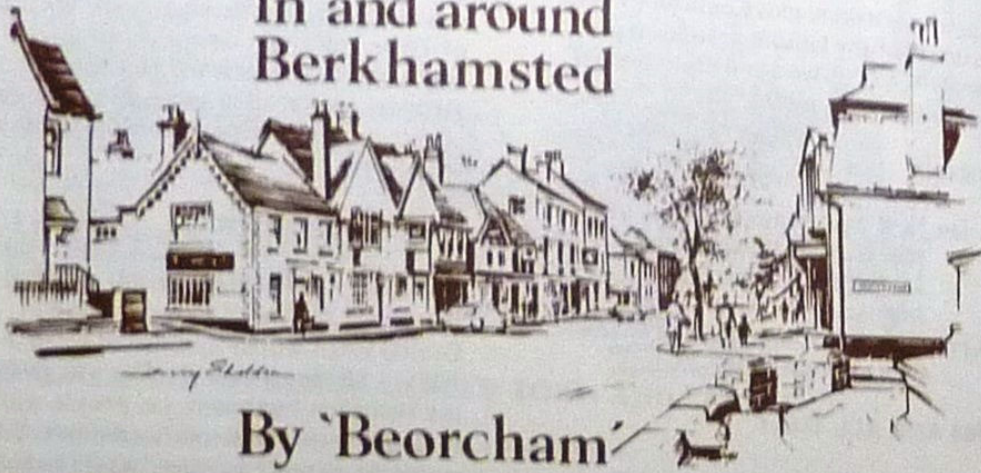


In and around Berkhamsted



By 'Beorcham'

HAPPY NEW YEAR

'Now that we have a High Street with a decent surface, I hope we shall have a better New Year,' someone remarked the other day.

A strange comment, I thought, for 1983 hasn't been a bad year for Berkhamsted. On the credit side we have a Town Hall with a nice clean face and a very interesting shopping arcade.

Another new attraction is the little lake district at the bottom of St John's Well Lane. The numerous ducks, drakes and occasional swans must be the best-fed birds in the country.

It has been a banging-about year in Lower King's Road, and it will be time for comment on the changes when flats have replaced the tatty old grandstand and part of the sports ground. Our footballers are pleased with their move towards the tennis courts, and I still hope that the old water-cess bed between the shops and the canal will be turned into a pleasant water garden.

Builders have been much more active at Northchurch. With the trimming of the towpath hedge we now see how developers have filled the valley between the High Street and the canal. And builders are now very busy in the more open valley west of New Road.

So 1983 has been a year of activity and change in Berkhamsted and Northchurch. With an increasing population it is hoped that more people will join our many and varied societies. It was shameful that a by-election for one seat on the local Council attracted only 12½ per cent of the voters, but that was a very rare event. The fact remains that interest in local government has declined considerably since Hemel Hempstead became the centre of power. How we miss the homely reports of our very own Urban District Council.

HARD WINTERS

Several readers have told me how sad they were to read last month's true story of a Berkhamsted family's hardship in one of the bitter winters of the 1890s.

If snow and ice stopped work there was no pay, but the Berkhamsted Times for January 16th, 1891, reported that Lane & Son, nurserymen, 'supplied all their men frozen out with a 5s. (25p) ticket, to be presented at some butcher's or grocer's shop.'

The newspaper added that on Saturday unemployed men made a collection which yielded 6½d. (3p) each for 55 men. On

Monday, Major Foster, of the Swan brewery, prepared 70 gallons of soup for unemployed men, who 'marched up the yard with their cans and, having got them filled, took them to their homes and had a good dinner.'

On Thursday, nearly 150 poor women were given a hot dinner at the Primitive Methodist schoolroom. A whole sheep was given by Mr. A. G. Lucas, of Ashlyns. Pies, plum pudding and tea followed the meat.

On Friday, 300 little children were entertained to tea, in two parties, again at the Primitive Methodist schoolroom.

The newspaper contained a letter praising the minister, the Rev. W. M. Wardle, and asking if other ministers were too much concerned for the next world to consider the cares of this life.

PETTICOAT LANE

A reader asks if I know anything about 'a sort of causeway' across the new cricket ground in Berkhamsted Park. It is part of an ancient track which soon climbs steeply up Lodge Hill and continues to Coldharbour. If Lord Brownlow's enclosure of the Common in 1866 had succeeded, he would have made the track a metalled road.

In Victorian times it was called Petticoat Lane. It was very popular with courting couples.

COMMON ROADS

An interesting postscript to the Railways of Dacorum exhibition was provided by Mr Phillip Heather in a recent talk to the Local History Society.

In an old vestry book he found the following entry of 1834, shortly before work started on the railway: 'Resolved that

Mr Augustus Smith be requested to communicate with the Rail Road directors as to their intention relative to the bridges across Gravel Path and White Hill Road.'

What we now call Whitehill (one word) was in a dangerous state and it was thought that two carriage roads from the town to the Common were unnecessary. Whitehill was of the least utility and should be stopped up, and Gravel Path improved as much as possible.

That was before we had the so-called New Road to provide a modest gradient to the Common and Ashridge. It was provided by Earl Brownlow in the 1860s and formerly closed one day a year to maintain its status as a private road.

How carthorses must have strained and suffered when there was only the choice of Whitehill and Gravel Path. But the heaviest loads would have been the downhill ones of gravel from the Common, timber, and furze for firing.

GRABALL ROW

A newcomer who borrowed my copy of R. A. Norris's book, 'Berkhamsted St. Peter,' published in 1922, was surprised to read the following paragraph:

'It is not difficult to imagine what a noble prospect of the church would be opened up, if the 17th century encroachment of the buildings from the "One Bell" eastward could be set back to the original line as indicated by the Court House; a town improvement which came near accomplishment in the early sixties of the last century.'

The One Bell public house has been replaced by a modern building, and on several occasions demolition of Graball Row, as the encroachment was nicknamed, has

COPY DATES FOR THE REVIEW

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FRIDAY JAN 6

IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

By 'Beorcham' *(continued)*

been suggested, but what would have cost thousands of pounds in Victorian times would now run into millions.

My book borrower was also surprised to read that 'Barkhamsted, as the normal pronunciation of the name Berkhamsted, has much to recommend it. It is euphonious and should no more be considered as affectation than Har'ford for Hertford or Barkshire for Berkshire. Barnet was originally spelt Bernet, the little Hertfordshire village of Barkway was formerly Berkway, just as Bayford was Beyford.'

Well, I like the present pronunciation, and it is now very rare for the town's name to be barked. However, not so very long ago an eminent judge (an old boy of Berkhamsted School) told a witness to say 'Barkhamsted.'

THE AXTELLS AGAIN

I have often mentioned the visits of American descendants of Thomas Axtell,

a Berkhamsted man who, some twenty years after the Pilgrim Fathers, sailed to America and stayed there.

In October I had the pleasure of taking a Californian couple on a tour of the town. They were especially pleased to know that two Axtells were churchwardens, one in 1624, the other in 1720. Another Axtell was town clerk in 1639.

In November a young couple from the Middle West called to see the town of their 17th century ancestor, and more recently I received a letter from a lady in Massachusetts who wants to learn more about the 17th century Axtells.

Incidentally, as long ago as 1870 our rector, the Rev. J. W. Cobb, was asked to supply information to complete the family tree.

I think it would be good to have an Axtell Road in Berkhamsted. Do you agree?