

ASHLYNS HALL

A house, its history and its people

In the beginning....

Well, the beginnings are certainly ancient, but not known with certainty. Nevertheless, a mixture of careful research and local legend has provided us with a beginning for our story of Ashlyns.

Let's start with the name. Ashlyns. -

This hill-top estate just outside Berkhamsted has been known as Ashlyns for centuries. A search through Berkhamsted's early records reveals a baron - one Richard Asselyn - mentioned in 1413.

The very romantic may like to believe that Asselyn had come over with the Norman Conquest and the family had remained in the area after William the Conqueror had been offered the Crown at Berkhamsted Castle. That's too fanciful for most people, but land often took its name from its owner, so it's quite reasonable to assume that Ashlyns, too derived its name from its owner - Asselyn.

As years advanced, so records improved and the mists of time obscured less. An important house has stood on the site since Elizabethan times. Indeed - until it was irreparably damaged by fire during the 1970's - a cottage, Elizabethan in all its features, stood beside the stable block. The ornamental trees in the grounds and the park also provide useful clues as some of them were definitely planted long before the present mansion was built.

The earliest recorded owners were the Wethereds. They were already established as wool merchants as far back as 1430 and continued to distinguish themselves both in trade and in the political life of England.

During the 1620's, Francis Wethered was the Controller of Works for King Charles II - a high office which brought him respect and gave him influence. The Wethereds continued to hold great offices throughout the seventeenth century and were described as "an ancient and worthy family of good report for Hospitality, Probity and Piety, and for unshaken fidelity to the Crown".

The last Wethered to live at Ashlyns was Mrs. Elizabeth Wethered-Craddock who died there in 1704. She was the last of the Hertfordshire Wethereds - cousins to the Buckinghamshire family which founded the famous Brewery which still exists in Marlow.

COVER PICTURE: Ashlyns Hall as a private residence before the First World War.



The servants at Ashlyns Hall before the First World War.

Of course, the house the Wethered family lived in was not the house you see today. The modern Ashlyns Hall was built at the turn of the eighteenth century. Strenuous enquiries have failed to tell us who designed the house, but we know that in 1801 a James Smith, Esquire - recently widowed - moved in with his baby son. A rich, educated eighteenth century gentleman would almost certainly have had a hand in the design of his house, and - as the dates fit - it may well be that James Smith was his own architect, supervising the building of Ashlyns Hall. We know that his second son, Augustus, was proud of his own architectural abilities and designed a church and house in the Scilly Isles. James Smith was descended from Thomas Smith who - in 1699 - founded the Smith Bank of Nottingham, which was the first bank outside the City of London and was the forerunner of today's National Westminster.

It was James's son, Augustus, who brings colour and character to Ashlyns Hall. He bought the lease of the Scilly Isles from William IV and became a virtual, but benevolent, dictator there. Known as 'King of the Scillies' he provided an education for every child by the simple expedient of charging one penny a day

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for attending school, and tuppence a day for staying away! By radically changing the agricultural system - bringing early potatoes and spring flowers to the mainland before anyone else - he rescued the islanders from virtual famine and gave them relative prosperity.

Berkhamsted, too benefited greatly from his son. Augustus Smith founded elementary schools in the town for both boys and girls; and it was he who revived the ancient Grammar School after years of litigation at his own expense. And it was Augustus Smith who, when Lord Brownlow enclosed Berkhamsted Common with iron railings, commandeered an entire train to bring an army of navvies from London to tear them down during the night, restoring the common to the people.

Augustus never married - too busy, perhaps! On his death in 1872, Ashlyns passed to his younger brother Robert. Robert married the girl next door, Mary Ann Dorrien. By coincidence the Dorriens, too, were bankers who lived on the adjacent estate - Haresfoot. When Robert married Mary Ann, the family name was changed to Smith-Dorrien, or Dorrien-Smith. Just to pursue the connection up to modern times, it is interesting to remember that the island of Tresco in the Scillies is still owned by the Dorrien-Smiths.

Ashlyns Hall changed hands again in 1870 when it became the home of William Longman - the famous publisher. He lived there until his death in 1877. His cricket matches on the lawn were famous and it is easy to imagine him entertaining modern writers of his day there. Longman had published Macaulay's 'History of England' in 1848, Roget's 'Thesaurus' in 1852 and negotiated with Trollope for 'The Warden' and 'Barchester Towers'. He was also a friend of Disraeli whose 'Lothair' he published in 1870, and of the historian J.A. Froude.

