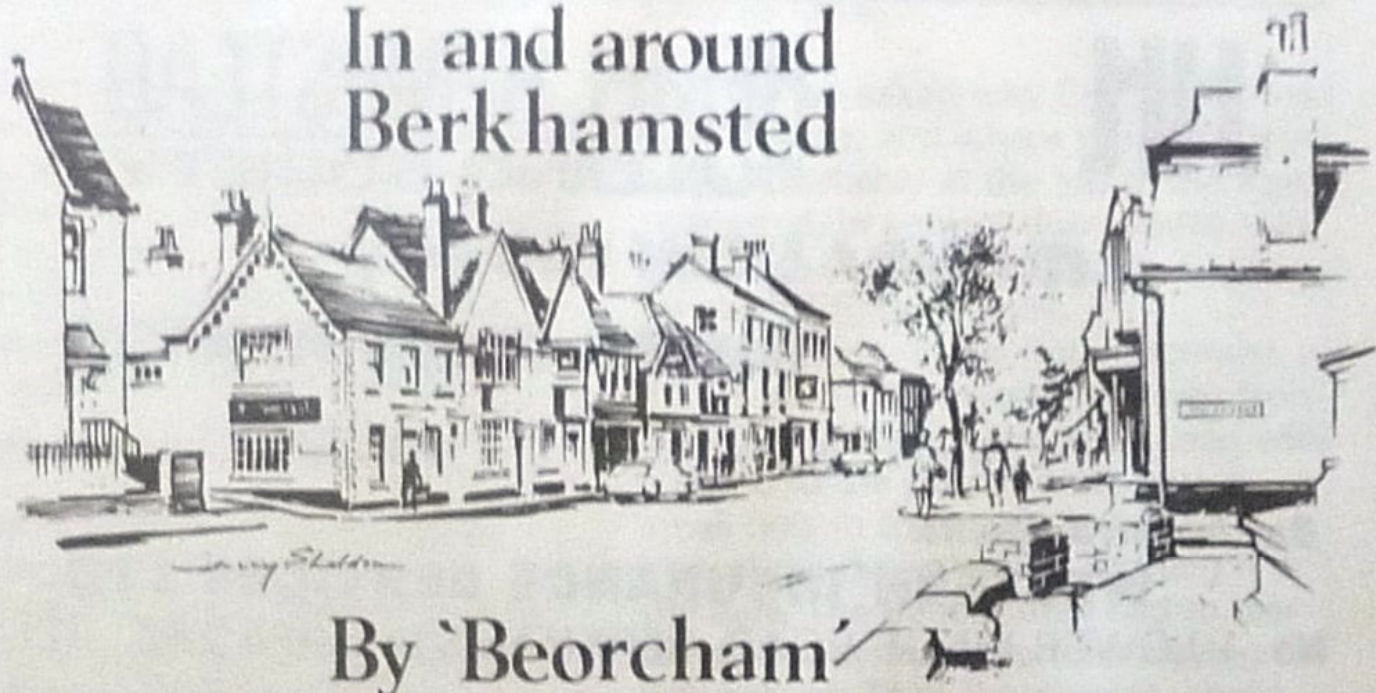


In and around Berkhamsted



By 'Beorcham'

THE TOWN'S CINEMAS

My thanks to Mr John Stobbs, who recently moved from Potten End to Marsworth, for sending a little booklet which had been used as a bookmark. It was the August 1948 programme of the Rex and Court cinemas, each of which seated about 1,000 people.

Programmes were continuous, and at a time when television was still a novelty "full house" notices sometimes sent late-comers away. So popular were the cinemas that the last Potten End bus, scheduled to leave the Town Hall at 10.20, always waited until the cinemas closed.

Prices, including entertainment tax, ranged from one shilling (5p) to 3s. 6d. For the children's programme every Saturday morning the prices ranged from sixpence to one shilling.

I can remember children's matinees at the Court Theatre (on the Tesco site) when we paid 2½d. (1p). Sometimes we were given small packets of sweets when we bought our tickets.

NOT QUITE A GEM!

Not that the Court was the town's first cinema. In 1910 or thereabouts the Gem Cinema was opened in Cowper Road. It was a large corrugated iron building between the Sayer almshouses and what was then the Wesleyan Methodist church. Top price was sixpence, and the audience faced the projector, seeing films on the back of a rather small and almost transparent screen. This experiment was not wholly successful and films were then shown direct on a larger screen at the far end of the cinema.

