

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BIRCHINGTON

1. The Position of the Ville of Birchington - A small town on the North-east coast of Kent. Facing North, the Thames estuary and the North Sea.

(Part of the Borough of Thanet, forming the Birchington ward, since 1935)

On the West end of the Isle of Thanet, some 72 miles from London

Like the other settlements of the Isle of Thanet, St John's, St Peter's, and St Lawrence, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile back from the sea coast.

Latitude, Birchington Square, 51° 22' North - **Longitude** - 1° 19' East

About the same latitude as Winnipeg in Canada

2. Sketch maps showing

- a) Position of Birchington in the World
- b) Position of Birchington in Kent
- c) Position of Birchington in East Kent showing routes
- d) Diagram showing the latitude of Birchington

3. Birchington in Pre-historic times

In pre-historic, Roman and Saxon times, even up to Tudor times, Thanet was an island, the Wantsum Channel dividing Thanet from the mainland of Kent. See map.

At its northern mouth between Reculver and Birchington it was 4 miles wide. At Sarre the channel changed to a southerly direction broadening out to a wide estuary at what is now Pegwell Bay. Sarre was an important haven situated under the chalk cliffs facing west and south. Ships navigated through this channel instead of sailing round North Foreland. At Sarre was a ferry to cross from the Isle of Thanet to the mainland to go to Canterbury.

The coast line was very different then. The chalk cliffs extended much further out than now as shown on the sketch map. There was an inlet of the sea extending up to where is now Brooksend and also an inlet at Gore-end now known as Minnis Bay. This Gore-end inlet extended right up as far as near St Thomas Church and the end of it was still in existence at the beginning of the 20th century, when it was covered at high tide.

In Pre-historic times there was a settlement at Gore-end on the edge of this inlet. This Bronze Age settlement was discovered in 1938 by a school boy. Many of the finds are now in the British Museum and some are at Quex Museum. This Bronze Age village was at the edge of the chalk near the present low water mark and dates nearly 1000 years BC. The Bronze Age implements and weapons found were some of the best found in the south of England. Also animal bones were found in the depressions which formed the base of the wattle huts and walls – bones of deer and ox. This village existed through the Bronze Age period right through to the Roman times, as Roman pots, jars etc have been excavated there.

4. Roman times

Roman finds have been excavated at Birchington specially at Minnis, showing some Romans once lived here. A Roman vase has been excavated near where the library is now and human bones thought to be Roman.

5. Saxon times

In Saxon times there was undoubtedly a small village round what is now known as the Square and also another small village at Gore-end, which was a small port.

These two villages were connected by a trackway now known as the Minnis Road.

The name "Birchington" is Saxon. It is the only parish in Thanet that could be supposed to derive its name from a Saxon family which settled here. But Wallenburg, who published in 1934 his book, *The Place names of Kent*, suggests the name is Old English, - for birch plus hyll or hill plus tun. Birchington is on a slightly rising ground. So the name means a village in the birch trees. In old documents it is spelt in many different ways. That its name should have been taken from a tree seems creditable as in early times Thanet was much more covered with trees than now. "tun" or ton is an old English word and meant a village which grew up around a farm or manor.

The main problem with the Birch tree is that it thrives on sandy soil and in Thanet we only have clay on top of chalk, so the likelihood of a grove of birch tree is very small. The name Gore-end is Old English from the word gard, meaning a triangular piece of land.

Many Saxon relics have been discovered in the Birchington area. At Sarre many Saxon graves have been excavated showing that there was quite a Saxon settlement there. This Saxon settlement dates as late as 653 AD. Epple is a Saxon name. In old documents it is called "Epals".

It was in Saxon times that Birchington became a part of the Manor of Monkton. Queen Eadgiva (or Ediva) the widow of Edward the Elder in 961 AD gave the manor of Monkton which included Birchington and Acol to the monks of Christ Church, Canterbury. So the Parish of Birchington with Acol remained a part of the Parish of Monkton until 1872. The Vicar of Monkton was also the Minister of Birchington. For this reason although Birchington has such an old Church it has only had ten Vicars (in 2014). It did not become a separate parish from Monkton until 1872.

In Canterbury Cathedral there is an old panel painted in oils in the St Martin's Chapel showing a portrait of Queen Eadgiva and at the top is a wood, a row of houses and a church with a spire and a number of galleons on the sea below the cliffs. This is stated to be Birchington by John Burnby in the first Guide to Canterbury Cathedral printed in 1771.

6. In Norman times

In Norman times Birchington was a part of the Manor of Monkton. Monkton is described in the Domesday Book. There it says there were two churches, one was Monkton, and the other was probably Woodchurch, now Acol. This Woodchurch church is no longer in existence, but the site is still known, at Woodchurch farm. The Manor belonged to the monks of Christ Church, now Canterbury Cathedral. When the monasteries were dissolved the manor was surrendered to the crown and the king bestowed it to the new foundation at Canterbury, the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury.

There were still the two settlements at Birchington the small village round the Church and Square and the small port of Gore-end, connected by a trackway. The population was then about (of Birchington) 200.

