

How the Town was Governed—6

THROWING MONEY DOWN THE DRAIN

By 'BEORCHAM'

LAST MONTH'S article referred to the creation of Boards of Guardians in 1834, when Poor Law administration was transferred from individual parishes to groups or unions of parishes. The Berkhamsted Union comprised the parishes of Berkhamsted, Northchurch, Tring, Wigginton, Little Gaddesden, Nettleden, Aldbury, Marsworth, Pitstone and Puttenham.

The next important change was the formation of rural sanitary authorities in 1872. This meant extra work for the guardians, who, after each meeting devoted to the relief of the poor, held a second meeting to deal with public health matters.

The Berkhamsted Union and Rural Sanitary Authority, as it was called, was in charge of an area with a population of 15,090 and a rateable value of £91,076 in 1881. Its first major success was the building of Aldbury isolation hospital,

which was so advanced in design that the plans were borrowed by several other sanitary authorities.

DELAYING TACTICS

The Vestry continued to function with reduced powers. Unlike Tring, which became a separate urban sanitary district under a Local Board, Berkhamsted stayed in the rural sanitary area. To quote Loosley's Directory for 1892: 'The admirable, economic administration of parochial affairs has militated against the formation of a Local Board; the streets and roads, lighting, and the important affairs dealt with at the Union, being of a model character'.

In fact, the delaying tactics of a joint parochial committee to consider a sewerage scheme for Berkhamsted and Northchurch were nothing short of a scandal. Some of the representatives were dominated by a desire to save

money, and were unfortunately right when they prophesied that the ratepayers' money would be wasted. As will be shown later in this article, the system installed was faulty and inadequate. If the saying, 'throwing money down the drain', had not been already in circulation, Berkhamsted would have invented it.

FILTHY STREETS

Sanitation is not a glamorous subject, and it is usually ignored completely by local historians. But fewer people would speak of 'the good old days' if they knew more about the filth, the diseases, the stinks, and many other discomforts and nuisances that were rife until fairly modern times.

Within the recollection of elderly folk there was no regular refuse collection. Street cleansing was always inadequate. The unpaid stonewardens or highway surveyors of the parish forever fought a losing battle in the days of unmetalled roads, unpaved footpaths, horse-drawn traffic and constant processions of cattle and sheep on the way to market. We can only hope that parishioners took note of the Vestry's threat to prosecute women who threw slops out of bedroom windows in 1824!

Writing about Berkhamsted in early Victorian times, Henry Nash said that all kinds of vegetable refuse were cast into the street. Pigs were the recognised scavengers. The rainfall took its own course and found its own level, 'sometimes resting in large pools in front of dwellings, waiting for the sun to evaporate it, and in the meantime providing a

cooling bath for pigs to wallow in. On private property cesspits were the only method of dealing with sewage, and it was no uncommon thing to see on the south side of the street the drainage from manure heaps flowing from the several gateways'.

BLACK DITCH

A 'black ditch' in the valley—an open sewer—was an offence to eye and nose, and in 1875 the *Berkhamsted Times* protested that for years 'the inhabitants in mid-town had inhaled the reeking breath of the Castle Street stream'.

Piped water was not available until 1864, and for many years after that date many residents used wells that were situated near cesspits.

In 1875, the year of a famous Public Health Act, the medical officer advocated the new drainage system. At a special parish meeting a large majority declared that the Rural Sanitary Authority should carry out the drainage of the town. Two years later a parochial committee visited Aylesbury to see the system used in that town, and despite the clerk's warning that they might be sued if a local scheme were delayed, William Nash remarked that there was no need to hurry. The town was very healthy; he had read in the paper that there had been only one death in the town in five weeks.

GOVERNMENT ENQUIRY

In 1878, a London firm was invited to prepare a sewerage scheme. Hearing that the works would cost £6,300, plus land and other expenses of £6,000, Captain Hamilton, of Highfield House, said that no one outside Bedlam would think of spending that sum on such an object. It was 'a useless expense and dangerous experiment'.

No progress was made until 1892, when the sewerage question was the subject of a Government Enquiry. Later, a scheme was approved by the Rural Sanitary Authority (which in 1894 became the Rural District Council), and still the 'economists' raised objections. At a public meeting a resolution was passed regretting that the ratepayers' wishes had not been ascertained before the Local Government Board had been asked to authorise a loan for £16,000. A second resolution was passed condemning the scheme as being excessive and extravagant; it was thought that the town could be efficiently drained for £10,000.

FROM RURAL TO URBAN

At this period important administrative changes had been made, or were about to be made. The Local Government Act of 1888 transferred the local government functions of justices of the peace to newly-founded county councils and county boroughs, and in 1894 another Act distributed the work in urban areas between borough and urban district councils. In rural areas parish councils and meetings were created to restore some ancient glory to the parishes.

