

IN AND AROUND BERKHAMSTED

by Townsman

TAKING THE AIR

The series of 'Best Walks' ended last month, and I am now sleeping much better, thank you. No more dreams of Ashbridge-bound readers going over the wrong stile and collapsing from exhaustion somewhere east of Letchworth. No more worrying whether I said right when I meant left. No more map-making, drawing double lines for roads, dotted lines for paths, and arrows to keep you on the straight and narrow.

Hours were spent exploring paths which, for one reason or another, were not included in the 'Best Walks.' Every published route was walked twice, sometimes thrice. One day a stile collapsed beneath me and I landed in nettles and mud. On another occasion a king-size bull, with a ring in his nose, stepped through a gap in the hedge and literally crossed my path when I was only

two yards away. There was only one thing to do: keep on walking at the same pace until I was far enough away to start sprinting! One evening, walking beside a wheatfield near Aldbury, I disturbed a fox. He, too, was only a couple of yards away. Tally-ho!

Three months elapsed before I was aware that anyone so much as read the 'Best Walks.' Then a reader told me that while following one of my routes she was overtaken by two young men, one of whom was holding a copy of the *Review*.

Just one report was received of a reader going astray, and he not only blamed himself but gave me a pot of honey because he had enjoyed the walks so much.

The only unkind comment came from someone who thought the descriptions so impersonal that he wondered whether

I had actually walked the routes. Charitably, I wished him corns on both feet.

THE CITIZENS' MAP

The 'Best Walks,' incidentally, could not have appeared at a better time. When the first article appeared, in May 1969, the last copies of the *Citizens' Association Footpaths Map* (second edition), had just been sold. A new edition was on sale just a week before the last article appeared.

By showing rights-of-way in green instead of red, the new map is much more attractive than the old. But I still like to use my pre-war first edition. Thirty-one years and many hundreds of miles after its purchase, it is still a faithful old friend, soiled, tatty and torn, and reliable.

STRANGE ADDRESSES

From an Income Tax office in Manchester, a reader received a form addressed as follows:

— Kings Road,
Birkhamstead,
Near St. Albans,
Bucks.

At least the senders had the right diocese!

Some time ago I received a letter from Leeds. The address, typewritten, ended with the name Berkhamsted. As no county was stated, someone had added, in pencil, the words 'Home Counties.' Rather quaint, don't you think? The message certainly came home.

Quiz! How many Home Counties are there, and what are their names? Six: Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex, Kent, Surrey and Hertfordshire.

BOOT SCRAPERS

A few weeks ago the *Berkhamsted Gazette* reported the Urban Council's decision to provide boot-scrappers outside changing rooms on recreation grounds. It seems that drains became clogged when football boots were cleaned in the sinks.

I don't know whether the Council had any difficulty in buying scrapers. I never see them advertised. But in Victorian times ironfounders manufactured boot-scrappers by the thousand, in a variety of designs and sizes, some equipped with brushes. Public demand was high because paths and roads were muddy.

Almost every house had a scraper near the front door; a less elegant specimen was sometimes installed near the back door. Woe betide the husband, son or daughter who failed to use the scraper. The accused was well and truly on the mat, in a different sort of scrape.

CHOICE SPECIMEN

Painted black, the scrapers lasted for many years. In modern times, however, gardeners have thrown away hundreds of specimens. When iron railings were sacrificed in the second World War, lots of scrapers were taken for scrap metal, too.

But if you look around you will still find many examples, some of which are almost worthy of preservation as ancient monuments. It would not surprise me if lovers of antiques were already collecting

vintage scrapers. There may even be a Scrapeologists' Society. So put your foot down if anyone makes a cut-price offer for your own downtrodden ironwork.

There is a fine specimen beside the door of the Progress Hall in Cowper Road; it looks somewhat like the top half of a very small grate. Outside the National Westminster Bank (222 High Street), husband and wife may simultaneously clean their shoes on a very elegant matching pair of scrapers.

St. Peter's Church has five scrapers, all of the same model, probably dating from the 1870 restoration. Rather sturdier scrapers stand sentry at the doors of the Congregational and Baptist Churches; they are of the same type and suggest bulk buying!

In Castle Street, opposite the churchyard, you will see several examples of built-in scrapers, the walls of the houses being specially recessed to accommodate the ironwork.

TROUBLE IN CHURCH

Hertfordshire Past and Present, an annual publication issued by the Hertfordshire Local History Council, does not command the wide readership it deserves. It contains some very scholarly articles, one of which, in the 1970 issue, is entitled 'Some Hertfordshire Clergy

of the late Thirteenth Century', by Rosalind Hill.

We are told that John of Reed, rector of Berkhamsted St. Peter in 1290, was involved in a quarrel about tithes which some of his parishioners were refusing to pay. Three years later, having been in trouble with his bishop because he had neglected to take priest's orders within a year of his institution, he managed to obtain a living in the diocese of Ely, leaving, as his successor Hugh of Nottingham complained, 'various intolerable defects in the chancel and manse', as well as a number of debts to the unfortunate chaplains to whom he had deputed the responsibilities of his office.

One of the chaplains, John of Todenham, was assaulted in St. Peter's Church by a man named Peter of Mileham, who struck him in the face with a wax candle, using such violence as to cause bloodshed and thereby desecrate the building. It was necessary to re-consecrate the church, under licence from the bishop, by the Prior of Dunstable.

POSTSCRIPT

What can I say about Mr. S. H. Smith that has not been said already? Just this. We had differences of opinion from time to time but never a cross word while we worked for the *Review*.

I had something to do with the production when Mr. Smith turned a neat but small parish magazine into a large, widely read monthly. He tackled the job with his usual zest. He was editor, reporter, advertising manager and circulation manager. As a Councillor and member of many societies he knew what was happening and wrote with authority and knowledge. As a churchman he reported and commented fully upon parochial life.

Only Mr. Smith, I am sure, could have cajoled advertisers into paying for space they did not occupy when war and post-war paper restrictions limited the number of pages!

A chat in the street nearly thirty years ago led to my starting the 'Berkham' articles. Neither of us knew how to pronounce 'Berkham,' and perhaps I should have chosen something simpler, like 'Parishioner.' But Mr. Smith was already using that pen name. Goodness knows how many thousands of Parochial Paragraphs he wrote for the *Review*. What he gave us was a digest of the month's news, plus his own comments, some of which were apt to be a little controversial.

I do not think that any man did more for Berkhamsted than Mr. Smith. We remember him with affection and gratitude.

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