

The history of Birchington in slides

Alfred T Walker – April 1983

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Birchington Square c. 1878

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Ville of Birchington with its Saxon name, triangular Square and Norman Church, has many unusual features. The Church Tower is not in the traditional place, but the old village settlement is still clustered tightly round the Square and the Church. Its long and interesting history is extremely well documented, copies of most of which are still held in our local archives. The original documents were called into the Cathedral Archives in 1996.

Much of the history of England can be illustrated from the history of this quiet place. For many centuries it was a small agricultural village of no more than a couple of hundred people, with a grass covered open space where five roads met. However, Birchington's history dates back to the Pre-historic times.

James Beck aged c. 14

PRE-HISTORY

In 1938 an important Pre-historic settlement was discovered at Minnis Bay initially by James Beck, a 14-year-old scholar of King's School, Canterbury. He discovered a Bronze Age site on the foreshore at Minnis between the high and low water marks. It stood about 200 yards from the promenade, near to what would have been the old coast line. This had been the old port of Gore-end in earliest times. James Unfortunately died the following year, but the excavations were continued by Mr. F. H. Worsfold, F.S.A., an eminent archaeologist. Much of what was found was donated to the British Museum. Mr. Worsfold, in his report to the Pre-historic Society's Journal, describes the Palaeolithic and Neolithic flints found in the area. This Pre-historic site and the finds are described in the Archaeology Cantiana Volume 51 (copies in Canterbury Cathedral Archives). Since then Miss Antoinette (Toni) Powell Cotton carried out more extensive investigations. Many of the items found were Bronze Age celts and palstaves, swords, daggers, rings, armulets, bracelets etc.

This site was probably a Bronze Age settlement built round an open space on the bank of a stream that once flowed out at Minnis Bay.



The finds suggest that the site was occupied from Pre-historic times through the Belgic Period into the Roman times, and then to early Saxon occupation and even into the early Middle Ages. Many of these finds are now in the Powell Cotton Museum as well as the British Museum. During the latest excavations during the building of the Thanet Earth complex in 2009, half of a beautiful Saxon jug was discovered.

Saxon Jug



13 b - 33 Belgic

Other finds of ancient relics have been discovered in Birchington. In 1853 a discovery of "tin money" was made at Quex, and a hoard of Bronze palstaves was found in 1904 in 'Southend' Brickfield, now part of the Park Lane Primary School playing field, and a Bronze Age palstave was found at Epple Bay brickfield, which was owned by Quex.

13 b - 32 Bronze Age

ROMAN FINDS

Some Roman remains have been found at Birchington. In 1896 during the building of Beaconsfield House, in what is now known as Alpha Road, three skeletons and a small Roman vase were found. Several Roman items have been found at Minnis Bay including a Roman millstone, pottery and an inhumation burial pot and some Roman items were found at the brickfield at Epple.

13 b - 28 + 29 Roman Epple & Roman Minnis

'BIRCHINGTON' - Its name

Not a great deal is known of Birchington during the Saxon period except that its name is of Saxon origin, and that it was a Saxon Queen who gave the manor of Monkton, which included Birchington and the Ville of Wood, now known as Acol, to the monks of Christ Church, Canterbury. The authority on the Place Names of Kent, J. K. Wallenberg of Uppsala University, Sweden, published his book, "The Place Names of Kent" in 1934. Wallenberg suggested that the name is Old English, "Bierce" being Old English for Birch (tree) "hyle" is a slight hill or rising ground and "tun" is Old English and meant a village or settlement which grew up round a farmstead or manor. So the name means the village on the rising ground in the birch trees. Birchington's old village is on slightly rising ground and was still called Church Hill until 1948. The Oxford Dictionary of English Place Names by E. Kwall gives a similar explanation.

The only problem with all this explanation is that Birch trees thrive best in well-drained but moist slightly acid soil, not heavy clay set on a thick bed of chalk. The majority of trees that grow like weeds in Birchington are the sycamores. All our Birch trees were specially planted in the Square and down Station Road at the Millennium.

The earliest known document with the name of our village is the Assize Rolls for Kent of 1240 where the name appears as "de Birchilton". In other Assize Rolls and Feet of Fines of 1254, it appears similar, although slightly different in spelling, and over the centuries the spelling of the name has changed to its present version. There are over 40 different ways of spelling the name in our records.



