The social impact of transport systems in Berkhamsted, 1760-1825

In 1761 in the parish of Berkhamsted St Peter, churchwardens wrote in their accounts: "P^d for Beer for the ringers when King George the 3rd was proclaimed, 7s.6d." and "P^d for Musick of ye King's proclamation, 1s.6d".[1] This celebration marks the beginning of a period of transition when a number of small towns emerged from their medieval market origins to embrace the changes of a rapidly industrialising nation. Transport systems played an important role in connecting towns to wider markets and improving their social and economic prospects. Berkhamsted was fortunately placed at a gateway through the Chilterns, between London and the industrial Midlands.

The dominance of London was established in the second half of the seventeenth century.[2] Control of inland trade was maintained via the city's web of connections over land, navigable waterways and to the coast, linking with provincial centres, the developing manufacturing industries in the north of the country, and overseas. Apart from its huge wealth and trade supremacy, London was home to the royal court, parliament and law courts, numerous professional men, peerage and gentry who influenced and shaped the south east of England, whilst the Home Counties offered agricultural produce, feeding grounds for livestock, basic craft manufactures and a market for luxury goods.[3]

According to Pawson, transport affected "modes of living and means of leisure"; better roads eased passenger movements, work places became separated from home, and urban elites moved to the country.[4] Similarly, Chalklin wrote: "another influence on towns was the fast growth of road transport… inns remained particularly numerous on the main roads… the number of professional people multiplied… the growing wealth of London created more leisured people wanting to leave the bustle, noise and dirt of the huge congested capital for fresh air and country surroundings".[5]

Berkhamsted grew from a market town with a typical medieval triangular layout incorporating St Peter's church (built in 1222) with the castle defending the

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[1] Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies (HALS), *Churchwardens' accounts and vestry minutes*, Ref: DP/19/5/1 (1748-1824)

[2] P. Clark, & P. Slack, *English Towns in Transition 1500-1700* (Oxford, 1976), p.159

[3] C.W. Chalklin, 'England: South-East', *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain Vol.2: 1540-1840* (Cambridge, 2008), p.50

[4] E. Pawson, *Transport and Economy: The turnpike roads of eighteenth century Britain* (London, 1977), pp.303

[5] Chalklin, *South East*, p.60-1

north-eastern approaches, into a thoroughfare town with its focus increasingly on passing traffic from London on the main road which followed Roman Akeman Street through the small agricultural community of Northchurch one mile away and on to Aylesbury and the north (Fig.1).

Fig.1: 'Barkhamsted' in 1766
Source: A topographical map of Hartford-shire 1766[6]

Apart from roads, lanes and churches, this topographical map from a 1766 survey also shows the seats of noblemen and gentlemen "and every Thing remarkable in the County". Dark shading indicates the steep gradient out of the valley to the south-west, the promontory on which Berkhamsted Place was built and the motte of the castle. These contours were central to decisions regarding the route of roads and waterways (and later the railway) through the Chilterns.

The River Bulbourne was a key feature of the valley. Fed from a chalk aquifer, the source was reported as being at Pendley near Tring in 1700, but over the years it crept towards Northchurch and from there, the river meandered along

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[6] A. Dury & J. Andrews, A Topographical map of Hartford-shire, 1766 (Stevenage, 1986)

the valley bottom for seven miles before joining the River Gade at Two Waters, Hemel Hempstead.

