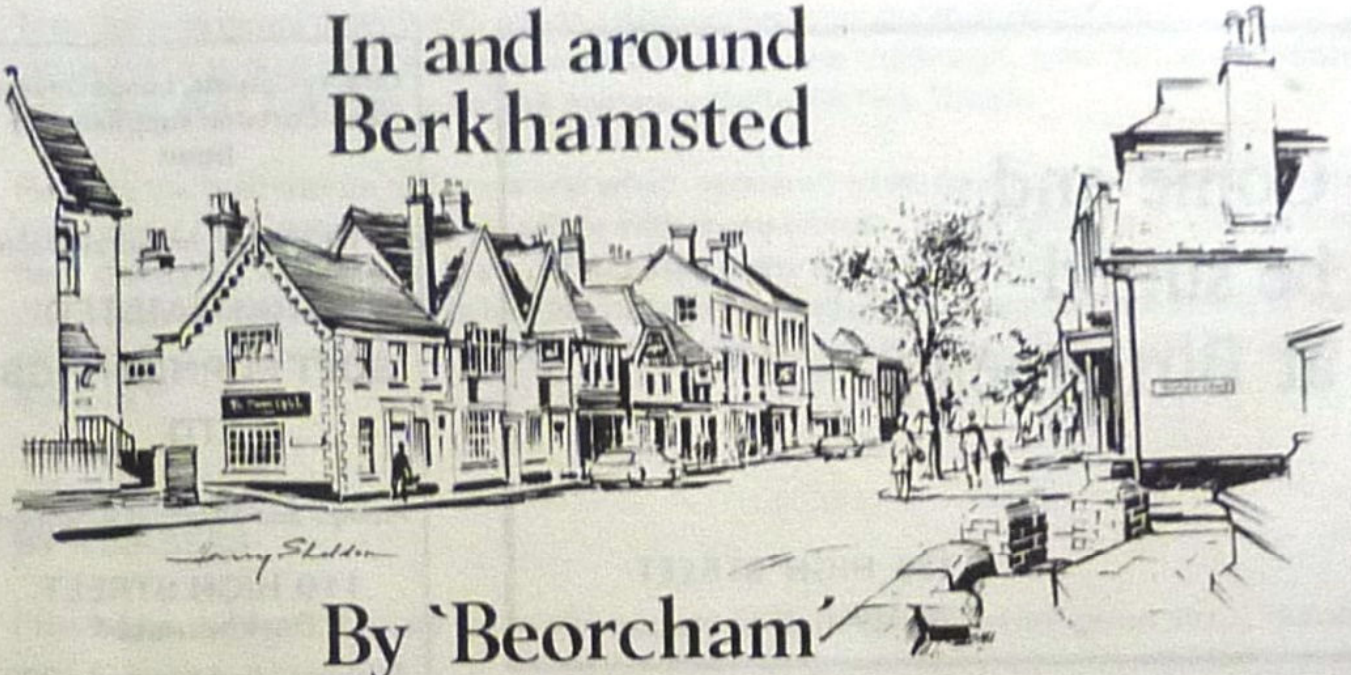


In and around Berkhamsted



By 'Beorcham'

A FAMOUS CYCLIST

The January number of a magazine called *Cyclist Monthly* devotes a full page to a Berkhamstedian who was the first man to go round the world on a bicycle. Not that it was anything like the modern bicycle. It was the so-called Penny Farthing, with a 50-in. front wheel and a small one at the back.

The rider was Thomas Stevens, born in Castle Street, Berkhamsted, on Christmas Eve, 1854. He was the eldest son of William Stevens, labourer, and Anne Stevens (nee Preston). Thomas attended the Bourne School (now the office of the Britannia Building Society) and at the age of 14 was looking after the family while his father left for Missouri to clear some land for a settlement. Tom's working hours in the grocery trade were long, but he found time at night to read travel and adventure books.

