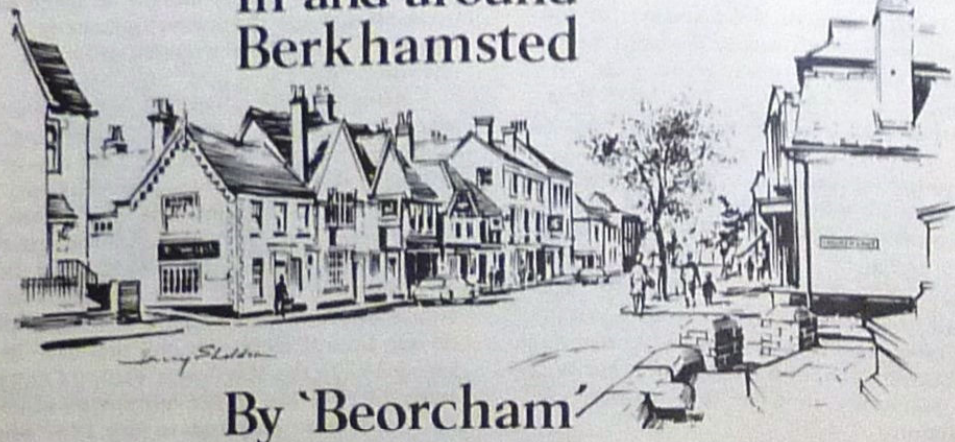


In and around Berkhamsted



By 'Beorcham'

AS OTHERS SEE US

A recent addition to the Shell County Guides is R. M. Healey's "Hertfordshire", published by Faber and Faber (£7.95). Goodness knows how many hundreds of miles Mr Healey travelled to visit every town and village in a county which, the publishers claim, has a range of scenery probably unrivalled by any county of similar size in Great Britain.

At Berkhamsted, Mr Healey recommends visitors to go immediately to the ruined castle where, from the Norman mound, "the town's unusual shape is brought abruptly and sublimely into focus." As for St Peter's Church, "it dominates the most distinguished section of the High Street." But, he says, "the latest restoration has resulted in the placing of the sanctuary under the crossing, thus absurdly dividing the nave from chancel."

The entry for Northchurch - "once more important than Berkhamsted, but now almost its suburb" - will probably start an uncivil war, especially if the good people of Northchurch read on to learn that St Mary's Church is "rather dull". And what will Potten Enders say when they find that they live in a "dispersed, suburban Chiltern community"?

The Potten End entry is the shortest in the book - much shorter than the one for Nettleden, "a tiny, secret place deep in a wooded crease of the Chilterns." Mr Healey was obviously impressed by "Spooky Lane", the flint and brick-faced sunken lane to Frithsden, crossed by an early 19th century bridge. A picture of this deep-cut lane and brick bridge fills the back of the book jacket.

By the way, on page 63 there are three different spellings: Berkhamsted, Berkhamstead, and Berkhamsted. The author should mind his p's and a's.

WRITING ON THE WALL

I am sure that many townspeople share Mr H. K. Ablett's view, expressed in last month's Review, that "The Home and Colonial Stores" should be obliterated from one of the High Street's tallest buildings. Despite the fact that the multiple grocers closed the Berkhamsted branch many years ago, the huge lettering on the wall fades very, very slowly. It is still the most conspicuous and unsightly advertisement in the town.

The shop was opened in 1925, the premises having been previously used for many years by the London County Westminster and Parrs Bank. Many readers

will recall that the upper rooms were used by a Conservative club.

The original writing on the wall was widely criticised, and after protests from the Urban District Council a less glaring colour scheme was substituted. I was told at the time that the person responsible for the original inscription was sacked.

From near and far the lettering spoils our view of the High Street, and photographers in particular will be pleased if it is obliterated.

CUT 'EM SHORTER!

No one knows more about old Northchurch than "Hedgehog", who is writing a new series of entertaining articles for the Northchurch St Mary Newsletter.

In the February number he recalled a village character, Tommy Janes, who made sausages and black puddings, which were hung out on lines in the garden. The village boys used them as targets for catapult practice!

Tommy sold his wares at the Berkhamsted market, and if stocks ran low he told his wife to "Cut 'em shorter, shan't have half enough."

IN THE WILDERNESS

A reader tells me that she is fascinated by the name of the short road which runs from Back Lane (all right, Church Lane) towards Mill Street. It is called The Wilderness, a name which is normally given to a desert or an uncultivated and uninhabited tract. But the road is right in the heart of old Berkhamsted, and probably centuries old. There were a few small, dilapidated cottages in The Wilderness until 40 or so years ago, but all were demolished, together with some ancient cottages in Water Lane, for what is now a large car park.

In my young days children were warned never to go to The Wilderness at night, one of the deterrents being a graveyard on the east side of the road.

Henry Nash, in his "Reminiscences of Berkhamsted" (1890) almost certainly had The Wilderness in mind when he wrote: "There were many places in the town of evil

repute, and of which timid folk had a natural dread; almost every lane and dark corner were said to be the haunts of supernatural beings."

Before the Gas Company moved to Billet Lane over 70 years ago, there were gasometers on both sides of The Wilderness. Many a mother took her children to sniff the gas, which was said to cure or at least ease certain ailments, but those visits were made only in daylight. And a quite different scent came from the old brewery in Water Lane!

Incidentally, I have a watercolour of a very tall house at the north end of Water Lane; it had obviously seen better days, but in 1907 it gave Knowles Drew, a very good Berkhamsted artist, an interesting subject.

SEATING CAPACITY

Reports that Dacorum District Council is to spend over £100,000 to improve the Civic Centre, extending the main hall to accommodate an audience of 260 instead of the present 160, is good news for the Operatic and Dramatic Society and others who attract large audiences.

It is remarkable how many halls Berkhamsted has lost. With the closing of the Town Hall, Sessions Hall, St Peter's Hall, The Queen's Hall in Chesham Road and the Progress Hall in Cowper Road, we must have lost at least 900 seats, a number which would be doubled if we included the Court Theatre, which was regularly used by the Operatic Society. That was when the population of Berkhamsted was about half of the present number. But few people had television to keep them at home!

It is hoped that the Sessions Hall will be re-opened in a year or so, much to the relief of a number of hon. secs.!

A MUSICAL TOWN

Famous for his public piano recitals, broadcasts and records, Mr Hamish Milne is the author of a recently published biography, "Bartok, His Life and Times". An old boy of Berkhamsted, where his father and grandfather were directors of music, Hamish is a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music, where he is a professor of piano. He contributes to many journals

IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

By 'Beorcham' *(continued)*

and lectures on a wide variety of musical subjects. The biography of the Hungarian composer is his first book.

Berkhamsted has connections with many famous musicians. Antony Hopkins at once comes to mind. Until a year ago Frank Lafitte was a familiar figure in the town; so, too, was Benno Moisewitch when he lived in Anglefield Road a long time ago. Then there is Andrew Davis, who conducts famous

orchestras all over the world. A short biography in recent programmes of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, states that he was born in Ashridge Park.

I wonder how many people remember the musical festivals organised by Kathleen Talbot, or performances by the London Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir Adrian Boult in Deans' Hall? Benjamin Britten was there, too.