

BERKHAMSTED REVIEW



In and around Berkhamsted by 'BEORCHAM'

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May Day

How did Berkhamsted celebrate May Day in the so-called good old days? This question was put to me the other day, and the earliest reference I can find is in the churchwardens' accounts for 1617, when the maypole was taken down, carried to the church, and then sawn up to mend the church rails and the gutter of the market house.

Until the early years of this century almost every village and country town celebrated May Day, with dancing round the maypole and the election of the May Queen. Girls dressed in white carried garlands from door to door for the less romantic purpose of soliciting alms. They would sing a May Day carol which told the story of an early morning ramble to gather flowers for their garlands.

Children were not alone in seeking alms. Jacks-in-the-green (usually chimney sweeps) blackened their faces and donned a hooped framework decorated with evergreens and flowers as they danced and sang:

The May, the May, the very first of May,
The springtime of the year;
We come round to your door today
To taste of your strong beer,
And if you haven't got any strong beer
We'll be content with small,
So give us a cup, and we'll drink it all up,
And thank the Lord for all
The doggerel varied from district to district,

and so did the tune. A pity there isn't space to say more about a custom which may still be remembered by our oldest residents.

A Castle Street Pre-Fab

This is the centennial year of the building of one of the town's most unusual houses — a sort of Victorian pre-fab. I refer to St. George's, in Castle Street, originally a temperance hotel called the George and Dragon.

This is what the Berkhamsted Parish Magazine said about it in October, 1879: "It is hoped that it will be inaugurated by Earl Brownlow, who takes great interest in the Temperance movement generally and in this special coffee tavern in particular. The building is the property of his lordship and has been erected by Messrs. Lascelles, the eminent London builders, so famous at the Paris Exhibition, under his Lordship's personal superintendence. . . . It is to be worked entirely on commercial principles. The directors trust that their adopted sign (which by the way is not yet hung up, but which his lordship himself is now preparing) viz., the George and Dragon, may indeed be a suitable emblem of that triumph of Temperance over drunkenness, which by God's help shall in the end be brought about."

For a time part of the hotel was used as a mission room, and many meetings (especially magic lantern lectures) were held there. "Good beds for commercials and cyclists" were

available, from one shilling a night, parties and school treats were catered for on reasonable terms, and chops, steaks, cold ham, tea, coffee, cocoa and Bovril were available at the shortest notice. A horse and trap were let on hire, too!

George Street Changes

In recent times many changes have taken place in George Street, where a whole row of cottages was recently demolished. It will be interesting to see what takes their place. This will be the biggest alteration since J. King's sawmill was demolished in the mid-1920s. Mr. King specialised in the manufacture of butchers' trays, milk yokes, malt and barn shovels, Indian clubs, dumb-bells, toy spades, hoops, cricket bats, stumps, etc. As Mr. King catered so well for the younger generation it was appropriate that the site of his mill became a recreation ground.

I would like to hear from anyone who has a photograph of Mr. King's mill. We have so few pictorial reminders of our bygone industries.

Harry Sterne

A short time ago, when alterations were being made to the front of Raymond Charles' shoe shop opposite the Sayer almshouses, a fascia bearing the name of Harry Sterne, tailor and outfitter, was uncovered.

Harry had a shop at the corner of Manor Street (now a lauderette) before the first World War; he then moved to what is now Raymond Charles' shop. Sterne's business was taken over in the 1920s by A. J. Cameron; some years later it became a shoe shop.

Ashlyns Hall

One of our few surviving old mansions is again in the news. Ashlyns Hall was saved from demolition in 1957, and today it is said to be in a very poor state, though still capable of being restored.

The mansion was built in the late 18th century, replacing a smaller house which, with gardens, orchards, nine acres of woodland and 210 acres of arable and meadow land, was sold in 1764 for £4,620.

The mansion has had several owners or tenants. In 1801 it was purchased by James Smith, father of our famous defender of common rights, Augustus Smith. Later, Ashlyns was the home of William Longman, the publisher, who entertained many literary giants of the period and was a churchwarden of St. Peter's. Mr. (afterwards Sir) Richard

Cooper lived at Ashlyns for a time, followed by the Kingsley family, until the house and estate were acquired by the Foundling Hospital.

An early spelling of Ashlyns is found in the name of Reginald Asselyn, mentioned in a document of 1314. I wonder if he gave his name to the Rue d'Asselyn, in the city of Orleans?

Over to Olney

Included in the Local History Society's summer programme is a visit to the house at Olney, Bucks, where William Cowper wrote the famous Olney hymns and many of his poems. Surprisingly, very few Berkhamstedians have ever visited this house, now the Cowper and Newton Museum, said to be the finest purely literary museum in Europe.

There is much to see: the parlour where Cowper wrote "The Task" and "God moves in a mysterious way", and the so-called John Gilpin room where he wrote "O for a closer walk with
continued overleaf

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