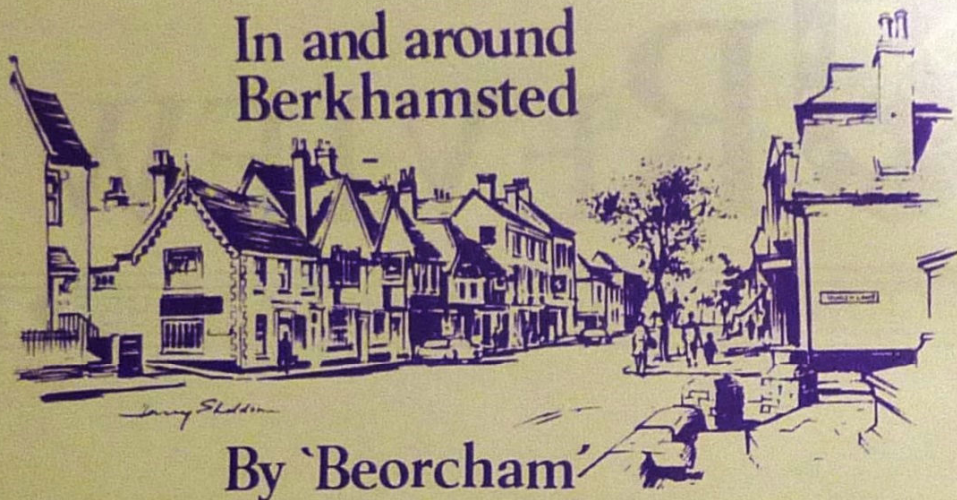


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In and around Berkhamsted



By 'Beorcham'

COWPER'S WELL

A Victorian photograph of Cowper's Well in last month's 'Review' was a reminder of the great interest that was taken in William Cowper, the poet and hymn writer, who was born at Berkhamsted Rectory (not the present one!) in 1731. In Victorian times people from near and far joined pilgrimages to Berkhamsted, first going to St. Peter's Church and then walking up Rectory Lane to see the famous well. But in the 1890's the well was filled in and today we are not sure of the exact site, but it was only a few steps from the modern rectory.

The poet's birthplace was demolished without trace before the days of photography, but drawings of the old rectory do not suggest that it was in a bad state. In fact, it seems to have been a very pleasant house. Certainly there would be an outcry today if the birthplace of a famous writer were pulled down. But the house was demolished when Berkhamsted was a small town; Rectory Lane was then truly rural, with a large barn for the storage of corn on one side and a farmyard on the other side.

However, the Rev. John Cobb, our Victorian curate, rector and local historian, was largely responsible for the Cowper window in St. Peter's Church. He also endowed the old well with a marble slab bearing the following lines, written by the Rev. G.S. Cautley, a Victorian vicar of Nettleden and a well known poet:

The perennial fountain here the ivy tods among,
Just emblam of his modesty and pure undying song,
With daily crystal draught refreshed the poet's fragile youth,
Amid the precious opening buds of genius, grace, and truth.

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Ere spectral wrath had clouded in despair the noble mind,
Self loathing, yet so loving still, so boon to all mankind,
Oh, stranger, in your heart of hearts let tender reverence dwell,
And love of love revived today at gentle Cowper's well.

Unfortunately, the marble slab was broken, but portions of it are still in existence. And Mr J.T. Newman was just in time to photograph the well, selling many hundreds of prints.

HIGH POINTS

Recently I was stopped in the High Street by an old friend who said that at a Christmas party there was an argument about the highest point in the Chiltern Hills. He thought it was Ivinghoe Beacon, but his grandson said it was Coombe Hill, near Wendover.

There are several points higher than Ivinghoe Beacon (802-ft.). Coombe Hill (852-ft) is usually said to be the highest, but there is a slightly higher point between Wigginton and Wendover.

My friend then asked if I knew where to find Flashlight Corner. Yes. It was the nickname given to our central crossroads when traffic lights were installed in 1930, probably the first in West Herts.

A SAD HUMORIST

Some time ago I mentioned W.W. Jacobs, a very popular author of short stories who lived at Beechcroft in Chesham Road. A reader has just drawn my attention to a book by Evelyn Waugh, another famous but younger author, who became very fond of one of the Jacobs' daughters. He paid several visits to Beechcroft, and to his regret did not meet a boy of his own age, Graham Greene.

In "A Little Learning" Waugh recalled Mrs Jacobs, who had done time for breaking windows as a suffragette, and was in constant conflict with her husband on every subject, especially the education of their children.

As for Mr Jacobs, Waugh said he was a wan, skinny, sharp-faced man, with watery eyes. Like many humorists he gave scant evidence of humour in private. An unkind but true description; I recall seeing him on his mid-day walks to W.H. Smith's shop. He always looked utterly miserable. He was a regular picturegoer at the Court Theatre, always for the 6 p.m. performance on Mondays and Thursdays.

WATCH YOUR STEP!

As one of a number of people who have had nasty trips on uneven paving stones we are apt to think that our footpaths were kept in perfect condition in years gone by. But let us go back a long, long time to 1758, when the "principal inhabitants" complained that the High Street was out of repair and so dirty that

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they could not walk along the road without great discomfort and inconvenience. William Bates was appointed scavenger for the year, but he could not do his duty until the parish levied a special rate of 6d. in the £ to "repair and cleanse" the High Street.

One of Bates' predecessors in the broom and shovel business was actually summoned for not clearing the King's way near the church by littering it with straw, so that it was impassable for carts.

Then there was a Berkhamsted staymaker who was fined one shilling (5p), paid in court, for "obstructing a certain watercourse adjoining the High Street with gravel, dirt and other material, causing it to overflow into the highway.

Stonewards were appointed for maintaining the footpaths, and their only claim to fame was that they "totally neglected their duty." If attention was bestowed upon any favoured spot, say the front of their own doorways, it was to pave them with small round pebbles. A more exquisite system of torture upon people with tender feet to walk upon could scarcely be invented. The more neglected parts were in some respects preferable.

That was the experience of Henry Nash in the early 19th century; he said that "all kinds of vegetable refuse were cast into the street, and pigs were the recognised scavengers. The rainfall took its own course and found its own level, sometimes resting in large pools in front of dwellings waiting for the sun to evaporate it, and in the meantime forming a cooling bath for the pigs to wallow in.....It was no uncommon thing to see on the south side of the street the drainage flowing from manure heaps."

PHOTOGRAPHERS:

We have run out of photographs for the 'Review'.
If you have a photograph
of clear definition
in black and white
of local interest
preferably including local people
we will be interested in printing it.
Please indicate your name and address on the reverse
of the photograph and whether you wish it to be
returned.



COVER PICTURE: As a result of last month's cover picture of Cowper's Well's mechanism, we have been given a photograph of a meeting of the Cowper Society in 1902. The then Rector of Great Berkhamsted, the Rev. H.G. Constable-Curtis is shown at the site of Cowper's Well. The sundial marking the spot is now in the (modern) Rectory garden. The plaque at its foot was later removed and a fragment is in the possession of the Local History Society. Photograph by J.T. Newman © The Rector and Churchwardens of St Peter's, Great Berkhamsted.

CARNI VALE

("farewell to the flesh")

Tuesday 11th February 8 pm.

COURT HOUSE

SUPPER : THE BERKHAMSTED GREAZE : MUSIC
THE GREAT WEIGH-IN

Tickets: £2.50 (£2.00 for unwaged)

from members of the Social Committee (numbers limited)