

ARTHUR ROBINSON RAYDEN

Arthur Robinson Rayden was born in 1845 in London into a wealthy family. He was privately educated and by 1871 was a member of the London Stock Exchange. Although he was working in London, he was interested in the developing seaside towns on the south-east coast. He decided that Minnis Bay, at Birchington, was ripe for development and where he wanted to be.

The first mention I have found for him, in local newspapers, is an article in April 1878. It starts by stating that he had formerly owned the Westgate-on-Sea and Birchington Gas Works. The gas was generated at Westgate and piped to Birchington's small gasometer in Gas Alley, a site off Canterbury Road, opposite the Church. We do not know when Arthur became involved in this project, but it seems he no longer had an interest when the Birchington site fell into disrepair, was then declared dangerous and the site sold off at auction in 1887.

The article went on to state – "we understand that Mr. Arthur R. Rayden has lately completed the purchase from Mr. Friend J.P. of Northdown, of the freehold land called Lower Gore End Farm, Minnis Bay (comprising in all nearly ninety acres) we believe for the purpose of opening up a new watering-place."

An advertisement was placed in national newspapers in June 1881 inviting applications for shares in Birchington Bay Freehold Land and Estate Company Ltd. It continued "The Company has been formed to acquire and develop an estate at Birchington-on-Sea as a seaside resort. A large sum of money has already been expended on this estate, in building a sea wall and promenade, constructing roads, planting trees etc. and is now ripe for development."

The Rayden family were still living in London at this time, but shortly after 1881 Arthur moved his wife and three children to a house in Minnis Road. He became one of the Poor Law Guardians for the Isle of Thanet and President of the Birchington branch of the Conservative and Constitutional Association, which together with the Birchington Habitation of the Primrose League, he was mainly instrumental in forming. He was a JP and in 1889 he became the first Thanet Alderman on the upper bench at Maidstone.

In 1885 Arthur combined business with local charity fundraising, by erecting a wooden Exhibition Building in The Dip. He chartered special trains from London, and provided transport from the station to bring people down to buy his building plots and view some of the amazing sights at the exhibition. The monies raised from the entrance fees was used to reduce the mortgage on The Institute, Birchington's first Village centre.

Things weren't going as well in Arthur's business world as in his private life. In June 1890 another article in the newspapers regarding the new estate stated "I hope that although slow, it's progress may be sure, for it is well planned. Two terraces of an ornamental character give an inkling of the future of the site." These were what today we call the First Houses and St. Valerie. Each block contained four separate properties, built for the express purpose of allowing the owners, or occupiers, to let out rooms to visitors who came to "take the waters" at Minnis Bay. They had elegant balconies set to catch the afternoon sunshine and to watch the sunsets over Reculver and Minnis Bay.

On the 29th February 1897 a violent storm hit Birchington. The sea wall and promenade at Minnis Bay was badly damaged. The Dip was flooded, with only the roof of the Exhibition Building being visible. The Isle of Thanet Gazette wrote that during the afternoon of the storm, the waves poured over the damaged sea wall into the valley (the Dip) without let or hindrance, changing a pretty spot into a

temporary swamp. There were two large conservatories near the building and these were also flooded in eight to ten feet of water. Arthur Rayden had many valuable belongings stored in the buildings, as well as a number of family relics and it was feared that these were now valueless. The cost of all this destruction would fall entirely on Arthur. The newspaper stated that "the gentleman has spent a fortune, to say nothing of the most persevering efforts over a number of years in developing this estate and protecting the sea front. He has accomplished this in the face of many difficulties and discouragements and much sympathy is felt for him in the present disaster."

The article was accompanied by the paper's artists' impression of the scene. The artist was Felicia Wain, who was the sister of Lois Wain, the cat artist, who also worked for the Isle of Thanet Gazette.

By July 1900 it had all gone horribly wrong. In the London Bankruptcy Court Arthur Robinson Rayden and his partner William Addinall, described as stockbrokers, were declared defaulters on the Stock Exchange. Rayden was the senior partner. On 23rd May, Arthur had executed power of attorney in favour of his son and had not been heard of again since the following day. The liabilities amounted to £10,000 - £12,000, against assets of £430. The failures of the partnership were mainly attributed to losses in connection with the Birchington Bay Freehold Land Estate Company, in which Arthur was the principal shareholder. The debt would be the equivalent of approx. £1,500,000 today.

As the bankruptcy report stated Arthur Rayden had disappeared. I found the death of his wife Emma in March 1898 and she was buried at All Saints, Birchington. But where was Arthur? I then came across an application he made in 1895 for a passport, so widened my search. Arthur Robinson Rayden died on the 21st January 1906, in Chicago, in his 61st year. What a sad end to a venture that had started so well.

Janet Robinson