

# Some Notable Berkhamsted Women

Some time ago, when invited to talk on local history to a women's organisation, I thought it would be gallant and appropriate to chat about famous Berkhamsted women of the past. Appropriate, yes—but not easy! Our history books are studded with names, but with precious few exceptions they are men's names. For example, at the end of his "Historical Guide to Berkhamsted," Mr. A. E. Loosley gives brief biographies of nearly one hundred Berkhamsted notabilities, of whom only half a dozen are women.

Not that Berkhamsted is exceptional in this respect. Until fairly recent times it was very much a man's world, and woman's place was in the home. But sigh no more, ladies—there is a distaff side to local history, so let us give honour where honour is due.

## Thank you, Mrs. Rolfe

Much has been said about Berkhamsted's benefactors. What of our benefactresses? Had it not been for the generosity of Mrs. Lionel Lucas, Butts Meadow would probably have become a built-up area. And who did more for local education in the first half of the 19th century than the last Countess of Bridgewater? By giving land for the erection of church schools in Berkhamsted and Northchurch, and then endowing the schools to the extent of £3,500, she deserves at least half as much applause as Thomas Bourne, who, a century earlier, left £8,000 for the establishment of a charity school in our town. And if it had been not for a woman, Thomas Bourne would probably never have heard of Berkhamsted. It

was entirely due to the fact that his sister, Sarah Rolfe, lived in Berkhamsted so he became interested in the town. So thank you, Mrs. Rolfe, for Bourne's Charity!

All honour to John Sayer for founding the almshouses; but let us also remember his wife, Mary Sayer, who considerably augmented the charity, and Martha Deere, whose subsidiary endowment of £875 was made in 1784, exactly a century after the almshouses were built. Another generous soul was Elizabeth Craddock, who, in 1703, gave to the parish 43 acres of land at Rickmansworth. This property, sold in 1894, realised over £2,700.

## Anne Cowper

There was another Berkhamsted woman who left no money for the poor, but gave the town its greatest son. Who can read William Cowper's works without sensing the poignancy of his references to his mother? A descendant of John Donne, the poet, Anne Donne married the rector of Berkhamsted. What tragedies befell this loving and lovable pair! Five of their children died in infancy, and Anne herself died soon after the birth of the seventh child, John, the only one besides William who grew to manhood. William was six years old at the time of his mother's death, and almost immediately he was sent away to school. If only as the subject of the famous lines written by William on receipt of his mother's portrait, Anne Cowper merits a place among the notable women of Berkhamsted.

## Two Novelists

For another literary association let us go to Edgeworth House, between Berkhamsted and Northchurch, which is said to have been the home, apparently for a short time, of the greatest woman novelist of the 18th century, Maria Edgeworth. She was the eldest of the twenty-two children of Richard Lovel Edgeworth, himself a writer of note. One of Maria's books was called "The Parent's Assistant," and with twenty-one younger brothers and sisters to keep quiet she was doubtless well qualified to write on that subject.

Maria Edgeworth has very few readers nowadays. Similarly, there is not a great demand for the works of another woman novelist who was known to many townspeople when she lived at Aldbury. But it is worth remembering that Mrs. Humphry Ward was fond of local—truly local—colour. She renamed Aldbury "Clinton Magna" when she made it the setting of a sad, sad novel entitled "Bessie Costrell."

Mrs. Humphry Ward lived at "Stocks," the Aldbury house (now a

school) which has an earlier literary association—in this instance a masculine one. Sir Walter Scott stayed at "Stocks" for a short time, and was so enamoured of the name of nearby Ivinghoe that he modified the spelling and used it as the title of the famous novel which has recently been filmed—"Ivanhoe."

## "Polly" Page

It is surprising that no novelist has written a story around a remarkable character of early 19th century Berkhamsted—Mary ("Polly") Page, daughter of "mine host" of the King's Arms. The most beautiful of three attractive sisters, she was noted for her "unvarying attention, charming manners and great conversational powers." That tribute was paid by Henry Nash in his "Reminiscences of Berkhamsted," and he further tells us that "she had a great admiration for the aristocracy, and held the peerage at her tongue's end. She could trace the pedigree of almost every family of note that honoured her with a call; indeed, her popularity was so widely recognised that she was no stranger even to Royal Courts."

Mary Page was certainly a famous hostess; there is a reference to her in Hesketh Pearson's recently published biography of Disraeli. It was in 1841, a year after the death of her father, that she had the honour of entertaining Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort for a short time while their horses were changed.

## Visit to Versailles

But it is for her friendship with Louis XVIII of France that Mary Page is best remembered. For seven of his 24 years' exile, Louis resided at Hartwell House, near Aylesbury, and he regularly called at the King's Arms to chat with "Pretty Polly" on his way to and from London.

A book published at Aylesbury many years ago gives an interesting account of Louis' last visit to the King's Arms. In 1814 the fall of Napoleon opened the way for the King's return to France, and at Aylesbury six young men mounted their horses to form a small bodyguard on the first stage of his journey to London. There were cheers, cheers, all the way, and no town displayed greater enthusiasm than Berkhamsted. Here the retinue halted for the horses to be changed, and Louis, bidding Mary Page farewell, said he hoped that she would be able to visit him at Versailles.

And Mary Page really did go to France. In the words of Henry Nash, "apartments were given to her in the Royal Palace, and every attention was shown to her to make her visit pleasant. This was a theme of never-failing interest to the family ever after, and many valuable souvenirs of the interesting event were treasured with as much care as family relics."

It is a pleasant and unusual story, this friendship of a Berkhamsted innkeeper's daughter with Royalty. But there have been other remarkable women in local history, and they will be introduced in a later article.

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