

Low Wages and Cheap Prices

# BERKHAMSTED

IN 1900

By 'BEORCHAM'

AIDED AND ABETTED by minute books, old newspapers and directories, I thought it would be appropriate, at the start of the 'seventies, to go back to the very beginning of the 20th century.

At a wild guess, two hundred residents remember the Berkhamsted of 1900. I have consulted half a dozen, and rather grudgingly they admit to a preference for the Berkhamsted of today. Their main dislike is the heavy traffic.

Much as we grumble about the state of some of our paths and roads today, conditions were far worse in 1900. Many new houses were built long before roads and paths were made. Then there was a new sewerage scheme which caused excavations to be made here, there and everywhere. One might have thought that the Boer War was being fought in the streets of Berkhamsted.

### SLEEPY HOLLOW

The rarest sight in the town was a motor-car, but hundreds of carriages and carriages churned up the mud. In the market place there were murky pools and heaps of filth 5 ft. across. When sun and wind dried up the mud, the two-years-old Urban District Council brought out watercarts to lay the dust.

Little more than a third of its present size, Berkhamsted was regarded as a sleepy hollow by bright young people and as a busy little place by old folk who, on Saturday nights, traipsed around the market, which, like the shops, stayed open until a late hour.

Some Berkhamstedians never journeyed beyond Tring or Chesham, and boasted of the fact. But many better-off residents travelled to and from London daily. Some had been attracted to the town by the schools; in top hats and frock coats they caught the 8.51 a.m. train to Euston, arriving at 9.35. Known as the business train, it was the fastest of the day.

Having a higher proportion of well-to-do residents than neighbouring towns, Berkhamsted acquired the dubious reputation of being a snobbish place, though snobbishness was to be found everywhere in an age of sharp social distinctions. People living in one street were apt to claim superiority over people living in a neighbouring and almost identical street. Between church and chapel people there was an icy relationship; party politics, too, caused much ill feeling.

### QUEUES FOR SOUP

But the major differences were between well-off folk and the so-called working classes. There was no talk of keeping up with the Joneses; that would have been a financial impossibility for the hundreds of families who never had a spare shilling at the end of the week. 'We'll all go to the workhouse' was a cry which gave many children bad dreams. In hard winters, when unemployment was rife, there were queues for soup and bread in the Castle grounds.

Most of the townspeople worked in or near the town. Four timber yards (East's, Sills', Read's and Key's) gave steady employment to dozens of men. William Cooper and Nephews had a long pay-roll at the chemical works. Lane and Sons needed a large labour force to look after 150 acres of nursery gardens. Small brushworks employed more women than men. Most girls went into domestic service until H. G. Hughes started a clothing factory in the High Street, transferring it to the Bulbourne Factory in 1899. By 1900 there were 130 employees, and it was said that soon the number would rise to 300. And now, 70 years later, the factory has closed down.

The birth of a new industry was accompanied by the death of an old one. One of the two 'Domesday Book' water-

mills (Lower or Bank Mill) ceased to function in 1900, due to lack of water and other causes. For a time the mill was taken over by a timber merchant, and wood and sawdust succeeded corn and flour.

### FOOD AND DRINK

Wages were low, and so were prices. Cheeld's Supply Stores advertised 7 lb. crushed lump sugar for 1s. Osbourne, cash grocer, sold bacon at 4d. to 9d. per lb., real Devonshire butter, fresh weekly, at 1s. 1d. per lb., finest American Cheddar at 7d. per lb., 'sound tea' at 1s. per lb. A cup and saucer were given away with  $\frac{1}{2}$  lb. 'bonus tea'.

David Pike charged 3d. for a pound of Tasmanian apples, 6d. for a pound of Denia grapes, 2s. 6d. for 56 lb. of new potatoes.