7. In the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages Birchington was still a small agricultural village just situated round the Square where the roads met with the Church adjacent. It was during the Middle Ages that Birchington and Gore-end became Non-Corporate Limbs of the Cinque Port

of Dover (roughly in c. 1250). As a result Birchington with Gore-end, St John's, Meregate and Woodchurch came under the jurisdiction of the Mayor and Council of Dover. The Mayor and Council of Dover appointed a Deputy who, with the Churchwardens, were the most important people in the community. It was their duty to collect the "sess/cess" or rate and send it to Dover and to see that all documents were signed by the Mayor of Dover. Some of the receipts for the Composition Money, or rate as it was called, sent to Dover are still in existence and date from 1490.

During the Middle Ages, the Tudor Period and Stuart times and even up to the middle of the 19th century the village was situated only round the Square. Houses extended down what is now Station Road as far as Paddock Road, eastwards along the Canterbury Road to about Park Road, and westwards to Court Mount, with a few houses along Park Lane. It was a small village where most of the people worked on farms.

The **Square** was a meeting place of roads –

1. Trackway to Gore-end
2. Roadway to Minister by Quex
3. Roadway to Margate by Birchington Hall later Spurgeons and now Birch Hill. The Hall was pulled down in 1967
4. Roadway to Sarre and Canterbury

Until Tudor times and even a little later, people had to cross the ferry at Sarre to get to Canterbury.

8. The Church

The oldest building in Birchington is the Church, adjacent to the Square. About 1100. See Guide Book on the Church.

9. The Square

The Square has been the centre of all the village activities out of doors for centuries. In very early times it was grass or earth. It was not covered with gravel or even tarmac until about 1910. In the Square were the Maypole, the cage, the whipping post and the Stocks. The Maypole is marked on an old map of Birchington dating 1688. Round the Square were the Inns, the earliest being the Powell Arms and the Pewter Pot. It is thought that the original building we later knew as The Queen's Head was originally known as the 'Sign of the Acorn' which is shown on a map of 1678.

The Powell Arms was originally known as the New Inn. Its name was changed in 1823 in honour of John Powell Powell who lived at Quex when he was made High Sheriff of Kent in 1823. At this date, the name New Inn was taken over by what we later knew as The Pewter Pot.

10. Tudor and Stuart Times

A number of old documents in the possession of the Church give much information on old Birchington. The Churchwardens Account Books date from 1531 and from these can be gathered what the Churchwardens spent on running the parish. The Parish Registers date from 1538 and give the names of all who were baptised, married or buried in the village. From these it is possible to trace families right back for many years. Birchington helped to fit out ships to fight against the Spanish Armada in 1588. The money collected was sent to Dover. During the Civil War between Charles I and Parliament Birchington followed mainly the Crispes who lived at Quex. They were Royalists. Some of the documents are listed in the Guide to the Church.

In 1673 when there was the Hearth Tax 230 hearths paid tax from 79 houses. Ramsgate had 234 hearths from 92 houses. Birchington helped to rebuilt St Paul's Church in London after the Great Fire of London in 1666. A collection was made. Birchington also helped the sufferers from the Plague in London in the same way. During these times all water came from wells and there was no mains drainage as now.

11. Population

Birchington remained a small village with a population of about 300 to 400 until the beginning of the 19th century, but it did not really begin to grow until the coming of the railway in 1862.

In 1801 the population was	537 from 100 houses.
1811	614
1821	700
1861	813
1871 after the railway	1,152 (Most were poor - working on farms)
1881	1,393
1901	2,128
1921	3,503
1961	6,362
1971	? about 10,000

12. The Roadways

Until very recent times the roads were really only trackways and very rough. The chief roads were the road from Margate through the Square to Brooksend and Sarre, the roadway to Gore-end, Coleman Stairs Road or Albion Road, and also Epple Road are quite old. The trackway from Essex gardens to Minnis Bay is old and was used by the Riding Officers when on patrol against smugglers.

The roads were not well defined and not well surfaced. The upkeep of the road was the job of the parish, the Surveyors of the Highways who were appointed at the annual vestry meeting when the Churchwardens were appointed. Holes in the roads were filled in with cartloads of stones gathered from the fields.

The first Surveyors of the Highways for Birchington were appointed in 1609. Their accounts of money spent in repairing the highways are still in existence and give much information on the roads of Birchington. The local farmers had to supply horses and carts to carry stone for the roads or pay a highway rate.

Early in the 1800s unemployed men were used to gather stones and fill in the holes in the roads, as well as women and families. The road to Minster past Quex was one of the old roads. This road lead from Minster Abbey to Gore-end through the Square. It was originally known as Parish Lane. Albion Road was also known as Pig Lane. The old Tithe Map of 1840 shows these old roads.

13. The Mills

Birchington had three windmills, one known as the Seed Mill was situated opposite the Bungalow Hotel (now Bierce Court) at the end of Beach Avenue. The second was a windmill for grinding corn at the end of Mill Lane, Canterbury Road. This mill was owned by a James Hudson in 1840. This wind mill was in 1772 moved back some 60 yards. It was moved in one day by the assistance of two horses. Neither the sweeps nor the mill stones were taken down for this operation. An account of this operation

appeared in the Kentish Gazette at the time. The third mill stood on the east side Quex Park and was the oldest of the three. It was owned by the Griggs family and there is great story of a hidden inheritance buried under the Miller's kitchen floor.