It was not long before Mrs Stevens' illness brought her husband back to England, and when Tom was 16 years old he astonished the family by saying that he was going to America in a week's time. He had saved sufficient money to pay for the passage.

After two years as a pioneer frontiersman, he was joined by the family in Missouri, and then moved on to San Francisco, where Tom became a keen cyclist. Riding from west to east, over the Rocky Mountains, across deserts and through forests and new farmland, he pedalled and pushed for nearly 4,000 miles. The pioneer ride ended at Boston 104 days after leaving the Pacific coast.

ROUND THE WORLD

Tom Stevens' experiences were described in *Outing*, a monthly magazine, and he became a correspondent for the *New York World*. He sailed to Liverpool and on the way to one of the Channel ports called at Berkhamsted to meet his many relations and friends. Eventually he reached Yokohama, having encircled the world with his beloved Penny Farthing.

Tom Stevens wrote three books and in 1895 or thereabouts returned to England. He married a clergyman's widow whose daughters, Violet and Irene Vanburgh, were famous actresses. For some years Tom was business manager at the Garrick Theatre.

Perhaps the best tribute to Tom is one which appeared when he was at the height of his fame. The journal *Outing* concluded an article with these words: "It only remains to be said that our hero stands 5ft. 6in., is built like a compressed giant, bears the stamp of personal courage and chivalrous enthusiasm upon his handsome features, and whether you call him Briton or Yankee, reflects honour upon the Anglo-Saxon stock, of which he is a magnificent type. Long live Tom Stevens!"

BY NUMBERS

I have been asked if I know when the houses of Berkhamsted were given street numbers.

It was in 1894 or thereabouts, much later than in many other towns. At that time there were only 36 roads in the town, and many people, particularly those with house names, were strongly opposed to numbers.

A major change was made when houses, shops and offices in the High Street were renumbered soon after the 1939-45 War. I recollect a committee meeting of the Citizens' Association at which a lady member said that she would not change the number on her front door for anyone!

A LOCAL ARTIST

My thanks to a reader for bringing along a Christmas card of local interest. The colourful scene of a merry-go-round on the ice could have been anywhere, but notes printed on the back of the card state that the artist was Robert Barnes, A.R.W.G. (1940-95), who lived in Berkhamsted and later in Surrey.

I wonder if anyone has a painting of a local scene by Mr Barnes? According to the notes he was at his best in rural and genre scenes, if perhaps lacking the originality of better known artists of his day. He was commissioned to illustrate the serialisation of "The Mayor of Casterbridge" by Thomas Hardy; this spanned six months, from January to June, and was one of his finest achievements.

LOOKING UP

A friend tells me that in the New Year he was invited to a small party where young and old enjoyed a quiz of local interest.

"Which building has its date in the largest figures?" was one of the questions. Do you know? It is Colebrooke House in the High Street, opposite the Goat Inn. The date 1863 is high up in the brickwork.

PETER THE WILD BOY

I was pleased to hear that the excellent Northchurch Society, at its February meeting, would devote a little time to Peter the Wild Boy, for this is the 200th anniversary of his death.

I am always sad when I see his gravestone facing the door of St Mary's Church, but inside I like to read once again the brass memorial tablet which tells us that the ablest masters were provided for Peter, "but proving incapable of speaking or of receiving instruction, a comfortable provision was made for him by Her Majesty at a farmhouse in this parish, where he continued to the end of his inoffensive life."

A very nice epitaph, much better than the chatter of old gossipers who thought that Peter was someone to be laughed at. He was still a popular topic of conversation when I was young, and seldom was there any sympathy for Peter.

One of my schoolmates often recalled a family tradition that an ancestor had seen Peter carrying children on his broad shoulders.

I like that story, for it shows Peter in a kindly light. A really wild man would not have been allowed to play with children.

PRINTERS' ERRORS

Although my articles are always typed, I suffer more than a fair share of printers' errors. In the February *Review* the last line on page 5 should have been at the top, not the bottom, of the column. The article should have been continued on page 5, not page 7. In addition Mr was