That, of course, was before we had "talkies". Kitty Wilkins was paid 7s. 6d. a week to play a piano which helped to drown the noise of the projector, which often broke down. "Want a spanner, mate?" was a popular cry, and if there was a very long wait the audience walked out and had their money back.

It was not long before the Gem had a rival. Towards the end of 1912,

stables in Prince Edward Street were replaced by the Picture Playhouse, a much more sumptuous cinema. Music was provided by a pianist and a violinist, and occasionally there were live "turns". On rare occasions films of singers and the use of synchronised records anticipated the "talkies" by many years. The building, much altered, survives as the King's Hall.

BEYOND THE RESERVOIRS

Last month's *'Review'* contained an appeal for old copies of the Berkhamsted Deanery Magazine from Mrs M.C. Vincent, who, after writing an excellent booklet on All Saints' Church, Long Marston, is now working on a history of St. Mary's, Puttenham.

With Wilstone, which is also in our deanery, we have a corner of Hertfordshire which few Berkhamsted people ever visit. Most of us enjoy going to villages in our hilly part of the county, but the flat land beyond Tring reservoirs could be off the map for all we know of the three villages I have mentioned.

Long Marston, with houses of many periods, has a nice Victorian church and, a short distance away, the tower of a church which was started in the 12th century. Do go and see both and read Mrs Vincent's history of Long Marston. Take your camera as well as your friends!

Not far away is the small village of Puttenham, with one of the most interesting small churches I have ever seen. It is touching to read a tablet which tells us that out of 71 people fifteen served in the first World War and all were welcomed home again.

Then there is Wilstone, not far from the great reservoirs and a mixture of old and new houses. The village has its own historical society.

I am sure that you will have a very pleasant tour.

CROSS OAK

I have been asked why Cross Oak Road is so named, and where the tree stood. Almost certainly at the top of the road, near what, in ancient documents, was called Cross of the Oak Farm, on the far side of Shootersway.

Henry Nash, in his *Reminiscences of 1890*, said that anyone suffering from the ague (malaria) was to proceed with a friend to the old oak tree, bore a small hole in the trunk, gather up a lock of the patient's hair and peg it in the hole. The patient then had to tear himself away from the tree, leaving the hair behind. Then the disease would disappear.

This, Nash continued, was not fiction, as the old oak with innumerable peg-holes testified. "This celebrated tree," he added, "like many other celebrities, has vanished, and another occupies its place. The bane and antidote have passed away together."

The tree probably stood on an island site at the Cross Oak Road and Shootersway crossroads. Another oak tree stood there until Shootersway was widened about the time of the first World War.

Cross Oak Road, by the way, was called Gilham's Lane a century ago.

THE COURT THEATRE

Our third cinema, the Court Theatre, opened in March, 1917. That was a time when very little new building was permitted, but with thousands of soldiers training in the district it was essential to provide entertainment. The Picture Playhouse was closed (some of the seats were transferred to the Court Theatre) and with occasional plays and short live "turns" between the films the new cinema was very popular. The Court was enlarged soon after talking

pictures, as they were called, attracted larger audiences.

And the fourth cinema? Two years or so before the last war, Edward Greene (uncle of Graham and Sir Hugh Greene) intended to build a cinema at the corner of Swing Gate Lane but Shipman and King, owners of the Court Theatre, suddenly bought and demolished Egerton House for the Rex Cinema. Two cinemas were quite enough for a town of less than 10,000 people at that time.

Soon after the Rex was opened, the Court really was a theatre, with a splendid repertory company, often reinforced by famous West End actors and actresses. Then came the war; few people went out in the blackout, and the Court reverted to films.

Eventually it was converted into a Tesco store. It was badly damaged by fire in 1969 and an even larger store took its place.

SMALL WORLD

A fellow townsman tells me that on a holiday in Italy last year he was astounded to meet a fellow Berkhamstedian in a very small town.

I was reminded of a visit to the Holy Land in 1966. One day our party visited Samaria, and as one of the cars was rather crowded I volunteered to return to Jerusalem in a taxi hired for another group.

I found myself sitting next to the Rev. Horace Spence, a former Berkhamsted rector whom I had not seen for thirteen years. Mrs Spence was there, too, so throughout the journey we were talking about mutual friends in Berkhamsted.

Have any readers had unexpected meetings in far away places?