14. Street Lighting

The Vestry Meeting decided to adopt the Lighting Act in 1876 when it was decided to have 21 lamps for the village, all lit by gas.

15. The Railway

The railway to Birchington was opened in 1863. At first it was only a secondary railway. The main railway was from Margate to London via Canterbury and Ashford. In 1870 there were four up trains a day and the first train left Birchington at 7.38 am via Chatham to Ludgate Hill arriving at 10.10. There were seven down trains each week day. The first reached Birchington at 10.5. In 1867 the fare from Margate to Birchington 1st class was 10d, second class 6d, and third class 3d. Margate to London cost 3rd class passengers 6s 2d.

Before the railway bridge there was a crossing, then a wooden bridge.

During the first World War there was a Light Railway from near Plum Pudding Island across the fields to the Canterbury Road and then near Park Corner to Manston. It was a single line and a light engine ran on it. It was used to carry supplies to Manston Aerodrome.

16. The Post Office

The first post office was in Park Lane and was kept in 1880 by a John Pemble. In 1884 it was moved to the Square to where the Lloyds Bank is now and then to corner of Albion Road and the Square. It was moved down to rear Ferris's Chemist Shop in 1995 and then to the rear of the small Co-op next to HSBC Bank in 2014

4. Water-works

Water supply was first brought to Birchington in about 1875. Before then all water came from wells.

5. Drainage

Main drainage was first put in about 1898. Before then cess pools were used, or earth closets.

6. Houses

Birchington Hall (later 'Spurgeons' Children's Home) was pulled down in 1980 ago. Grove House dates from the 1600s. The Smugglers, originally Evergreen House was a farm house of the Neames. At the end of the house is W.N. in iron, the initials of William Neame.

7. Climate

Birchington has very low rainfall, many hours of sunshine, warm summers and bracing air. It has one of the lowest rainfalls in the British Isles, it being on the eastern side of the British Isles. The yearly average rainfall is not much more than 20 inches and is fairly evenly distributed throughout the year. November is the wettest month.

Birchington is kept dry by the light clay and chalky soil which quickly absorbs any moisture (see Met records in the Margate Public Library).

8. Schools

Birchington had one of the earliest schools in East Kent. It was a Charity School founded in 1709 by the bequest of Anna Gertruy Crispe. She left in her will a farm of 47 acres, the income from which was to be used for the education of poor boys and girls of Birchington and Acol who were of good character. We first hear of the school in 1840 when it was at the corner of Park Road and Canterbury Road and remained in existence until a little after the National Schools were built in Park Lane in 1845. The Crispe Charity, as it is known, then gave money to help towards the upkeep of the Church Schools in Park Lane. In 1876 it contributed towards the little school run in St Mildred's church at Acol for ten years. When this closed in c. 1886, The Charity again continued to contribute towards the National Schools until they came under the Local Education Authority. The Charity money is now used to help Birchington and Acol boys and girls when starting out in life after leaving school and also to help Birchington and Acol youth organisations.

There have been a number of private schools. The best known are Queen Bertha's School for Girls situated where Queen Bertha Estate is now, Woodford House School, situated in Station Road, now where Woodford Court flats stand and Grenham House Preparatory School – closed in 1984 and now the site of Hunting Gate and Homebirch House. Next to the National Schools in Park Lane was the old Birchington Workhouse., with a flint barn dating from 1794.

9. Quex

The present mansion was built between 1809 to 1813 by John Powell Powell who allowed the Powell Arms to be given his name in honour of his appointment as Lord Lieut of Kent.

10. Geology

A study of the Geological Map, Sheet no. 274, shows that Thanet is a fold of chalk, an anticline with its steeper slope to the south. Much of Thanet is cretaceous chalk with areas of Brickearth and a little Thanet Sands. These are of the Eocene period. Separating Thanet from the mainland is a wide belt of Alluvium which forms the old Wantsum Channel. The chalk cliffs have suffered much erosion and until the sea walls were built, now forming the promenade, the cliffs receded at a rate of about a foot a year.

The gaps in the cliffs are artificially cut, by fishermen and farmers – by fishermen for shelter for their boats and gear and by farmers to obtain seaweed for manure on their farms. The cliffs once stood out many hundreds of feet out into the sea, but sea erosion has worn them back and now the sea walls protect them.

Much of Birchington is covered with brickearth. For this reason there were several brick making works in Birchington. These were situated at Epple Bay, where Ocean Close now is, at the back of Park Lane School, now where the playing field is, and at Minnis Bay, by Ingoldsby Road and the railway line.

Before the new promenades were built one of the features of Birchington, especially between Grenham and Minnis were the chalk sea stacks. These were a result of the sea erosion of the chalk cliffs.

At the far end of Minnis Bay, near Plum Pudding Island alluvium is found. The alluvium area stretches up to Brooks End and marks the original channel which existed in very early times.