Ellis wrote that "Georgian towns on the whole remained astonishingly compact and countrified" and grew by increasing density rather than area.[7] This was the case with Berkhamsted. Even by the time the railway was cut through the outer moat of the castle in 1838, the built-up area of the town had barely extended beyond the medieval triangle and the High Street (Fig.2) and looks little different from the map of 1766.
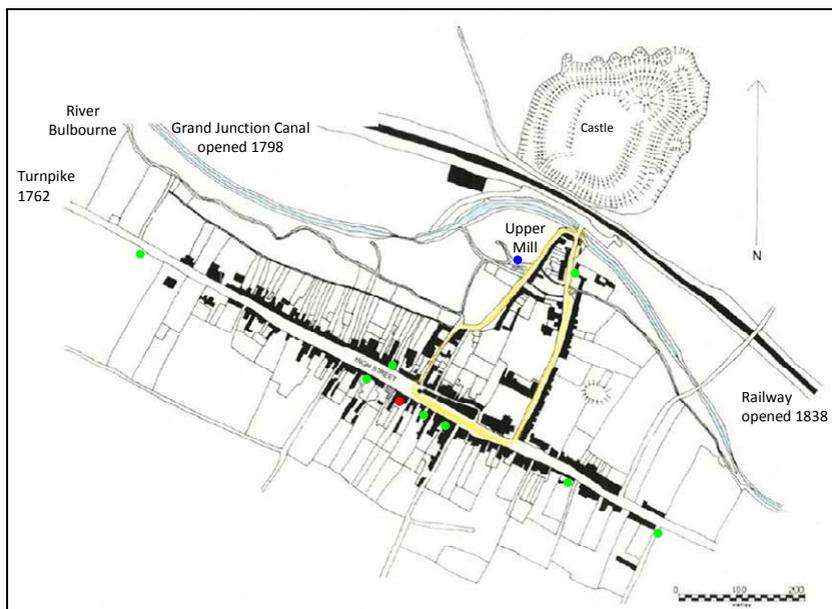

Fig.2: Berkhamsted in 1839
Source: 1839 tithe map[8]

This study looks at how the improved transport systems facilitated social changes in the local community.

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[7] J.M. Ellis, *The Georgian Town, 1680-1840* (Basingstoke, 2001), p.8
[8] M. Dunn, A. Gibson & J. Moir, 'No. 173 High Street, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire: an analysis of a thirteenth-century urban timber-framed building' *Vernacular Architecture,* vol.38 (2007), p.49 [with J. Moir's consent]

In the words of Berkhamsted's local historian Nash: "by gathering up the fragments of past events we are enabled to get some knowledge of the road we are travelling…"[9]

Social changes in the local community

The turnpike prompted social changes in the local community. With improved access to the metropolis, a sizable contingent of aristocracy and gentry were able to maintain influential contacts, to attend businesses and the glittering London season whilst being within easy reach of fresh air and sports on their country estates around Berkhamsted. Demands for goods and services to provide for genteel lifestyles meant that local tradesmen and craftsmen had the chance to prosper and with new-made wealth, some were able to climb further up the social ladder. The Georgian period accentuated class divisions and a widening differential between rich and poor but when they were noticed, the poorer members of the community benefited from the philanthropy of the rich and their health improved in the more wholesome environment bestowed by the canal. Despite improvements in the national transport network, regional traditions still played an important part of life in Berkhamsted.

Gentry of metropolitan identity

Professionals were increasingly becoming part of the elite in Georgian times and Sweet's "uniquely metropolitan identity" could be observed in them when they were in the provinces.[10] Bankers, merchants and attorneys, many of Huguenot origins made their fortunes in London and built their grand residences on the hillsides of the Chilterns. They provided leadership and capital for improvements to the town and its transport links. They were authority figures such as Members of Parliament and Justices of the Peace; many enhanced their status in the local community by holding office as sheriffs and deputies.

Francis Egerton, third Duke of Bridgewater, made his fortune by realising the advantages of a waterways network for his coal mining industry in the north of the country and achieved fame as the Canal Duke. His ancestral home was in the Chilterns and just before his death in 1803, he was taking an interest in renovating his estate at Ashridge, adjoining Berkhamsted Common. His dukedom died with him but his cousin succeeded him as the Earl of Bridgewater, who in the same year was reported as: "raising a volunteer corps

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[9] H. Nash, *Reminiscences of Berkhamsted* (Berkhamsted, 1890), p.2