Edward Platt supplied the finest old Highland whisky, guaranteed seven years old, at 3s. 6d. a bottle, or 20s. a gallon, and old tawny port at 2s. 6d. a bottle. H. Lee's lemonade cost 1s. per dozen bottles. Local tobacconists sold 'Sweet Lavender' cigarettes at five a penny, or silver-tipped at ten for 3d.

C. Dockrill made trousers to measure from 10s. 6d. or 13s., and suits from 30s. He also cleaned, curled and dyed feathers, then very fashionable. J. Wood and Son sold gramophones at £5 10s., and 'the phonograph, the only machine by which you can record and reproduce sounds,' for £5 5s. C. E. Southey, at Elm Grove corner, built 'single bicycles' to order from £8 10s., fully guaranteed, and made a speciality of fitting free wheels to tricycles.

F. A. Grimsley, baker and refreshment contractor, supplied bride cakes from 10s. 6d. and always had 'tea and coffee at hand.' For more substantial refreshment one crossed the High Street to the Rock House (on the site of the Civic Centre), where A. C. Neville, fishmonger, had a separate department known as the Ham and Beef Restaurant, with 'joints always in cut.'

### THE POST OFFICE

Suttons, the carriers, took a 1 lb. parcel to London for 2d., and charged 1s. 2d. for a 112 lb. package. Postal charges were rather higher, but if you took a parcel to the post office (in the now empty building next door to the Civic Centre) before 2.30 p.m., you could be sure of delivery in London the same day.

For Berkhamsted and surrounding villages the post office had a staff of 36—four postmasters, two postmistresses, nine town postmen, eleven rural post-

### BEORCHAM (Contd.)

men, five telegraph messengers, five clerks and telegraphists. The head post office was open from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., and letters and parcels were delivered at 6.30, 9.30, 3.15 and 5.45 on weekdays. On Sundays there was one delivery of letters (no parcels) at 6.30 a.m.

### BY TRAP TO CHESHAM

There were no buses, but a trap provided communication between Berkhamsted and Chesham stations twice a day. Incidentally, our town then had more family and business connections with Chesham than with any other town.

The local police force comprised one inspector, one sergeant and five constables, plus one constable each for Northchurch, Aldbury, Little Gaddesden and Potten End.

The London and County (now the Westminster) was the only bank until Prescott, Dinsdale, Cave, Tugwell & Co. Ltd. (now the National Provincial) opened a branch here in 1900. Hours of business: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

If you were a sportsman, you could join football, cricket, lawn tennis and gymnastic and athletic clubs. Hunting

men favoured the Berkhamsted Beagles (10 couples) or the Berkhamsted Stag-hounds (16 couples).

### CLUBS AND SOCIETIES

There were four clubs: the Mechanics' Institute, the New, the Conservative, and the Working Men's Club.

At the Baptist Church, the Claremont Parliamentary Debating Society was a nursery for budding orators. The town had a Provident Dispensary, Anti-Vaccination League, Cottage Garden Society, Chrysanthemum Society, Dramatic Society, and local branches of the Christian Social Union and the English Church Union. Swinging Berkhamsted was represented by the Handbell Ringers, though the only professional ringer was the town crier, who was also the bill-sticker.

And local government? As already mentioned, the Urban District Council was young in 1900; it was formed on 1st April, 1898. Then, as now, its work was varied, highly controversial, always interesting. But this month's 'scrapbook' is not the place for a review of the Council's early activities. I hope to devote at least one article to this subject in a forthcoming issue.

## HERALD - 1970!

On the star-laden stillness, the midnight bells chime  
To herald the dawning of a year new in time.

A year that is special, another decade,  
The start of a chapter in the lives we have made.

A promise, a message, the hope we all need.

Just helping us onward, in thought, word and deed

The past put behind us, the future unveil—

To strive for success, and refuse the word fail.

And doing ones best is the way to achieve

The same unto others will always receive.

On the star-laden stillness, the echoed bells ring,

Inspiring to welcome the New Year to bring.

Elizabeth Gomez



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