The next recorded owner of Ashlyns Hall was Sir Richard Cooper who was a chemical manufacturer with an abiding passion for breeding pedigree cattle. He earned fame with his export of pedigree shorthorns and Shropshire sheep.

COPY DATES FOR THE REVIEW

NOVEMBER 1ST

Copy should be received on Fridays at the Court House Cottage, Church Lane
- preferably typewritten and on large sheets of paper with wide margins.

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In the early 1930's Ashlyns Hall was sold to the Thomas Coram Charitable Foundation who were looking for country premises for their long-established Foundling Hospital in London. The Trust built a splendid school for orphaned children in the ground of the estate. The school became part of the Hertfordshire Education Authority after the second World War.

The history of Ashlyns Hall during this century may seem to be sad and to lead the house further and further away from its original purposes as a family home. Indeed, after a spell as a privately run Old People's Home, Ashlyns was left empty and soon began to deteriorate.

In early 1980, however, its future was assured. Instead of continuing to deteriorate, new life was to be given to Ashlyns Hall. A locally based Group of companies - Shanning Group - gained permission to change the use of the house and restore it - as much in period style as possible - for use as a Group Headquarters and Conference Centre.

Hardly the future that James Smith would have imagined for his house in 1801, but a definite and positive step towards saving a beautiful, historic building from decay and eventual demolition; a step that means that once again Ashlyns Hall will be lovingly looked after and inhabited with pride.

CHRISTIAN AID AUTUMN FAIR

Saturday November 2nd.

9.00 am - 2.00 pm

IN THE COURT HOUSE

CARDS - CHRISTMAS GIFTS - TOYS - WHITE ELEPHANT

FANCY GOODS - SWEETS - CAKES - ETC.

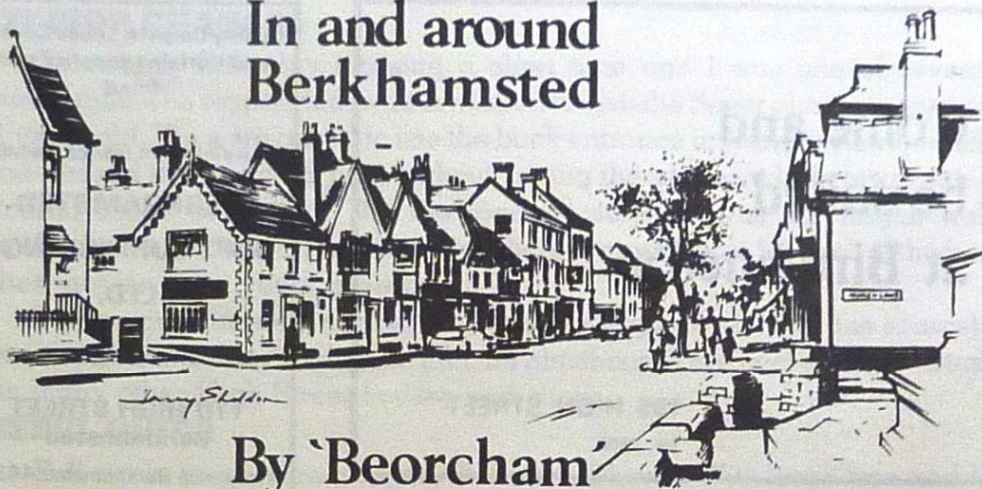
Ploughmans Lunches being served 12.00 - 2.00 pm.

COME EARLY, STAY LATE

Any offers of saleable goods welcome.

Contact: Hon. Sec. K Middleditch. Tel: Berk. 2423

In and around Berkhamsted



By 'Beorcham'

HISTORIC BOURNE END

Where is Battles Bridge? You don't know? It is the canal bridge at Bourne End, and there is a story that in the course of constructing the canal or railway a fierce argument led to blows and one of the labourers lost his life. The story is retold in the newly published History of Bourne End, based on the notes and illustrations of Miss. Ethel Salisbury, who was still gardening at the age of 95 and died in 1980, when she was 97 years old.

