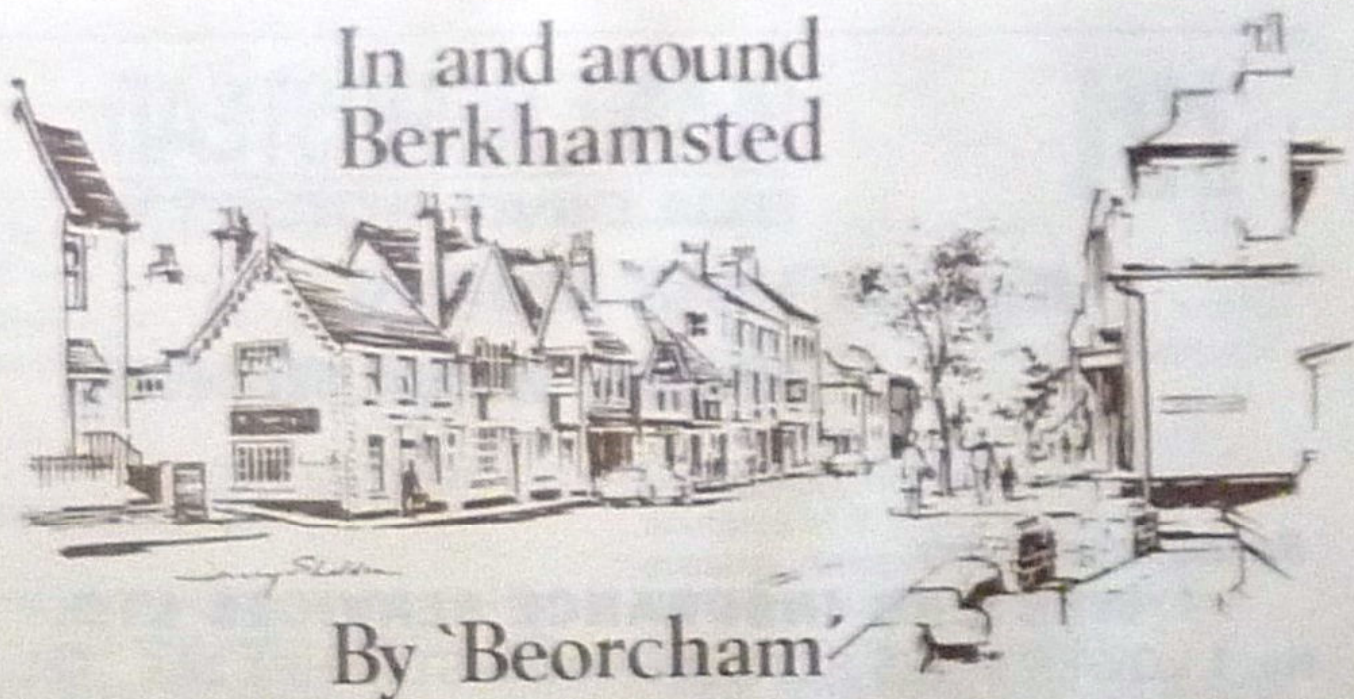


In and around Berkhamsted



By 'Beorcham'

THE SAYER ALMSHOUSES

When the Local History Society recently devoted an evening to the Sayer almshouses, now exactly 300 years old, there was some surprise that John Sayer was able to bequeath £1,000 "for the building of an almshouse and the purchasing of lands for relief of the poor in Berkhamsted St. Peter."

Three hundred years ago £1,000 was worth many, many times the present day value. John Sayer, Charles II's head cook, received £150 a year, plus £40 for livery, and he must have had other sources of income to live at Berkhamsted Place, the mansion at the top of Castle Hill which was demolished 17 years ago. John also secured the manorial rights, and his interpretation of those rights upset many of the parishioners.

So incensed were the rector, churchwardens and others that they petitioned the King, who no doubt discussed the complaints with his head cook. Anyway, a report to the Treasury said that "such benefits as arose, chiefly out of the tolls and

profits of the market, were so small that Sayer gave them back to the town and to the collector, the better to preserve peace and amity among the neighbours."

