

BERKHAMSTED OFFICIAL GUIDE 2004

Draft contribution at 27 January 04 compiled by John Cook

INRODUCTION – Berkhamsted and its neighbours

Berkhamsted lies on the western edge of Hertfordshire, bordering the Chiltern Hills. Over much of the last millennium it was an important market town with strong royal and literary connections; today it is a vibrant residential and cultural centre, and while it is now part of the Borough of Dacorum it has retained its own strong identity. Together with the adjoining village of Northchurch it is separated from other towns and villages by lovely countryside, all of it in the Metropolitan Green Belt and much of it classified as being an area of outstanding natural beauty. Berkhamsted has its own Town Council and Mayor, and the Berkhamsted Citizens Association, with over 1000 members, is also there to champion the interests of local people.

In its position in the valley of the River Bulbourne – one of the Chiltern chalk streams - Berkhamsted lies on the principal transport corridor from London to the Northwest. The Roman road called Akeman Street passed through Berkhamsted, later to become a major coaching route. The Grand Union Canal and Britain's most important railway - the West Coast Main Line - are also routed through the town. Today the M1 and M25 motorways are within 15 minutes drive; London is 27 miles (43km) away and Euston Station can be reached by frequent fast local trains, many taking only half an hour for the journey. Heathrow is 27 miles (43km) by road; Watford is 11 miles (18km) to the Southeast, Aylesbury 12 (19km) miles to the Northwest.

Apart from the other advantages of its location, Berkhamsted is an excellent centre for exploring the northern half of the Chiltern Hills and other fine walking country. Close to the town are Berkhamsted Common and 5000 acres of the National Trust's Ashridge Estate.

Berkhamsted's Long History

In 1992 a large team of archaeologists excavating along the route of the Berkhamsted bypass before it was built, unearthed evidence of a sequence of occupation from far earlier than had previously been thought. Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman finds showed that the Bulbourne Valley around Berkhamsted had been peopled continuously for over 5000 years.

Romans and Saxons

In Roman times Akeman Street gave access to several villas in the area, and Roman remains in the form of coins, bricks, tiles and pottery have been found at several sites in the town. Not much evidence exists today of Saxon times, with one notable exception: Grims Dyke, the great ditch, a section of which can still be found on Berkhamsted

Common. Another legacy of the Saxons is the name of the town, the original meaning of which was probably 'settlement among the birches'.

Medieval Prosperity

Then one of the great events that made 1066 the best remembered date in English history took place in Berkhamsted. Here the Saxon leaders offered the crown of England to William the Conqueror after his victory in the Battle of Hastings and his devastating march, encircling London. One of William's first initiatives was to set about fortifying his new kingdom with castles, and one of these was built at Berkhamsted. Its first owner was William's half-brother, Robert, Count of Mortain, and until it was abandoned in 1495 Berkhamsted Castle was mainly a royal residence. The first buildings were of wood, but later it was rebuilt and enlarged in the local building materials – flint, and soft limestone. Most of the castle buildings were later demolished for the re-use that could be made of these building materials, but the impressive earthworks and moats have largely survived.

The Great and the Royal

During the 400 years when the castle was occupied it had many notable associations. In the 12th century Thomas a Becket was Constable of the Castle before becoming Archbishop of Canterbury, then two centuries later Chaucer was clerk of works here. In 1250 King Henry III's brother, Richard, Earl of Cornwall, lived in the castle, and from here Richard's son, Edmond, founded the nearby monastery of Ashridge.

Berkhamsted Castle was the favourite residence of the Black Prince. Here he honeymooned with the Fair Maid of Kent, and from here he rode off at the head of his troops, many of them Berkhamsted men, to fight the battles of Poitiers and Crecy.

The last occupant was the influential Cicely, Duchess of York, who lived in the castle during the Wars of the Roses. Granddaughter of John of Gaunt, founder of the House of Lancaster, she married Richard, Duke of York, head of the rival House of York. She was the mother of two Kings of England – Edward IV and Richard III, and grandmother of another, Edward V, all of whom died in tragic circumstances; but she lived to see the end of civil war and the establishment of the House of Tudor.

Prosperity and Expansion

The building of the castle gave impetus to the expansion of Berkhamsted into a flourishing market town. From the beginning of the 13th century substantial buildings, including what claims to be the second largest parish church in Hertfordshire, Berkhamsted St Peter, were constructed along the old Roman road, and there was a busy market. At its peak in medieval times Berkhamsted High Street was lined with houses, shops and halls, parts of which still survive in several buildings. During alterations to one of them as recently as 2003, experts from English Heritage were surprised to find a section of a hall which they dated as early as 1267, making it the oldest timber-framed urban building in England.

