

IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

By 'Beorcham'

THOSE WERE THE DAYS!

Nowadays it is rare to see a Christmas card showing gluttonous families seated at what was known as a groaning board. All the same, it is interesting to know how bygone Berkhamstedians enjoyed some very good feasts.

Our Victorian historian, John Cobb, found a fragmentary document, probably of Henry VIII's time, giving details of a feast at 'harry dawnsserris howsse' (Harry Dancer's house). Three geese cost 1s. 6d., and 19 chickens 1s. 8d., roughly a penny each. One ounce of pepper, however, cost 3d. Altogether there were 40 entries, including payments to the cooks, the total cost of the dinner being £1 1s. 5d. There was an additional payment of 1s. 6d. for 'horsmete' - not horsemeat, but fodder for the horses which brought the guests to Harry Dancer's house and, I hope, carried the guests safely home.

Then there was a dinner for trustees of the Bourne Charity School at the King's Arms in 1764. They were empowered to spend a sum not exceeding £5 per annum, and the bill came to £3 13s. 8d., including 2s. 6d. for 'serots' (cheroots?).

At a later date Bourne scholars were invited to an annual feast on the founder's birthday, December 16. The fare was usually

roast beef, plum pudding, mince pies and oranges. A receipt bearing the signature of a famous hostess at the King's Arms, Mary (Polly) Page, has been preserved, dated December 16, 1847, acknowledging the receipt of £5 for 'dinner for the Trustees and Children this day'.

FOND MEMORIES

Since writing about children who were evacuated to Berkhamsted in the 1939-45 War, I have received many comments on their continuing interest in the town which they periodically revisit. I am especially grateful to Mr George Ellis, formerly manager of the local Gas Company, for news of a boy who stayed with him and his wife for four years and is now rector of a parish in Manchester. Here is the Rev. Victor C. Brown's tribute to Berkhamsted and his war-time host and hostess:

'I often look back over the past 40 years to my time at Berkhamsted. The war years brought dramatic changes in many people's lives, but I suspect that those most changed were the children aged eight years when the war began. Many were taken from the influence of strangers at a very impressionable age. I was one of that group and was lucky enough to come to Berkhamsted during 1940, where I remained with my host until Christmas, 1944.'

COURT HOUSE DINNERS

The Rev. V.C. Brown continues: 'The first school I attended was Stockwell Road Junior (at Gossoms End) and then the North Paddington Central School, which used a church hall and library building at North-church.'

'Each day we had our dinner in the Court House by St. Peter's Church. Mrs. Haslam and the members of the W.V.S. did a marvellous job in organising these dinners, although the children did not understand the difficulties involved and often grumbled.'

'I remember the St John Ambulance Cadets and the displays in which we were sometimes involved on the playing fields in Kings Road; the British and American soldiers with whom we became friends; the American air base at Bovington; walks across Berkhamsted Common; the Castle and the boats on the canal; and many other things.'

'Although I am a Church of England priest, I am grateful for the influence on my life of Cowper Road Methodist Church and in particular Mr King. I was very fortunate in my hosts, Mr and Mrs G.W. Ellis, who exercised a great influence on my life. Forty years on we are still good friends and often talk together by telephone. My four years' stay in Berkhamsted changed my life for the better, and I shall be grateful for the rest of my life'.

Mr Brown added that while writing this letter, he answered the front door twice and took three telephone calls!

PROMPT REPLIES

Within a few hours of the publication of the December *Review*, three readers (Mr R. G. Bates, Mr R. Osborn, Mr Basil Cole and Miss Chowns) answered my request for information about 'Dryfoot, the ideal waterproof

of leather', marketed by Seal Products Ltd., of Berkhamsted.

This branded dubbin, I am told, was manufactured in Water Lane, in part of the old brewery buildings which were swept away many years ago. 'Dryfoot' was marketed by Mr P.D. Millen, who had a boot and shoe shop in the High Street facing Chesham Road; in the late 1920s it was sold to White & Son.

WOMEN OF STRAW

Last month I promised to say more about a new publication of great local interest - 'Straw Plait', by Jean Davis, of Aldbury.

I did not know that a Bill of 1689 contained a clause which was designed to encourage the wearing of woollen hats, thereby drawing forth protest from people in the north-west of the Chilterns who declared that a thousand families maintained themselves by making straw hats.

The industry was more widespread than I imagined, and in dozens of towns and villages there were schools where little, if anything, other than plaiting was taught. By the 1870s the effect of imports from China reduced the local demand, but as late as 1922 there was still one merchant in Luton who dealt exclusively in English plait. In the 1930s the craft survived in some villages, the end produce being mats and little boxes rather than hats.

Mrs Davis's book (95p) contains some splendid photographs. One shows the plait school at Potten End which Mr Gravestock built from flint and rubble picked up on his way home from Hemel Hempstead each week. Finally only the ivy was holding it together and it collapsed. There are also some excellent photographs of plaiters at Wigginton and Tring.

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By 'Beorcham' *(continued)*

CLEMENTINE HOZIER

The Local History Society recently acquired a copy of the programme for the opening of new buildings for the Girls' Grammar School, as it was then called, on November 15th, 1902.

The Rt. Hon. Viscount Peel declared the new building open and distributed the prizes. I was especially interested to see, under the heading 'Lower certificates', that C. Hozier gained First Class in Scripture Knowledge, French, German, History, English and Second Class in Arithmetic.

It is hardly necessary to add that the schoolgirl was Clementine Hozier, who married Winston Churchill.

VILLAGE LIFE

A reader says that when telling a friend

that he was thinking of moving to a village near the town, he was told that he would find village life very, very dull.

Nonsense! If anyone is bored it is usually his or her fault. Activities in our villages are surprisingly numerous and varied.

I regularly see a quarterly journal (The Gaddesden Diary) which lists the addresses of club secretaries in Little Gaddesden. How many? Twenty five, and all flourishing!

Potten End is another very lively village. And Northchurch, despite its proximity to the town, is determined to keep as much as it can of its village character. I am especially fond of the Northchurch Society, which regularly holds meetings which are as popular as many Berkhamsted gatherings.

The only village of which we hear very little is Ashley Green, but it is another county and another diocese, not to mention another news-gathering area.