

BERKHAMSTED REVIEW

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In and around Berkhamsted by 'BEORCHAM'

Timely suggestion

What a splendid suggestion that during Queen Elizabeth's silver jubilee year we should renovate a clock that was installed to commemorate Queen Victoria's accession.

I refer to the tower clock of St. Peter's Church. We all look up to it and are rather sorry when time stands still. However, with money and skill our old friend could be going like clockwork all the time. It may also be possible to regild the four dials.

The striking mechanism, by the way, has to be disengaged whenever the ringers pull the ropes. The clock chimes on the treble and fourth bells, and the hour booms on the tenor.

Castle Street discovery

I wonder how many successive buildings have occupied the corner site in Castle Street where the Congregational Church formerly stood? It was demolished nearly three years ago, and we know that a smaller church previously occupied the site. Earlier still there were cottages, and local archaeologists recently inspected an ancient fireplace which they thought was Tudor. Almost certainly there were even earlier cottages—perhaps a continuous row before Chapel Street came into being.

The site is now being redeveloped, so hurry up if you wish to photograph the School Chapel from an unobstructed viewpoint.

Incidentally, the broken flint wall which caused Whitehill to be closed for several weeks has been splendidly restored. And the pair of granite railway sleepers of 1837, which afterwards served as a mounting block for horse-riders, have been restored to their former position against the flint wall.

Breaking the ice

During the first severe frost of winter, at the beginning of December, I heard what is now a rare noise—that of ice breaking as a narrow boat headed for Bourne End. Fair progress was made until the boat approached a lock; there it was necessary for a man to pommel the ice before the gate could be opened.

Many years ago, when the canal was a busy commercial waterway, harrowing tales were told of the plight of barge families who were ice-bound for weeks at a time. The ice was up to 2ft. 6in. deep, and gigantic icicles curtained the lock-gates.

But for local people there were skating galas. Hundreds skimmed along to music played by the town band and illuminations provided by fairy lights and bonfires on the towpath. An old fellow named William Fisher did a roaring trade selling baked potatoes and coffee to the skaters. Collections were taken for unemployed men who maintained good skating conditions

by sweeping the ice at regular intervals.

I wonder how few Berkhamstedians still have a pair of skates?

John Brown's body

A short time ago I was given a book entitled "Berkhamsted Heritage: Culture and Industry in a Rural Connecticut Town." For a 200 years old township of 2,500 people to produce a book of 345 large pages, with maps and scores of pictures, is as praiseworthy as it is remarkable.

Especially interesting is a chapter on John Brown, whose soul goes marching on. The famous Abolitionist was born in a neighbouring town, Torrington, and he and his family often visited Berkhamsted, where they played under the spreading branches of a tree beneath which Red Indians had formerly held council. Later on it became known as John Brown's tree and bore a bronze plaque.

The Berkhamsted book recalls a railway disaster when a goods wagon full of dynamite exploded. The editor of a local paper, "not noted for understatement," said the freight car was blown so high that it did not come down until the next day, while "a bolt from the engine struck a walnut tree, causing the tree to bear nuts, all of which were threaded to fit the bolt."

Tell me another!

Dwight's Pheasantries

My recent reference to M. Dwight's Pheasantries prompted Mrs. Gent, of Chapel Street, to show me a booklet issued in 1934. In an introductory note, Mr. M. Dwight said that the business was established 200 years ago and could well claim to be the oldest and largest of its kind in England.

Every year 20,000 pheasants were reared at Berkhamsted, and to maintain a strain of strong, vigorous birds a complete change of pure-breds from all parts of the world was introduced into the stock each year. Pheasants and eggs were exported in large numbers to almost every part of the world.

For 3,000 pheasant eggs one paid £1.32 from April to May 12th; later on there were substantial reductions. Of course, one could buy smaller quantities!

The cab cleaner

Trying to piece together some family history, an American lady seeks information about John (Jack) Taylor and Elizabeth Ryder, who lived in New Road, Northchurch, in the 1880s.

It is known that John, in 1881, was "a cab cleaner of horse-drawn carriages." I shall be pleased to pass on any information you may have.

Picture books

If you are fond of old photographs, may I recommend a very handsome book entitled "The Birth of Photography?" The author is Mr. Brian W. Coe, who lives in Charles Street and is Curator of the Kodak Museum at Harrow. There are some truly wonderful photographs.

Of county and local interest is Richard Whitmore's "Victorian and Edwardian Hertfordshire." The BBC newscaster is known to many Berkhamsted residents and our part of the county is very well represented. Incidentally, his oldest photograph (Hemel Hempstead fire brigade) is dated 1845.



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