[10] R. Sweet, *The English Town 1680-1840: Government, Society & Culture* (Harlow, 1999), p.258

of cavalry; and… raising a new house near Berkhampstead".[11] Both had been instrumental in the running of the turnpike trust. The presence of resident aristocracy boosted the status of the community and where they settled, others followed. The seats of noblemen and gentlemen were worthy of mention on the map of the area in 1766 (shown in Fig.1), such as Robert Hucks, Member of Parliament and Edmund Boehm, an eminent Hamburg merchant. The seat of Thomas Dorrien (of the German merchant and banking family, and Justice of the Peace) was Haresfoot estate, developed from Harrat's Foot End on the map. In 1819, Hassell wrote of his tour of the Grand Junction Canal: "Beyond Bourne End, we have little interesting until we reach Berkhamsted; at the entrance to this town is the elegant seat of Mr. Pechell, opposite to whose mansion is Mr. Moore's house, pleasantly situated on the banks of the stream". Augustus Pechell of Berkhamsted Hall was Receiver General of the Post Office and John Moore married into the Brabazon family with connections to the earl of Meath. Hassell described the Dorrien family vaults in St Peter's church and wrote that much of Berkhamsted Castle garden was appropriated to the use of its proprietor, the Earl of Bridgewater.[12] Four principal families (Dorrien, Smith, Drake and Pechell) kept their wealth within their own community and intermarried in successive generations, despite the lure of the London season's marriage mart. By 1831, four per cent of the population in Berkhamsted were capitalists or professional men.[13]

The gentry were attracted to areas lacking in manufactories and their lower-class workers. Kalm observed that the entire countryside in Hertfordshire resembled a garden, with tastefully-built estates of gentlemen scattered here and there.[14] Industry was not welcomed and much productive land was taken up with sports, as illustrated by the royal hunt that took place in 1822. A deer was released on Stoke Common to the south of Beaconsfield and chased by sportsmen through woods and enclosures around Amersham, up the hill and through the park at Ashridge and was finally taken between Hemel and St Albans (a distance of

[11] British Library, *British Newspapers 1600-1800,* 'Ashridge', *Morning Post*, issue 10883 (22 Aug 1803)

[12] J. Hassell; J. Cranfield (ed.), *A Tour of the Grand Junction Canal in 1819* (London, 1968), pp.17-19

[13] Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Social Structure, 'Parish register aggregate analyses: the Population history of England database and introductory guide', *Local Population Studies Supplement* (Colchester, 1998) [Berkhamsted character file]

[14] W.R. Mead, *Pehr Kalm: A Finnish Visitor to the Chilterns in 1748* (Aston Clinton, 2003), p.35

over 30 miles) by a much depleted company with distressed horses, including a "remarkable fine hunter" which died on returning.[15]

For the rich, the Georgian age epitomized flamboyance in fashions and hairstyles, balls and hospitality with ostentatious displays of food, servants in livery and smart modes of transport; all flaunting status. When local mansions were offered for sale, facilities for horses and carriages were desirable. In 1778, Pilkington Manor boasted a "TRIPLE coach-house, stabling for NINE HORSES…" which on resale in 1810 had changed to "double coach house, and stables for ten horses".[16] In 1779, there was an unfurnished house to let "with every convenience for the immediate reception of a genteel family. There is a double coach-house, stabling for eight horses…"[17] The sale of Ashlyns Hall in 1764 included "a Coach-House for three Carriages, Stabling for seventeen Horses"; by 1803, the emphasis had changed: "excellent mews, riding house… and paddock".[18] Private transport was preferable to reaching London on a stage-coach and certainly no gentleman would want to be seen in a post-chaise; "riding post" was for the lower classes.

London newspapers recorded the arrivals and departures of provincial gentry for the season and high expectations were set for social events back in the country. Lipscomb wrote of Berkhamsted in 1799: "The town has in it many genteel houses, and the neighbourhood being pleasant, it is much resorted to by persons of fortune and fashion, so that a lively air of gaiety prevails here."[19] It was with the Earl of Bridgewater's permanent residence in the locality from about 1814, when refurbishments to "Ashridge castle" were nearing completion that social occasions in Berkhamsted became more frequent; newspapers reported on gaieties, parties and entertainments at Ashridge.