In the circumstances it seems that John Sayer must have been a very kind man to leave so much money to a town which had been critical and ungrateful. But John died in 1682, two years before the almshouses were built.

MARY SAYER

John's widow, Mary, survived him by nearly 30 years, and drew up elaborate instructions for administering the charity, augmenting the bequest by several hundred pounds. A curious stipulation was that each almswoman was to be paid "8s. by the month . . . on the tomb in the parish church of Berkhamsted, near the monument lately erected for the said John Sayer, Esq., on the Sunday after evening service." The trustees claimed that instruction was ambitious, and a

simpler distribution was adopted.

The Sayer bequests were supplemented on other occasions. For instance, in 1784 Martha Dere gave £500 to provide an extra 1s. 6d. weekly to each almswoman.

1984 may be an ominous date, but 1684 and 1784 were good years for Berkhamsted.

WATCH YOUR STEP!

Now that we have a fairly smooth High Street, I hope that some attention will be given to our footpaths.

One of the worst spots is near the bus stop outside the National Westminster Bank. One of the paving stones rocks like a yo-yo, and whenever it rains there is a sudden squirt of muddy water.

Once upon a time action was taken as soon as the surveyor was informed. But that was when local government was truly local.

ON THE RIGHT LINES

My thanks to a reader for adding to my recent comments on the local postal service. He writes: "Can you imagine starting work at 3 a.m., walking between four sets of rails 200 yards north of Berkhamsted station and waiting in a small wooden hut ready for the Up Special travelling Post Office to come thundering through? It was due through Berkhamsted at 3.30 a.m., and we would receive a phone call from the signaller to say that it had passed through Tring. Then we erected the apparatus, which consisted of a metal and rope frame in which the pouches, suspended from the train, would be dropped.

"In those days Berkhamsted had the

biggest drop in the country, receiving mail from the North for Gerrards Cross, Beaconsfield, Maidenhead, Windsor, Chesham, Amersham, the Chalfonts, etc.

"The mail was forwarded by road direct from Berkhamsted station. There were always upwards of thirty leather pouches, each containing on average three or four bags of mail.

"I have myself received letters posted in Huddersfield and date stamped at 8 p.m. the previous evening, dropped at Berkhamsted at 3.30 a.m., sorted by 5 o'clock and included in the first delivery.

"For items going north the pick-up at Berkhamsted was at 9 p.m. The trains could be identified by the lights strung all the way down the side of the train.

"Although travelling Post Offices are still used, the line-side apparatus was discontinued when electrification came in."

HIGH STREET CHANGES

Little has been said about a major change in our High Street. Behind high hoardings on the east side of Park View Road, demolition workers have cleared a large site which had been an eyesore for a very long time. Behind what was once a neat garden stood schoolrooms which for many years had not been used for their original purpose.

The police moved to Park View School while a new station was being built at the crossroads in 1972. A youth club was also formed, but most of the townspeople knew the old classrooms only as a very tatty polling station.

So much for recent, or fairly recent, times. The building which proclaimed its date, 1834, was our first

elementary school, opened at a time when Berkhamsted children had no education at all unless they attended Sunday schools. In 1894 a separate building for infants was added, and that, too, was recently demolished.

THE CHALK SCHOOL

The provision of schools depended entirely on local efforts. Augustus Smith, best known for saving Berkhamsted Common from enclosure in 1866, was to the fore in starting a school which was opened in July, 1834.

Much chalk was used in its construction – for many years it was popularly called the Chalk School – but officially it was known as the British School, thereby linking it with the undenominational British and Foreign

Bible Society. It was open to all boys and girls who attended a Sunday school, and the minister of any denomination had the right to call and instruct children belonging to his congregation. In 1870 it was called the Board School, and in 1912 the Council School. Finally, it was known as Park View School.

Soon after giving this school their full support, the rectors and curates of Berkhamsted and Northchurch, with many prominent churchmen, decided to start a Church of England school near St. Peter's Church. Adjoining the Court House, classrooms and a house for the master were built in 1838, and like other schools established through the Church of England National Society, it was known as the National School, intended for the children of both Berkhamsted and Northchurch.

