

BIRCHINGTON – HISTORY & PROGRESS

Far from being “just a few houses on the way to Margate”, as ignorantly described by a member of Thanet Council in 1969, Birchington possesses a history which runs contemporaneously with that of England.

The usual interpretation of the name ‘Birchington’ is that it was originally an enclosure or manor on a hill among Birch Trees. There is also a suggestion that its name comes from a Saxon War-lord who staked a claim to an area of land along the cliffs and the little stream filled valley at its western outfall into the bay. The man’s name was probably something like Berchel - this was a very early spelling of the name in the Church archives.

Map of Thanet 1414

Thanet itself covers an area of some 140 square miles, on the north-eastern corner of Kent. This name may be connected to the Egyptian word “Khekh”, meaning to chase or follow or hunt – a pursuit followed by many owners of Quex Park, at one time a Royal staging-post for some British monarchs on their way to their other dominions in Europe, while they awaited a favourable wind for their crossing.

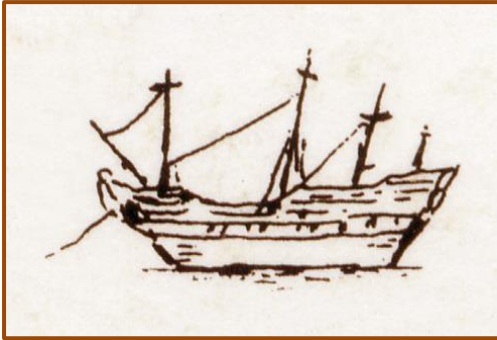
Birchington is connected with the ancient Britons through Quex, which at one time issued coinage, known now as ‘tin money’. This has been discovered in considerable quantities in the area. Roman associations with the village are strengthened by the discovery of funeral urns, found in Quex Park and also at Gore End (Minnis Bay now).

Even earlier evidence has been uncovered in Minnis Bay dating back to pre-historic times, when the land jutted out much further, before there was heavy erosion of the chalk cliffs.

Pic of Minnis Bay chalk etc.

The Saxons also left their mark, where some of their noble families settled, leaving Saxon coins behind (Sceattas), which have been dug up on their boundaries towards Sarre. So, through history the name of Birchington (in one of its 50+ variations of spelling) has left its mark in the history of this corner of Kent. The church in the Square has evidence of some very early worked stones on the outside of its south wall, dating from c. 1100.

The community was involved in the Spanish Armada in that it had to help equip one of the ships in the English fleet. The people of the parish gave so generously they paid another third more that was required of them.

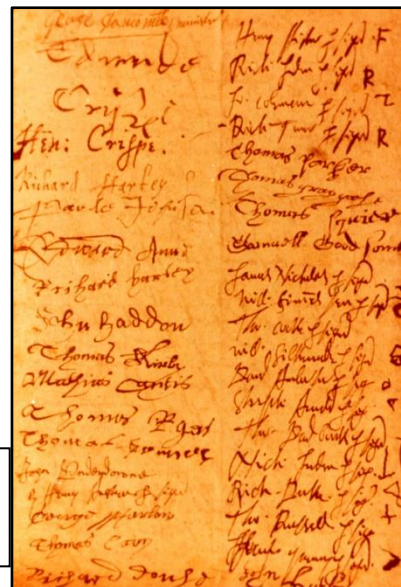


4 parishes were joined together, each contributing a quarter of the required amount (known as 'Composition Money') to pay for the rigging, sails, victuals, water etc. to service the sailors and fighting men on board a ship.

Birchington was also involved, along with every other community in England in Cromwell's Civil War, when he sent a document to each parish called "The Vow & Covenant" which every man had to sign, or go to prison. The document was read out in All Saints Church on 25th March 1643, when 171 men either signed it or made their mark. They were also ordered to sign a second more detailed version a few months later, when 169 men signed or made their marks. These two documents stated that all those who signed were in backing Parliament and were against Charles I – in other word this was admitting treason.

When Charles II came to the throne in 1660, he ordered all those incriminating documents were to be burnt. Most parishes obeyed this, but Birchington (along with a handful of other parishes) did not burn theirs. (This was probably because they had been hidden because of their incriminating implications.) For whatever reason ours couldn't be found at that time and so survive to this day!

Part of the Vow & Covenant
from 1643



Birchington's spirit of independence and its awareness of its duties have extended down to the present day. The Parish had to fight quite hard to get permission to form its first Parish council in 1894. This continued to function very successfully until 1935, when Margate Borough Council annexed both Birchington and Westgate into their

Borough, without the agreement of either of these smaller communities. It took until 1986 before we were able to have our own Parish Council once more.

The population of Birchington in 1801 at the first census was 537, with 100 homes. In 1851 the population had risen to 885 with 181 homes. With the arrival of the railway in 1863, the village grew in leaps and bounds and in 1980 (when this article was first written) it had risen to 7,500.

Pic of fighters

The history of Birchington covers many facets in Britain's march of progress – some glorious, others less so! Epple Bay was the scene of many prize fights in the bare-fist days and it was also a handy spot for the smugglers to land their 'un-customed' brandy and fine lace. Waiting partners stood on the cliff top, from where they could keep a keen eye open across the cliff tops for the approach of any Customs men. There were some vicious encounters between the smugglers and the upholders of the Law.

There is a record of a fairly rare transaction of 'buying a husband'. Wife-buying was more common, but Edward Prichard vowed he would never wed Elizabeth Yowell unless he was paid for it. And he was – because the sum of £4 changed hands! Unfortunately there is no record of whether they lived 'happily ever after', though!

Pic of Rossetti

Bungalow

No history of Birchington would be complete without noting Gabriel, Charles Dante Rossetti came here and stayed in the newly built 'bungalow' built and owned by his friend and architect, John Seddon. Rossetti had had a serious stroke in the November of 1881 and his friend and neighbour in London, Hall Caine, suggested he come down to Birchington to recuperate. He arrived on February 5th 1882, in the midst of one of the freezing winters that were common in those days. In his letter home to his London friends he was fairly curt about his views on Birchington, and he only lasted until April 9th, when he died. His family were all with him, and under their guidance, it was decided that he should be buried here instead of being taken up to Highgate cemetery, where his wife was buried.

Pic of grave

His sister, the poet Christina Rossetti wrote a telling little poem in his honour, which was published the following month, entitled "Birchington Churchyard".

Pic of Church in 1882