Service providers
Small market towns, especially if they embraced the needs of their genteel inhabitants, provided the advantages of urban living alongside desirable rural

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[15] British Library, 'Royal hunt', *Morning Post*, issue 15916 (20 Mar 1822)

[16] British Library, 'Pilkington sale', *Morning Post*, issue 1882 (29 Oct 1778) and *Morning Chronicle*, issue 12775 (20 Apr 1810)

[17] British Library, 'House to let', *General Evening Post*, issue 7138 (25 Sep 1779)

[18] British Library, 'Ashlyns sale', *St James Chronicle*, issue 563 (11 Oct 1764) and *Morning Chronicle*, issue 10614 (28 May 1803)

[19] G. Lipscomb, *Journey into South Wales, through the counties of Oxford, Warwick, Worcester, Hereford, Salop, Stafford, Buckingham, and Hertford, in the year 1799* (London, 1802), p.439

vistas. Stobart used the information in the *Universal British Directory* to categorize the attributes that made towns attractive to the upper classes, based on the number of luxury services provided, the availability of manservants and facilities such as assemblies and horse racing; the places that ranked high on this scale were designated as "residential leisure towns" such as Bath and Shrewsbury.[20] Towns are more easily described in these terms than Sweet's evolving degrees of politeness which were derived from contemporary travellers' journals; as a general rule the further removed from London the more rustic the society, though positive influences included good communications with London, volume of through traffic and resident gentry.[21] Although even the county town of Hertford failed to pass the threshold for a residential leisure town, the demand for luxury services provided opportunities for a few local people and there were two surgeons, a clock-maker and a book-seller in Berkhamsted.

Evidence of 302 servants can be found in militia lists between 1758 and 1786.[22] Of particular interest are the 87 servants who named their masters and mistresses, including four coachmen (including one for Thomas Dorrien), along with a farrier and under-groom for the Duke of Bridgewater. Forty were employed by 14 gentlemen and three ladies and many worked for those who were climbing the social scale: farmers and husbandmen and those in the food and drinks trade, making the most of the growth of a consumer society. Two of the gentlemen were noted in the militia lists as suffering from gout, presumably excusing them from active service but also an indicator that they indulged in rich food and alcohol. Some servants were able to improve their prospects, later becoming tradesmen or craftsmen in their own right and William Wilkinson, the deaf clerk and servant to attorney John Duncombe became a scrivener then an attorney during the eight years that he appeared in the militia lists.

The innkeeper of the Kings Arms was particularly successful in enhancing his social status and reputation through service to the gentry. Innovations in road transport such as coach springs and fly waggons enabled passengers and goods to be conveyed to their destinations more comfortably and speedily. Over time, frequent stops and overnight stays in the Home Counties became less necessary

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[20] Barfoot, P. & Wilkes J. (eds.), *The Universal British Directory of Trade, Commerce and Manufacture* (London, 1791) and
J. Stobart & L. Schwarz, 'Leisure, luxury and urban specialization in the eighteenth century', *Urban History*, vol.35, no.2 (2008), p.228
[21] R. Sweet, 'Topographies of politeness', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol.22 (2002), pp.359-361
[22] J. Hill, (transcriber), *Hertfordshire Militia Lists: Great Berkhamsted & Frithsden 1758-1786* (Apr 1996)

and coaching inns needed to adapt to the changing situation. John Page was able to ensure the continued success of the Kings Arms by emulating the rituals of the London season to such an extent that Lipscomb wrote in 1799: "Splendid assemblies have been much encouraged at this place, which, if I mistake not, have sometimes been honoured with the presence of royal visitors."[23] Page provided a room "most tastefully fitted up with artificial flowers and laurel" with musical entertainment and the chance for the gentry to socialize with family and friends.[24] Page's success was assured with the assistance of his daughter Polly, who presided over these occasions and in 1815 she was complemented that "the arrangement of the Ball and supper-rooms, which was highly *nouvelle* and elegant, does great credit to the taste of Miss Page".[25] Polly's refinement was one of her attractions in her friendship with Louis XVIII during the years of his exile as he travelled between London and Aylesbury.[26] Assemblies normally drew about 150 elite guests; in 1822 "it was gratifying to observe so numerous an assemblage of the County Nobility and Gentry, at a time when complaints are so loud and so general of the preference given to a Continental residence by English landlords and families."[27] In 1824, guests were inspired to quote from Cowper's poems by the view of his birth place at the old Parsonage from the window of the principal supper room.[28] As a break from the dancing, guests sat down to a sumptuous supper at one o'clock before dancing again until four in the morning when they sent for their carriages for their homeward journey.

