

How the Town was Governed—5

## FREE GIFTS TO SAVE THE RATES

By 'BEORCHAM'

UNTIL THE Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 abolished the old parochial system, the Vestry devoted much of its time and income to the relief of the poor. By present day standards the relief was horrifyingly inadequate. Year after year use was made of a workhouse which was dilapidated, insanitary and overcrowded. So dreadful must have been the lot of the inmates that one thinks of the evils described by Dickens.

Few people, least of all the ratepayers, took a forward view, and the Vestry could do little more than pursue a policy of mend and make do. Parsimonious the parish officers may have been, but they were not deliberately cruel. On the contrary, the overseers' accounts show that many little acts of kindness were performed. We must remember that besides great changes in social and economic life there have also been great changes in the way people think. To take a modern in-

stance, few people envisaged the Welfare State even a few years before it came into existence.

Last month's article brought us to the year 1824, when so many paupers were employed on road repairs that the offices of overseers of the poor and highway surveyors were combined. At the same time, the Berkhamsted Vestry invited the Northchurch Vestry to unite for purposes of Poor Law administration. It was proposed to build a workhouse to serve both parishes, but Northchurch was at first reluctant to part with its own workhouse.

### GEORGE NUGENT'S BEQUEST

Now we come to an act of charity which helped both the poor and the ratepayers. One of the town's greatest benefactors was the Rev. George Nugent, who from 1791 until his death in 1830 was rector of Bygrave, a small parish

near Baldock. Nugent, however, lived in Berkhamsted, at the Red House; he served as parish clerk and often presided at the Vestry. More than anyone else he was moved to pity by the wretched condition of the workhouse which stood next door to the George public-house, in front of what is now Park View School. In his will Nugent bequeathed £1,000 for a new workhouse, and it was built on a new site in the High Street, at Kirtsbury Road corner.

### SECOND THOUGHTS

By 1832 some Northchurch parishioners doubted the wisdom of maintaining a separate workhouse. A parish meeting was called to consider entering into an agreement with Berkhamsted for the reception of Northchurch paupers in the new workhouse, the village paying the cost of their maintenance. Just in case the marriage would not last, it was stipulated that all the furniture transferred from Northchurch to the Berkhamsted workhouse should be marked and returned on termination of the agreement.

The proposed amalgamation was turned down by 17 votes to 15, but six weeks later another meeting was called and the transfer to Berkhamsted was approved by 33 votes to 26. The Northchurch workhouse was then closed and eventually converted into cottages, which survived until a few years ago, when the site, at the corner of Billet Lane, was cleared and used for the building of council flats.

At last Berkhamsted and Northchurch

had a common interest—the workhouse. But shortly afterwards, in 1834, further centralisation was enforced by Parliament. Boards of Guardians were set up to administer Poor Law in groups of parishes, known as unions. Thus the new workhouse, originally intended for the poor of Berkhamsted only, had to serve several parishes.

Much ill-feeling was caused by this change. The Guardians purchased the workhouse and Berkhamsted had to contribute its share of the purchase money. The balance, under the direction of the Poor Law Commissioners, was invested and the dividend (£17 5s. 6d. yearly) was placed to the credit of the parish of Berkhamsted, thereby benefiting the ratepayers, not the poor, as Nugent intended.

### CLOSING THE WORKHOUSE

It is not possible in this series of articles to deal with the Board of Guardians, whose meetings, held at Berkhamsted for 100 years, were fully reported in the local Press. Many readers, however, may wonder what happened to the workhouse, a word which was officially abolished some 40 years ago. Nugent House, as it was called, ended its days in another bitter controversy. The County Council, as the Public Assistance authority (note the change of name from Poor Law), was strongly criticised for transferring all the inmates from Berkhamsted to Hemel Hempstead and closing Nugent House in 1935. Two years later it was sold for £3,700, and down came bricks and an inscribed stone which proclaimed the 'munificent gift' of George Nugent—as conspicuous a reminder of the founder as the 'Guift of John Sayer' inscription on the almshouses.

### PUBLIC SUBSCRIPTIONS

Of particular interest is the way private donations and public subscriptions enabled the town to acquire new buildings and services at no cost to the ratepayers. For instance, in 1788 the cost of a new parish fire engine, £58 15s., was over-subscribed by £6. In 1849 the first street gas lamps were bought by public subscription; 16 lamp-posts, 17 brackets and 33 lamps and piping were provided at a cost of £106, and it was merely necessary for the Vestry to pay for gas and maintenance out of the rates. The Town Hall-cum-Market House was built by public subscriptions. So was a new road to the railway station, Lower King's Road. Not a penny on the rates!