A Quiet Age

But in the three centuries following the loss of its royal connections Berkhamsted rather fell into decline. Its ancient charters ran out and its market no longer had the monopoly it once enjoyed. Berkhamsted would have become something of a sleepy backwater if it had not been that the High Street continued to be one of the major trunk roads from London. Such was the importance of this road that it was necessary to set up a turnpike trust in 1762 to make sure it was properly maintained. The coaches, wagons and cattle being driven to the London markets brought income to the town, and several old coaching inns can still be seen in the centre; but all this was to change after the coming of the canal in 1798 and then the railway in 1835.

Victorian Flourishing

At first these new transport routes were slow to affect Berkhamsted's economy; but as the 19th century went on full advantage was taken of having them on the town's doorstep, for example in the expansion near the centre of Cooper's, the world famous manufacturer of sheep dip. Berkhamsted grew fast then, with new houses, churches, schools and shops. Improved train services allowed clerks working in London business houses to live in a pleasant country town and travel to work daily. Berkhamsted became a commuter town: but it has always been much more than that.

21st Century Prosperity

Today Berkhamsted continues to change. There is an insatiable demand from people wishing to live in the town, constrained as it is from expanding by the Green Belt all round it. Most industry has gone, the sites of old factories being re-developed for housing; but other businesses have moved in. The opening of the bypass in 1992 brought relief from the continuous heavy traffic through the town centre, and substantial improvements were made to enhance the High Street. The heart of the town is a conservation area, with a comfortable blend of the old and the new.

Many small and medium-sized companies have chosen to have premises in Berkhamsted, and there are purpose-built office buildings, both near the town centre and in the industrial area. Several of the town's historic houses have been adapted as offices, notably Ashlyns Hall, which is now the headquarters of a large international company. Although the old industries of Berkhamsted may have disappeared, some light industry flourishes, for example printing, in the industrial area centred on Northbridge Road.

Today's Berkhamsted has a real feeling of prosperity.

A Short Berkhamsted Walk

A good way for a visitor to start to explore Berkhamsted is to begin at the castle and walk from there to the High Street, taking in Castle Street and St Peter's Church, and then along through the centre of the town.

The castle is rarely crowded and is open free to the public during the day. Although not much is left of the buildings or walls, the lawns are immaculately kept by English Heritage, and you can climb the great motte and marvel at the great moats and earthworks, constructed over 900 years ago. On the south side you can see where, Robert Stephenson, the engineer of the London and Birmingham Railway, audaciously built his railway on the outer bank of the Castle. Today, high speed tilting trains speed through Berkhamsted linking London to Britain's next four largest cities – Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow.

London's Most Important Canal

Under the railway bridge turn left, then first right into Castle Street. The Grand Junction Canal, the first linking London to the industrial north was opened here in 1798. From the Thames to Berkhamsted and beyond it is wide enough to take large barges, and even wider opposite the station to allow them to be turned there. If you have time, a walk along the canal towpath in either direction makes a fascinating and rewarding diversion. Recently restored by a local joint project with British Waterways Board, the towpath is now well surfaced, and at intervals there are plaques giving the local history of each part of the town through which the canal passes. Today pleasure boats have taken the place of the old industrial barges that used to ply the canal 200 years ago. Of the three canal-side pubs that have survived, the Rising Sun is of particular interest, have retained much of its original character.

Berkhamsted's Second Street

Castle Street, traditionally the second most important thoroughfare in the town after the High Street, bustled with shops and small businesses until well into the 20th century. On the left is a genuine Canadian totem pole, a gift to the owner of the timber yard that used to be on the site. *The Boat* has the date 1611 on it, but like the other five pubs where Berkhamstedians and visitors could quench their thirsts along this street, it is no longer licensed.

The western (right-hand side) of Castle Street is almost entirely taken up by the buildings of Berkhamsted Collegiate School, the co-educational successor to the original 16th century boys' school which was founded by a Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, John Incent. The date of the opening of the school, 1541, can be seen on the lychgate. Most of its buildings are Victorian or later, but nearing the top of Castle Street you can see the original Tudor school building facing the churchyard.

St Peter's Church

The construction of the massive parish church of St Peter's on the corner began in the reign of King John and continued over several centuries. Students of architecture will be able to distinguish examples of various medieval styles of English church building. Like many other English parish churches from the Middle Ages it was restored by the Victorians, but St Peter's still looks much as it did in medieval times. Inside there are numerous monuments, brasses and fine stained glass windows. The tomb chests from three different centuries, all to men with royal connections, are of particular interest.