As early as 1887 Mr. T. Read urged that an urban district should be formed. A weightier suggestion to the same effect was made at a Vestry meeting in 1891; then, in 1896, a further proposal envisaged a considerably larger area than the present urban area, which, incidentally, has twice been enlarged.

Tring, which for years had been a separate urban sanitary district, elected its first urban council in January, 1895. Berkhamsted waited until April 15, 1898, for an urban district to be formed. Controlling an area of only 1,039 acres, with a population of about 5,000, the Urban Council was immediately concerned with the drainage and sewerage scheme, on which the rural authority had already spent £13,812. That sum, it was stated was practically lost, 'just as if it had been cast into the sea'.

RECONSTRUCTION

Much of the work done had to be reconstructed. In its first year the Urban Council spent £8,645 on a high-level sewer, and in the second year the reconstruction of the low-level sewer cost £2,600, plus £2,500 for the disconnecting of house drainage, etc.

It was a time of high spending and great inconvenience. The laying and relaying of pipes ruined paths and roads. There was mud, mud, everywhere. Sarcastic comments appeared in the local papers, and some of the new councillors must have wondered whether they were in their right minds to have sought election.

For a quiet life, the vestry, now concerned only with ecclesiastical matters, was much to be preferred. Only six people, other than reporters, turned up for the annual meeting in 1899, and they re-elected themselves. But Northchurch, outside the urban district, had a parish council to look after the village. The number of electors present at the annual meeting was 120, and voting was keen for the twelve seats on the council.

(To be continued)

ALL SAINTS ALTAR SERVERS

1st 8 a.m., P. Webb, 9.15 a.m. M. Allen and D. Billington; 8th 8 a.m. D. Cox, 9.15 a.m. B. Ashby and D. Hinds; 15th 8 a.m. D. Handscombe, 9.15 a.m. D. Billington and E. Monger; 22nd 8 a.m. M. Handscombe, 9.15 a.m. M. Allen and D. Hinds; 29th 8 a.m. J. Jackson, 9.15 a.m. B. Ashby and E. Monger.

EPISTLE READERS

1st November E. J. Bayliss; 8th B. Holmes, 15th Mrs. B. J. Bowden; 22nd G. P. Lancashire, 29th D. Woodward, 6th December H. Crompton.

FLOWER ROTA

November 1st Mrs. Chapman; 8th Mrs. Potter; 15th Mrs. Lancashire; 22nd Miss Walker.

SANCTUARY ROTA

November 1st Mrs. Mellis; 8th Mrs. Common; 15th Mrs. Moore; 22nd Miss Walker; 29th Mrs. Biggin; December 6th Mrs. Doggett.

PARISH REGISTER

BAPTISMS

September 27—Ian Keith Ranger, 7 Upper Hall Park.
September 27—Stephen Peter Kettle, 12 Shrublands Road.
October 11—Jane Louise Lang, 21 Dukas Way.
October 11—Emma Jane Burton, 18 Falcon Ridge.

WEDDINGS

September 19—Ian Rex Ewers, of Aylesbury and Elizabeth Webster of 15 Shrublands Avenue.
September 19—Keith Harding of Amersham and Joan Anne Morgan of 35 High Street.

FUNERALS

September 30 — Archibald Philip Samuels, 27 Beech Drive, aged 73 years. Interred Kingshill Cemetery. Service at St. Peter's.
October 9—Edith Gertrude Sandall, 27 Boswell Road, aged 65 years. Interred Kingshill Cemetery. Service at St. Peter's.
October 7—William Clifton, 148 Bridge-water Road, aged 78 years. Interred Kingshill Cemetery. Service at St. Peter's.
October 8—Edith Gummell, 23 Highfield Road, aged 73 years. Interred Kingshill Cemetery. Service at St. Peter's.
October 14—John Archibald Campbell, 16 Riverside Gardens, aged 53 years. Interred Kingshill Cemetery. Service at St. Peter's.

COLLECTIONS & STEWARDSHIP FUND

	£	s.	d.
Stewardship Fund (September)	694	14	0
Collections (September)			
St. Peter's	55	3	9
All Saints	26	13	9
	£776	13	6

SAVE THE CHILDREN FUND

Come to a Christmas Market in St. Peter's Hall, on Saturday, 21st November, from 9 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.

There will be a variety of stalls and raffles. Admission will cost adults sixpence, and children threepence. Please support this worthy cause. Coffee will be served. The Save the Children Fund wish to thank most sincerely all those who brought clothing to the collection on 6th and 7th October. Twenty-six sacksful of clothes have been sent for distribution in all corners of the world to those in need.

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