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In and around Berkhamsted

by 'BEORCHAM'

The Halsey Diaries

As a change from my own observations, I invite you to look around Berkhamsted through the eyes of a Victorian diarist. Every day, from 1845 until 1852, Frederica Halsey recorded the weather and the activities of her very busy household. Her husband was Thomas Halsey, M.P., and with two young sons they lived at The Hall, the mansion which stood about 100 yards east of Swing Gate Lane until it was pulled down some 40 years ago.

Many of the 2,500 entries are of great local interest. There are accounts of long rides to one country seat or another, chats with local tradesmen, and many comments on the social life of the town.

Pride and Prejudice

In addition to his duties at Westminster, Thomas Halsey attended local vestry meetings and the family regularly worshipped at St. Peter's. Now and again there are some rather acid comments. Was it the heating system which prompted the following entry? — "Tom went to morning church and was nearly stunk out; he says he could not have believed it possible there should be such a smell." Tom demurred when Henry Twells, the curate (afterwards a famous hymn writer), called for a subscription for an organ, but "promised to see about it if the other gentlemen's subscriptions came to anything near the amount required."

In 1851, when the Rev. J. Hutchinson succeeded the Rev. John Crofts as rector, "we were much pleased with his mode of reading and the distinctness with which he made himself heard." A year later, however, Sir J. Culme-Seymour, rector of Northchurch, preached a most beautiful and improving sermon against Pride. I only wish we had him oftener instead of poor, dear, prosy Mr. Hutchinson, whose sermons do not in the least edify me, though I think he himself is a particularly agreeable man."

Shooting Mishap

The Halsey family was not blessed with good health; there were endless colds and Frederica was an invalid for weeks on end. And there was a silly accident when "Tom shot at Gaddesden, and of those stupid young Coopers shot him in the legs, five shots went in, 24 others grazed the skin, but it was providential it was no worse." But two days later Tom's leg was better. He attended a Cricket Club meeting and "brought Mr. W. Cooper, the one who shot him, home to dinner."

The Halsey's pet dog, called Nyk, bit Mr. Holliday, the wheelwright, whose shop was at the top of Holliday Street. Mrs. Halsey went to see the poor man and gave him 30s., "which I looked upon as equal to a fortnight's earnings... He was perfectly satisfied, and we parted the best of friends."

Staff Problems

One night the cook "fell down drunk" and was discharged. A manservant, too, "fell down drunk" and "became quite like a madman, so violent and frightened us all to death; did not go to bed till near 2 o'clock." The following day he expressed great penitence and obtained Tom's permission "to stay his month instead of being sent off at once." Then there was a Belgian cook who was discharged and "we had the whitewashers in to clean the kitchen, everything in a state of dirt and grease which one's wildest imagination could hardly have conceived."

Another disappointment was "the odious upper housemaid with those dreadful eyes, who let me clean windows rather than do it herself; she is to leave this day month, to my intense satisfaction as I have never liked her." But when another maid left, "I could hardly realise to myself that she was going, and when we did part we wept together."

Heavy Expenses

The large indoor and outdoor staff was a great strain on the family budget; there is a reference to "our Exchequer being in a very empty state" when it was necessary to order 392 yards of homespun linen "for 28 pairs of servants' sheets which will amount to a fearful sum."

However, all the servants were sent to London to see the Great Exhibition of 1851, and there was an annual supper for the indoor staff, while "each of the under garden men and the carter received a shilling to procure a supper for themselves."

For the gentry there was an annual ball and we find this tell-tale entry: "Tom bilious and ill, he always is, I remark, after a Berkhamsted Club dinner." Incidentally, when Tom wished to smoke a cigar, he usually retreated to a greenhouse!

Unusual Dinner

On one occasion the Halseys and several other members of the local gentry were entertained to dinner at Berkhamsted Place by General and Mrs. Finch. Mrs. Halsey commented: "A pleasant enough party, but a very odd dinner — fair soup, bad flabby cod fish, and then a boiled neck of mutton, which I never before saw as a company joint, a small thin goose, calves' feet

fried in batter and a sort of rissole unfried, the composition of which I could not make out; this was the whole of the first course and the second course matched it."

The Halseys also visited the Headmaster of Berkhamsted School; Mrs. Crawford was described as "rather nice looking and very tolerably presentable."

Lost at Sea

There is no space here for further extracts from the diary, but it is one of the most interesting sources of local information I have ever seen, and I am indebted to a member of the Halsey family, who lives in Berkhamsted, for permission to inspect and quote from the diary. I am now all the more keen to bring out a book on Victorian Berkhamsted.

Unfortunately, there is a tragic end to our story. The Halseys were fond of foreign travel.

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