Edited by Joan Hands, of Boxmoor, the nicely illustrated book of 48 pages recalls the time when there were five inns in the village; the Friend at Hand and Fox and Hounds have gone, and now there are three. The village takes its name from the Bulbourne's spasmodic tributary, the Bourne Gutter, said to flow only when the rainfall exceeds 32 inches in any period of twelve months. Superstitious people said that it was an omen of war and dear bread. As for Sugar Lane, it is a continuation of our Shootersway; both of the words "sugar" and "shooter" are derived from an Old English word for robber. The name of Winkwell probably comes from old English "wincell", a corner. Pix Farm takes its name from Robert Pick in 1394, and there was a Broadway Farm in 1608.

In 1843 a school-cum-chapel with a house adjoining were built; most of the children left school when 10 years old. Every Friday evening alterations were made in readiness for the Sunday services. Then came St. John's (Broadway) church, erected as a chapel of ease of Northchurch, much of the cost being borne by the Rev. Sir John Culme Seymour, rector of Northchurch for 50 years. It was dedicated on 23 May, 1855.

Thank you, Mrs. Hands, for editing Salisbury's recollections and research. The book, published by the Dacorum Museum Advisory Committee, costs £2.35.

INTERIOR CHANGES

One sunny Saturday morning a short time ago I was one of several townspeople who responded to an invitation to visit the Sayer almshouses, now 301 years old. We were asked to use the back entrance in Cowper Road, which I had passed thousands of times without seeing the pleasant little lawn with a colourful fringe of flowers. But the greatest surprise was the bright, well furnished rooms, now rearranged so that there is more space for each of the four ladies, not six as in years gone by.

It was a most interesting visit, and another surprise was that one scarcely hears the heavy traffic despite the fact the almshouses are nearer the roadway than many other High Street houses and shops.

USEFUL GUIDE

Full marks for the new guide to St. Peter's Church. With large type and 17 illustrations it is quite different from the last edition, dated 1961. Telling the reader exactly where to see this or that feature, it is bound to be popular with newcomers and visitors, especially children. I shall not be surprised if some lifelong parishioners start looking for features they had forgotten or never noticed before.

And now for a story that is almost beyond belief. Several years ago I spent a holiday in India, and on a flight to Katmandu I was in the same row as an American family who asked where I lived. "In Hertfordshire," I said, "in a town called Berkhamsted." Immediately a lady pulled out her handbag a copy of the guide to St. Peter's, saying that she was there taking brass rubbings a short time ago.

HERTFORDSHIRE HEDGEHOGS

"See Round", our diocesan monthly news-sheet, has been giving hedgehogs some unexpected publicity. A prickly subject, to be sure, but the Dean of St. Albans mentions that in years gone by people born in our county were known as Hertfordshire Hedgehogs.

Well, they are very interesting creatures, but not so cuddlesome as cats. In years gone by the people of many counties had unkind or comical nicknames. Many Wiltshire people, for instance, are still proud to be Moonrakers. Does anyone know what our neighbours in Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire were called?

NO END OF ENDS

A newcomer to Berkhamsted asks why we have so many Ends in the district - Potten End, Gossoms End, Bourne End, and so on. There seems to be no end of them. On the Citizens' Association's first footpath map I counted 21 Ends, all within a few miles of our town.

Hemel Hempstead has even more Ends than Berkhamsted, and I would like to know how Snatchups End was so named. Also very puzzling, and rather frightening, is World's End in Buckinghamshire.

John Field, in his "Place Names of Dacorum District," says that End is an "extremity, corner or district in an estate." One which has been forgotten in Berkhamsted is Kitts or Kick's Bury, now Kitsbury.

Berkhamsted and District Local History Society

Hon. Secretary: Mr P.C. Birtchnell, 195 High Street, Berkhamsted. Tel. 3506

Tuesday, November 12th

BY SPECIAL REQUEST! Many members have asked for a repeat of the local films ('movies') which aroused great interest last winter. Many people were turned away when all seats were taken. Some rare 'stills' will add to the interest of the meeting.

Wednesday, December 11th

MEMBERS' EVENING. Short talks of local interest, interrupted by refreshments.

NOTE THE DATE: The Annual General Meeting will be held in the Court House on Wednesday, January 22nd, 1986.