Philanthropy and the poor

Gentry families were little troubled by the sight of the poor in the valley from their grand estates on the hillsides. Those at the bottom of the social scale still showed deference to authority and stability was maintained, though the class structure was changing. The Poor Law provided a workhouse, disease was hidden in the pest-house and charity was dispensed by philanthropists.
In 1808, Cobbett described the pauper system as a "comforting system", implying interference on one side and dependence on the other, thus "making a poor mouth". He viewed the latest vogue of ladies visiting poor families as a display of ostentation and he was in favour of paying sufficient wages to labourers so that they could maintain their families independently rather than "sink quietly and contentedly into that state [of being chargeable to the parish]

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[23] Lipscomb, *Journey*, p.439
[24] British Library, 'Ball', *Morning Post*, issue 17166 (26 Dec 1825)
[25] British Library, 'Ball', *Morning Post*, issue 13964 (23 Oct 1815)
[26] P. Birtchnell, *A Short History of Berkhamsted* (Berkhamsted, 1972), pp.113-5
[27] British Library, 'Ball', *Morning Post*, issue 16113 (6 Nov 1822)
[28] British Library, 'Cowper', *Morning Post*, issue 16789 (11 Oct 1824)

from which their grandfathers, and even their fathers, shrunk with horror."[29] Women were able to supplement the household income from straw plaiting and they benefited from an embargo on imported straw during the Napoleonic war. In 1820, a publicized petition (which appears rather pretentious, echoing Cobbett's opinion) included Mrs Augustus Pechell and other Berkhamsted ladies: "The diminished use of Straw Hats… throws numberless women and families into distress, who have hitherto derived subsistence and comfort from their industry… the undersigned have therefore determined immediately to give such orders as they flatter themselves may not be altogether useless."[30] On the other hand, Member of Parliament Thomas Herbert Noyes attended local vestries and left instructions for curbing labourers' perks: "When Workmen… are employed to do parish work I see no reason for giving them Beer over & above their wages; I will allow no such charge", which seems rather harsh considering he was one of the sufferers from gout.[31]

Some poor folk were housed in a "wretched straw-thatched building" in the corner of St Peter's churchyard, and Ragged Row was an aptly-named terrace of cottages that constituted the workhouse for 50 of the poor of Berkhamsted.[32] In 1816, husbandman Daniel Wheeler took on the management of the workhouse, with the prospect of benefiting from the earnings of the inmates after he had provided them with food, clothing and firing.[33] Reverend George Nugent, turnpike trustee and owner of 'Red House' with an impressive frontage on to the High Street, bequeathed £1,000 to rebuild the workhouse in 1830.[34]

The poor suffered most from ignorance of the dangers of unsanitary conditions caused by poor drainage, contaminated water and overcrowding in the town. Street cleaning was not a priority and the vestry had to issue a warning to women who threw slops out of bedroom windows.[35] Outbreaks of cholera could be blamed on the town's unhealthy position "along the south side of a swamp".[36] A pest-house was built on the edge of Berkhamsted Common for isolation of infectious diseases. A welcome and unexpected side-effect of digging the channel for the canal was that the water-table was lowered, thus

[29] British Library, 'Pauper System', *Bury & Norwich Post*, issue 1361 (27 Jul 1808)
[30] British Library, 'Pechell relief', *Morning Post*, issue 15280 (8 Jan 1820)
[31] BLH&MS, *Constables' Accompts 1748-1819* (13 Oct 1767)
[32] Birtchnell, *Short History*, p.61
[33] HALS, *Churchwardens' Accounts* (26 Jun 1816)
[34] Birtchnell, *Short History*, p.62
[35] Ibid, p.65
[36] Ibid, p.82

saving the town from the disease-laden effects of the overflow from the River Bulbourne.

