

# IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

By 'Beorcham'

## THE TOWN HALL

Many people took advantage of a recent opportunity to explore the Town Hall and its various neighbouring rooms. We had to watch our steps as we scaled ageing staircases and made our way along once familiar corridors.

At a quick glance the Town Hall and Sessions Hall looked as if they could soon be brought into use again, but a major snag is the need for new approaches, fire escapes and lavatories. Much must be done before the whole complex can again be brought into use.

The old reading room and committee room, separated by a wooden partition, call for much more than new staircases, but it is obvious that with the removal of the partition a spacious room would be available for a local museum.

On the ground floor the caretaker's premises have been gutted, and there are some ambitious plans for their future use. Perhaps the best feature, at the moment, is the small garden, previously seen by very few people.

Anyway, work is in progress, and if the money can be raised, Berkhamsted will again have a central social centre which should never have been closed.

## A CHANGE OF ADDRESS?

The possibility that Messrs Penny and Thorne may move to Dean Incent's House reminds me that many years ago another firm of solicitors, Wallington, Fabian & Co., had an office in that ancient house. That was when the major portion was the home, studio and shop of our renowned photographer, Mr J. T. Newman.

I wonder how many - or how few - know that two Pennys and one Thorne were successively town clerks of Berkhamsted? When the Urban District Council was formed in 1898, Thomas Penny, already a well known solicitor in the town, received £50 a year for his duties. He was succeeded by his son, Thomas Edward Penny, and many years later his partner, Douglas Thorne, was the third town clerk.

The offices of Penny and Thorne have occupied the same premises in the town centre for as long as anyone can remember. Some older readers may recall this childish riddle: Who are the poorest shopkeepers in Berkhamsted? Answer: The two who have only a Penny between them.

## IN THE SWIM

At the time of writing the Dacorum District Council is in hot water for the threatened closure of the town's open air swimming pool. It was opened a few years after the first World War, and at that time many Hemel Hempstead swimmers were envious of Berkhamsted's superior facilities.

It was a local barber and councillor, Mr P. D. DeFraine, who pleaded year after year for a bathing pool in Berkhamsted. At the opening ceremony he threw a lighted match into the water to warm it up. Yes, he was a great local character, popularly known as 'Daffy' DeFraine, and a descendant of Louis XVIII's court barber. His shop was between the Swan and the Crown.

Prior to 1923 most of the town's boys learnt to swim in the canal, then by no means as clean as it is today. A favourite bathing place was near the site chosen for the pool.

In late Victorian times a strong hint that the local authority should provide a proper bathing place was made by the chairman of the Bench when seven Berkhamsted lads were summoned for 'indecent bathing in the canal'. Edward Penny, for the defence, said the text of the summons was too severe a charge; they were respectable working lads who went to swim where from time immemorial Berkhamsted boys had bathed. The magistrates said they did not wish to convict for such an offence, but the practice had to stop. Each defendant paid one shilling costs.

It may not be widely known that there was a tepid bath in the former Waterworks building near the Town Hall. Pupils from Berkhamsted School for Girls learnt to swim at the Waterworks, being strung together and pulled through the water!

## AN EARLY LIBRARY

Recently I discovered that Berkhamsted and Northchurch had a parochial lending library as early as 1842. The annual subscription was one shilling, paid in advance, and each subscriber was entitled to have one book at a time. Each book was to be returned at the end of fourteen days, and it could be re-issued or exchanged for another book. The library was open from 16.00 to 18.00 on Tuesdays, and there was a fine of a penny a week for keeping any book beyond the prescribed time.

A catalogue, printed by G. Watson, a local bookseller, shows that the library consisted of 244 books, most of them of a religious character, but there were several travel books and a few works of fiction, including 'Robinson Crusoe'.

The population of Berkhamsted and Northchurch in 1842 was around the 4,300 mark, most of whom could not read or write. It would be futile to make a comparison with the present day, but there are nearly 40,000 books in the Berkhamsted branch of the County Library.

## AUGUSTUS SMITH

Radio 4 recently devoted three quarters of an hour to a feature entitled 'Excursion to an Emperor: a portrait of Augustus Smith of Scilly'. This was of special interest to the boys and girls of Augustus Smith School, and I have met a number of townspeople who enjoyed the programme. Some, however, were disappointed that there was no reference to the great man's sensational action in saving Berkhamsted Common from enclosure in 1866.

In fairness it must be said that the BBC promised no more than an account of his activities in Scilly, but there was a reference to the 'rebellious son of a rich country gentleman' who was mainly responsible for Berkhamsted's first elementary school.

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In Scilly, where this rule was absolute, Augustus Smith made it compulsory to charge one penny to go to school and twopence to stay away!

Incidentally, the news that Cassell's are to close the general publishing side of the business recalls the fact that John Cassell, the founder, unsuccessfully sought permission from Augustus Smith to give a lecture on temperance in a local schoolroom. John had given up his job as a carpenter in Manchester and migrated to London, and his broad accent and rough appearance did not make a good impression at Ashlyns Hall. However, a few years later John Cassell founded the famous publishing house, and on a return visit to Berkhamsted he addressed a well attended meeting on the subject of temperance.

### ONCE IN A LIFETIME

Looking through some copies of the *Berkhamsted Times* for 1877, I found a report

of a public meeting at which Henry Nash made some comments which could well have been included in his *'Reminiscences of Berkhamsted'*.

Many people, Nash said, spoke of the good old times. 'Not for the agricultural labourer however. He scarcely ever knew what it was to get a sufficiency of bread, to say nothing of meat, which was a luxury which came to him like angels' visits.

'As to his dress, he never dreamt in his happiest moments to have more than one cloth coat in his lifetime; if he was so fortunate as to be able to get one to be married in, such care was taken of it that it was put into the old oak chest, and never allowed to see daylight except on high days and holidays, and it was not infrequently handed down as a heirloom to his son. Now the old smock which used to be the badge of serfdom has almost disappeared; and the labourer, the artisan and the mechanic all appear on Sunday in broadcloth, like gentleman, and who will say that this is not a change for the better?'