The Ancient High Street

Next to St Peter's on the west side is the Tudor Court House, now used as the parish hall, and on the opposite side of the High Street are a number of substantial old houses. The timber-framed building dates from 1500 and was the home of Dean Incent. The Victorian fronts of other houses and shops along that side of the street conceal much older parts behind them.

Turning right into the long High Street it is easy to guess from its straightness that this was once a Roman road. The narrow entrance to Chesham Road can be seen on the other side: this is the ancient highway that once linked the two royal strongholds of Berkhamsted and Windsor castles. 200 metres up Chesham Road is the birthplace of the writer Graham Greene, with a blue plaque on the wall. Further up (and a steep climb) are the exceptionally handsome buildings of Ashlyns School, built in the 1930s originally to accommodate the children of the Coram Foundation when it moved out of London.

The Commercial Centre

On the corner of Chesham Road is the 17th century Swan, now providing accommodation and a 'dry' bar for young people, and a little further along two other old coaching inns, each with a wide opening by the side leading to where there used to be stables at the rear - a reminder of the time when Berkhamsted was once a major staging post for coaches on their way to and from London.

A little to the west where the roadway widens out is the historic commercial centre of Berkhamsted, and it is here that the medieval market house stood until it was burnt down in 1854. It was replaced by what is known as the Town Hall, the ornate neo-gothic building next to Boots. Designed by the eccentric architect Edward Buckton Lamb, this was built in 1859 to house not only a new market hall but also the growing Mechanics' Institute, as well as a large public meeting room. In the 1970s it became derelict and was threatened with demolition, but thanks to the efforts of local people it was saved and restored, and it now provides a valuable local amenity, for weddings, public meetings and concerts, with a restaurant at street level.

Opposite the Town Hall, No 173 is the building recently found to date in part from 1267, and restored in 2003 largely at the expense of English Heritage. The substantial and rather forbidding police station on the corner of the crossroads is the third to stand on that site. The first, built in 1764, was known as the Bridewell and its cell was described as 'a dungeon, a most dreadful hole without air'.

The Varied Street Scene

All the way along the High Street the original facades of the old houses and shops can be seen in great variety above the modern shop fronts. Most of them are Victorian but two of the three buildings now made into one and occupied by Mackays are older. Towards the back there is an 18th century timber roof which you can see if you walk in. William Cowper, the Berkhamsted-born poet, went to school here.

On the same side a few paces along is Dickman's, a well-preserved early 20th century Victorian chemist's shop, and next to that the old Bourne School, now occupied by the Britannia Building Society. The original school was built on this site in 1737, paid for by a rich London merchant, Thomas Bourne. The present building was erected in 1854, largely at the expense of General John Finch, another local benefactor. The three coats of arms over the front door are those of Berkhamsted town, Thomas Bourne and John Finch.

A little further along No 234 is an early Victorian baker's shop with fine ornamental brickwork and matching ironwork. On the opposite side of the street on the corner of Cowper Road are the Sayer Almshouses, given to the town by a prominent local citizen, John Sayer. He was Charles II's chief cook and a friend of Samuel Pepys. One of the tomb chests in St Peter's is a monument to him, and on the front of the almshouses is a plaque bearing his name, his coat of arms and the date 1684.

To Find Out more...

For those wanting to know more about Berkhamsted there are a number of books available in the Bookstack at No 248 High Street, and local maps as well, including the excellent map of local footpaths produced by the Berkhamsted Citizens Association. Also, in the Civic Centre there are various free leaflets available, including the Berkhamsted Heritage Trail and the Graham Greene Trail.

Whatever your pleasure..... with time at your leisure, there is something for you in Berkhamsted.

There are many activities to participate in throughout the town ranging from healthy, bracing walks through our fabulous countryside to relaxing with a pint or a glass of fine wine at one of our attractive canal-side pubs. With a thriving nightlife and lively markets. Berkhamsted truly offers a glimpse at an historic town thriving in a modern setting.

A SHOPPERS DELIGHT

Berkhamsted plays host to an eclectic mix of contemporary shops, designer boutiques, antique shops, an award-winning butcher, a bustling Saturday street market and a Friday bric-a-brac market. There is also a regular farmers' market providing the very best in locally produced merchandise and from time to time a French market for all your Gallic based delights! With another high-profile retail store about to move to the town centre, Berkhamsted's shopping experience looks set to continue to prosper.