Some gentlemen offered genuine assistance to the poor through bequests, invested either in funds to gain interest or in land that could be rented to provide a few shillings annually. In 1784, John Dorrien left £100 to the rector and churchwardens to distribute to ten of the poor who were not in receipt of alms.[37] Thomas Baldwin was born in Watford, attended Berkhamsted School and later became Comptroller of the King's Works. He died in 1642 and his bequest of £23 accumulated enough each year to enable payments twice a year right through to the end of the churchwardens' accounts book (1824). Land sales and re-investments meant that payments continued at least until 1908.[38] Thomas Coram's Foundling Hospital in Bloomsbury was supported by local benefactors such as Robert Hucks (treasurer) and Samuel Pechell (governor); young orphans were often boarded with foster mothers in the town and the hospital was later moved to Berkhamsted (now Ashlyns School).[39]

Regional traditions

Everitt described the unparalleled population expansion post-1750 which led to the destruction of the old peasant economy, but not local loyalties or regional traditions; it was the gradual improvement in transport that undermined them.[40] It seems logical that once communication channels were opened up, local people would develop a wider circle of acquaintances, business partners and suppliers, with a likely impact on local loyalties. However, local identity was not wholly subsumed in the pursuit of urbane refinement once the outside world was bought to the doorstep. In 1903, Mrs Smith-Dorrien was invited to inspect the parish boundary as part of an annual tradition which had taken place for centuries. Participants were issued with willow sticks at the starting point at Ashridge and overseers and small boys were "bumped" or flogged at various points on the circuit as a mock-painful aide-memoire of the position of the boundary.[41] When St Peter's church bells struck midnight before the first day of September, cutters of gorse and fern (used to fire brick baking ovens) staked out their claims on Berkhamsted Common like gold prospectors and returned in the

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[37] W. Page (ed.) 'Berkhampstead Borough', *The Victoria History of the County of Hertford,* vol 2 (London, 1908), pp.171-179
[38] Ibid
[39] British Library, 'Foundling Hospital', *Reads Weekly Journal*, issue 1393 (11 May 1751); Birtchnell, *Short History*, p.50
[40] A.M. Everitt, *Landscape and Community in England* (London, 1985), p.7
[41] P. Birtchnell, *Beating the Bounds of Great Berkhamsted Rural, July 15 & 17 1903* [collection of photographs now owned by BLH&MS]

morning to collect their late harvest.[42] Although villagers continued to collect furze and wood from Northchurch Common until just before the First World War, the tradition in Berkhamsted was most likely superseded when affordable coal arrived at canal wharves. The ancient statute or "statty" fair was held every Michaelmas, but not just for hiring servants; "stalls and sideshows lined both sides of the street, often bringing traffic to a standstill" and Whitsuntide Fairs were held in Berkhamsted until Victorian times.[43] Regional traditions in Hertfordshire such as beating the boundaries, autumn harvests and fairs largely survived the gradual improvement in transport in the Georgian period.

Conclusion
In conclusion, the development of the medieval market town of Berkhamsted into a thoroughfare town and then a canal town presents a microcosm of what was happening in the rest of the country, emerging into a new age of industrialisation and facilitated by a growing network of roads and canals.

The glamorous coaching age left physical reminders in the high street, particularly the Kings Arms, the administrative and social centre of the town for many years, though King Louis XVIII might struggle to recognize today's newly-refurbished hotel as the venue for his assignations with the innkeeper's daughter. Where turnpikes expedited the carriage of passengers, valuables and perishables, working boats transported bulky items to and from London and provided work at the inland port of Berkhamsted.

Better roads attracted gentry and professionals to settle in rural domains and prompted social changes in the local community. Service providers were able to fulfil genteel requirements, including glittering social occasions to emulate the London season. A few philanthropists provided some comfort for the poor, who were also the main beneficiaries of an unexpected side-effect of digging the canal, which by lowering the water-table rescued the town from frequent and disease-laden floods. Berkhamsted was able to maintain its more home-spun social events despite the tendency for improved communications to erode regional traditions.

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[42] D. Jones-Baker, *The Folklore of Hertfordshire* (London, 1977), p.161
[43] Birtchnell, *Short History*, p.77