A crowning achievement, again defrayed by subscriptions, was the provision of elementary schools, following a resolution which was proposed by Augustus Smith and backed unanimously at a Vestry meeting in 1833. Until that date—indeed, until 1870—the Vestry, like most local authorities elsewhere, thought that the education of the poor should be left entirely to voluntary effort.

Speaking of education, the Vestry took prompt action following the Endowed Schools Act of 1869. A special meeting was held to adopt a scheme which gave the ratepayers three

seats on the board of governors of Berkhamsted School; the scheme also led to the establishment of the Girls' Grammar School, though it did not come into being until 1888.

Following the famous Education Act of 1870, a parish poll was taken and a local School Board came into being in 1871. A census taken in the parish showed that not more than one-third of the children who should have been at school were in regular attendance; many had never attended a school at all.

Managers of the National (Church of England) Schools lost no time in introducing improvements to meet the requirements of the Act. The British (now Park View) School had no endowments, lacked liberal subscribers and could not renovate the buildings or staff the school in such a manner as to enable the managers to take the Government grant. Overtures were made to transfer the school to the School Board and for many years it was known as the Board School.

### CHURCH RATES

Although shorn of Poor Law and, later on, several other duties, the Vestry continued its non-ecclasiastical work until almost the end of the 19th century. Many able men helped to govern the town during a time of rapid development; and as happens today, their actions caused pleasure or pain, according to one's point of view.

Perhaps the most bitter controversy was caused by the 'church rate', which required all ratepayers to contribute towards the cost of maintaining the fabric of the parish church. Here, as in many other towns, Nonconformists were determined to resist payment of this rate.

Henry Nash, our Victorian writer of reminiscences, takes up the story: 'A number of warrants were issued to restrain upon the defaulters . . . and the extreme action of the law was applied to upwards of forty persons, whose homes in some cases were stripped of their choicest treasures. Much indignation was manifested against the parish officials who refused to accept the whole amount of the rate as a free contribution, deeming it their duty to uphold the integrity of the law and not to submit to any compromise.'

It was the first and last scene of its kind in Berkhamsted, one which shattered many long-standing friendships.

The law was repealed in 1868, and Nash adds: 'A spirit of liberality broke forth under the voluntary system that has resulted in the complete restoration of the ancient fabric'—in other words, the restoration of the parish church in 1870.

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## PLANNING PERMISSIONS

The Town Planning Committee of the Berkhamsted Urban District Council has recommended approval of the following planning applications:

A new shop front at 134, High Street for Neil's Furnishers Ltd.

A double garage to replace an existing structure at 98 Kings Road for Mr. S. P. Cooper.

A Dutch barn to replace an existing building of a similar type at Ashlyns Farm, Chesham Road for the Thomas Coram Foundation for Children.

A first floor extension and detached garage at 1 Seymour Road, Northchurch for Mr. E. Sampson.

Houses and garages for seven plots at Oak Wood, Shootersway for Cross Oak Developments (Berkhamsted) Ltd. This was subject to a number of conditions designed to protect visual amenities and increase the safety and free flow of traffic.

The conversion of an existing integral garage into a music room, and the provision of a double garage for Dr. A.L. Hodge at 6, Barncroft Road.

## ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

Canvassers have been calling at every house in Berkhamsted to find out whether any changes have taken place since the last register of electors was compiled.

Anyone who will be 18 on or before the 16th February 1971, will be entered as a fully qualified voter.

Anyone who will reach the age of 18 between 17th February 1971 and 15th February 1972 inclusive will appear on the register; but his name will be preceded by figures to indicate the date from which he can vote.

Please help by returning your registration forms as soon as possible.

## A RETURN TO BERKHAMSTED

Sir Hugh Carleton Greene, former foreign correspondent of *The Times*, former Director-General of the BBC, returns on 22nd October to Berkhamsted, the place from which he launched forth on his exciting career.

He has accepted an invitation from the Berkhamsted Citizens' Association to give a talk on his boyhood in the town. The meeting will be held in the King's Hall and will start at 8 p.m.

It promises to be a fascinating evening for Sir Hugh has emerged as a significant figure of our time. As the BBC's Director-General he was an innovator, even a revolutionary.

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