FLOURISHING NIGHT LIFE

The buzz of Berkhamsted lasts well into the evening, with a wide range of cafes, restaurants and pubs specialising in fine food and drink from across the world, attracting visitors from afar. There is a venue to suit every palate and pocket from traditional inns to

award-winning international cuisine, so whether you want a full evening meal or lunch on the run whilst out shopping, you are sure to find whatever you want in town.

CULTURAL TREATS

Berkhamsted boasts a huge range of artistic entertainment with something to suit the cultural taste of just about everybody. Throughout the course of the year you can find concerts covering many musical styles. Few towns of its size can rival Berkhamsted for its presentations of classical music (it has its own symphony orchestra); and frequent jazz, choral, operatic, flamenco folk and Irish events. There are also local bands displaying a varied mix of modern music.

If film and theatre are more your idea of a good night out, then Berkhamsted has something for you as well. Berkhamsted Film Society presents regular screenings of new and classic films during the year. It is planned to reopen the Rex Cinema, an art deco delight, which is currently undergoing restoration. In theatre you can discover occasional performances by high quality amateur companies and youth theatre groups.

There are many exhibitions by local artists and photographers to be found.

A SPORTING TOWN

Berkhamsted can truly be said to be a sporting town in all respects. Whether a spectator or participator, you will find plenty of activities available here. Berkhamsted Town Football Club, *The Lilywhites*, has been in existence since 1895 and plays in the Ryman Division One North (in 2002 it reached the final of the FA Vase), and the Ladies Club is also well known. However, if your skill level is not quite up to that standard then there are plenty of local Saturday and Sunday League teams and a thriving junior soccer scene. In the summer Berkhamsted Cricket Club competes in the Herts League and its ground on the outskirts of the town is a beautiful place to play or watch.

Archery is another sport well catered for and the Berkhamsted Bowmen are the oldest archery club in England. You can also find excellent facilities for hockey, tennis, squash, bowls, gymnastics and swimming.

If you just want somewhere to keep fit and exercise then the Berkhamsted Sports Centre is open seven days a week with a superb range of sport and fitness equipment and swimming pool. There are also a number of attractive golf courses close to the Town.

AROUND BERKHAMSTED

If you take a short trip outside Berkhamsted you will find a whole host of extra delights to enjoy. With plenty of shops and activities in the adjoining towns of Hemel Hempstead and Tring and some absolutely breathtaking country to explore in the surrounding area. There is a plethora of glorious small villages set in idyllic countryside locations that can

take a bit of finding but are well worth the effort! And with Berkhamsted's superb travel links you really can get to anywhere in the country without too much trouble!

Literary Berkhamsted

Berkhamsted over the centuries has been an exceptionally productive place for writers. Most notable was perhaps the poet and writer of hymns and letters William Cowper, who was born in Berkhamsted rectory in 1731. Although he moved away when still a boy he retained affectionate memories of the place, and there are frequent references to the town in his poems and letters. In Victorian times Cowper became a cult figure, and Berkhamsted was a place of pilgrimage for his devotees.

In the 20th century one of the giants among English novelists, Graham Greene, was born and educated at Berkhamsted School in what could be described as a hotbed of literati. Contemporaries of Greene's at Berkhamsted School were Claude Cockburn, Peter Quennell, Humphrey Trevelyan, Cecil Parrott and J. Keith Winter. And the literary tradition continues: now in the 21st century not a year goes by without at least one new book by a Berkhamsted author being published.

Berkhamsted's Festival of Light

On a Friday evening before Christmas every year Berkhamsted High Street is closed to traffic and the people of the town turn out in force to party. The Christmas lights on the tree and along the central part of the town are ceremoniously switched on, a silver cup and certificates are awarded by the Citizens Association for the best decorated shop windows, and there is music, dancing and lots of stalls. This has grown into a really popular annual event, organised jointly by the Dacorum Council for Voluntary Service and Berkhamsted Town Council.

Berkhamsted's Coat of Arms

A coat of arms was granted to the bailiff and capital burgesses of Berkhamsted over 350 years ago. The design was chosen 'upon deliberate consideration that the glory of that place hath proceeded from the ancient castle there ... in a shield, or, a triple tow'ned castle azure, within a border of Cornwall, viz., sable besanted.'

The use of the word *Cornewall* is a reference to the fact that Berkhamsted Castle has for centuries been a part of the Duchy of Cornwall, which by tradition belongs to the eldest

son of the king or queen. So the castle, although managed by English Heritage, is presently owned by Prince Charles.
