

When Chesham Road was 'Grubs Lane'

# THE PLACE NAMES OF BERKHAMSTED

By 'BEORCHAM'

MANY PEOPLE have argued about the derivation, spelling and pronunciation of the town's name. In years gone by historians wondered whether the Berk-homestead was a fortified place or a dwelling among the hills.

In the 1922 and 1931 pageants the choir sang a 'Song of Berkhamsted' which included the lines:

So both to church and castle

The birth and growth we trace  
Of Berkhamsted whose name is read  
The 'Fortified-Home-Place.'

Nowadays, however, experts favour (a) a homestead among the hills or (b) a birch-grown homestead, the latter being the choice of the compilers of *The Place-Names of Hertfordshire*, a most informative book.

John Cobb, in 1855, amused himself and his readers by finding fifty different

spellings in old documents, from the time-saving Bercam to the extravagant Berkehampstedde. But there have been hundreds of versions ever since Anglo-Saxons produced the spelling Beorhðan-stædæ. A twentieth century compositor or typist can be just as inventive as a scribe of olden times.

## 'MUCH BERKHAMSTED'

Berkhamsted was not born Great but had greatness thrust upon it by clerks who did not want anyone to confuse the town with Little Berkhamsted, a village near Hertford. Thus the town was called Great, Greate, Much or Muche; a particularly nice version was Berkhamsted Magna. By Victorian times most of the inhabitants were so sure of themselves that they dropped the word Great, but the Great Berkhamstead Urban District Council did not prune its

title until March 18, 1937, mainly because persons looking up the council's telephone number in the directory frequently telephoned Berkhamsted Rural District Council, unaware that there was a local authority listed under 'Great.' Until their death by amalgamation and nationalisation the water and gas companies remained Great.

Such spellings as Barkehamsted (1546) and Barkhamsted (1644) show how the name was pronounced in Tudor, Stuart and indeed later times. Hertford, of course, has been pronounced 'Hartford' for centuries, and 'Hurtford' is now considered rather low-class, but Chauncy thought otherwise in 1700: 'Doubtless, it was merely called Hartford for Hertford, by reason of the broad dialect and ill-speaking of the vulgar sort of people which oftentimes through long usage changed the true names of divers places.'

Some of the vulgar, ill-speaking people crossed the Atlantic and spelt names as they were pronounced; in Connecticut there is a township of Barkhamsted some 25 miles from the state capital, Hartford. In Old England we do not 'bark' the town's name; anyone who calls it 'Barkhamsted' is assumed to have come from another planet. The first syllable is stressed, and many people do not sound the aspirate, i.e. *Berk'amsted*.

## THE ENDS

Berkhamsted is in a district noted for Ends—Potten End, Bourne End, Gossons End, Heath End, Water End, and dozens more within a radius of ten

miles. John Godsalm (1287) and other members of his family gave Gossoms End its name; an amusing spelling is Goshams yende, 1565. John Potyn (1565) may have named Potten End. Reginald Asselyn (1314) is linked with Ashlyns, Hugh Harefot (1200) with Haresfoot, Adam Durant (1294) with Durrants, and Robert de Cruce (1307) with Cross Oak, though old Berkhamstedians maintain that Cross Oak Road (formerly Gilhams Lane) takes its name from a rather famous oak which once stood at the Shootersway crossroads.

Shootersway was Sugarsway in the eighteenth century; by earlier names it does not sound so sweet. Shokersweye (1357) and Shukerswaye (early 1600s) is believed to have been a robbers' way, a lonely and presumably dangerous alternative to the highway in the valley. Shootersway formerly continued from Brickhill Green (originally Brick Kiln Green) through Sandpit Green (Sandputtes, 1300) and Long Green to Bourne End, where the name Sugar Lane survives.

#### **ST. JOHN'S WELL**

Dudswell was Dodd's spring, Rossway was Rothewey (1432), Norcott was Northcote (1300), Kingshill was Kyngeshill (1427). Esserugge is one of many early versions of Ashridge, and spellings of Marlin (Magdalene, Maudelynes, etc.) are legion. In 1406 Frithsden was Freseden, and some people still pronounce the name that way; it means the valley belonging to the wood or frith.

Our most interesting street name, St. John's Well Lane, recalls a long-vanished leper hospital dedicated to St. John and a spring which sent water trickling down the lane. Another spring, Boxwell, gave its name to a house and then to a road.

Castle Street was Castelstrete in 1357; in the same year Ravens Lane was Ravenyngeslane, so called after a family which provided the Black Prince with one of his henchmen, John Raven. King's Road was formerly Cocks Lane (another family name); it was also called Bridewell Lane, after the gaol which preceded the police station. A

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new road to the railway station was named Lower King's Road in 1885; as it is a continuation of King's Road there was really no need to 'lower' the name.

**THE WINDMILL**

Chesham Road was Elwynslane in 1525 and Grubslane in 1608. Bankemulle (1269) and Northmullane (1357) remind us of ancient watermills in Bank Mill Lane and Mill Street. The town's only windmill gave its name to Millfield, on the east side of Gravel Path, which was so called because carters came that way with loads of gravel from the Common.

Kitsbury was Kitts (or Kicks) End Bury; Greenway was Grenewayfyld in 1357. Three Close Lane takes its name from three closes or paddocks where cattle and sheep on the way to London markets were penned for the night. Highfield Road (Hifeld in Henry VIII's reign) was known as the Pightle, an ancient name for a strip of land between two copses. Manor Street is so called because it was built on the Pilkington Manor estate.

**BRING BACK BACK LANE!**

The local authority took an unfortunate decision, which should be reversed forthwith, by changing the ancient, honourable and appropriate name of Back Lane to Church Lane. An old town should treasure its old names. York, for instance, would never dream of changing the name of the Shambles. To be fair to the council, names of local historical interest are sometimes used; for instance, a new road off Chesham Road is to perpetuate the name of the field, St. Edmund's. The names of local worthies are also used—Bourne, Edlyn, Brownlow, Bridgewater, Egerton, Cobb, Torrington, Cowper, etc. Cowper's most popular poem inspired the name of a road called Gilpin's Ride. Another bright idea, Captain's Walk, is a reminder of Captain Constable Curtis, after whom Curtis Way is also named. He lived at a former mansion called The Hall, the name of which is preserved in such roads as Hall Park, Hall Park Hill, etc.

Hony Lane, Sparrow Lane, Benehenstrete, Ragged Row and Tiptoes Lane are among the names found in old documents. Formerly there was a Petticoat Lane in the Park. A little cluster of houses off Castle Street was Happy Valley; Prince Edward Street was preceded by Snob's Alley; Middle Row, the shops between the parish church and the top of Water Lane, was nicknamed Grab-all Row to signal dislike of the way the old market place was built upon.

*The above is extracted from a new, enlarged edition of A Short History of Berkhamsted, which will be published this summer.*

**THE 'REVIEW'**

If you have an article for the 'Review' please let the Editor have it by 15th April.

We regret that owing to production difficulties caused by the power shortage some readers may have received their March issue a little late.