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