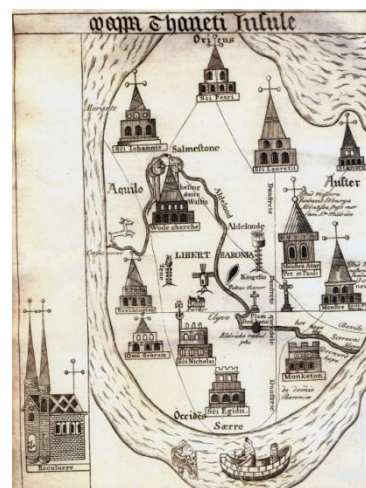
Queen Ediva

It was during the Saxon period that Birchington, a part of the Manor of Monkton, became the property of Christ Church, Canterbury. In the year 961 A.D. Queen Ediva, a Saxon Queen, the widow of King Edward the Elder, gave the manor to the monks of Christ Church in Canterbury, the gift being a thank-offering from a pious queen for the recovery of her lands, from which she had been unjustly deprived. From that time the parish and manor received the name of Monkyston – the Monks Land – and Birchington, being part of that manor, became part of the ecclesiastical parish of Monkton and the Vicar of Monkton was also Vicar of Birchington and Woodchurch. This continued until 1871, when Birchington became a separate ecclesiastical parish. Because of this situation, even though Birchington has such an ancient church, it has only had **ten** vicars [by 2017].

In Canterbury Cathedral, against the north wall of St. Martin's Chapel in the north transept, is a 15th century painting in oils on wooden panels of the Saxon Queen Ediva who died about 970 A.D. At the top of this picture, behind Queen Ediva's head, is a village with its Church with a spire. When John Burnby described this picture in 1772 in the first Guide to Canterbury Cathedral, he stated - "In the back-ground is a view of Birchington in the Isle of Thanet". [p. 65]

At the foot of the picture is a scroll with an inscription stating that "Edyva the good queen To Christ Church of Canterbury did give indeed Monketon the Monks there to feed." The Manor of Monkton included nearly all the western half of the Island of Thanet and was divided from the lands belonging to the Abbey of St. Augustine by the 'lynch' on Thomas of Elmham's Map of Thanet (1414) shown as a strip of land about four feet wide, traditionally the route run by St Mildred's hart, which marked the land belonging to St Augustine's Abbey (on the east side of the Isle) from the land of Christ Church Priory.

Thomas of Elmham's map of Thanet
[with East at the top of the map]



NORMAN PERIOD

Birchington, as such, is not mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, except in so far as it was a part of the Manor of Monkton. The entry in Domesday states that it was held by the Archbishop of Canterbury and it had two chapels [St. Nicholas-at-Wode and Birchington].



Unmarked tomb of an early Parker?

It appears to be in the time of Henry III that this ancient Chapel was added to the original two-cell building, but there was a church on the site here in Birchington before that. In c. 1250 the small Chancel was replaced and a squat tower and

chapel added at the less usual SE corner of the church. At the same time, the family at Quex, called Parker at that early date, built a Chantry Chapel into the NE corner attached to the new Chancel. It would almost certainly have been built to accommodate the grave of one their family members.

To give us an idea of the original age of our church, we asked the Diocesan Architect, Tim Tatton-Brown, to help. He looked at two very old worked stones in the outside of the South wall and dated them as 'late Saxon' or 'early Norman'. These stones were part of the original nave wall, but were moved outwards when the nave was enlarged in c. 1355-60. We hold a copy of a contract dated 1343 where they planned to add a large



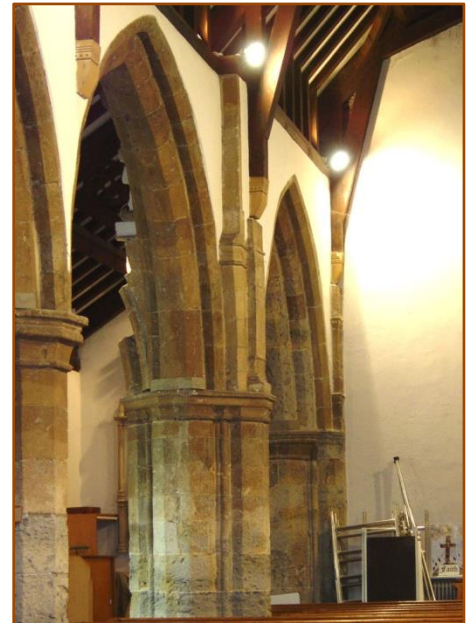
Black Death corpses taken for burial

new South Aisle to the church, which would have doubled the church's capacity. Work was soon begun, as the massive SW pillar and pilaster indicate. It would also appear to have included a new SW tower, judging by the truncated springers we can see on the south side of the large pillar – but in 1348, the Black Death arrived in the village.

The springers on an unfinished arch intended to span the south aisle clearly suggest this in the huge SW pillar.

GORE-END

The little port of Gore-end, now known as Minnis, has vanished, but centuries ago Minnis was a haven for shipping. John Leland, the English Antiquary of Henry VIII's time, in 1542, mentions the "little strait at Gore-end" and mentions that vessels lie off Gore-end, but from his description of Gore-end there appears to be little, if any, resemblance between that part of the coast as we know it today and the place which John Leland surveyed. The port of Gore-end ran from the chalk headland to the east of Minnis, to the lower land where the Rifle Range once existed to the west of Minnis. It ran in a north western direction towards the Gore Channel and was shaped like a wedge.



The eastern coastline of the port can be traced running from the Minnis Road along the line where the chalk and the sand meet out towards the wreck of the "Valkyr". The haven extended inland between Minnis Road on the east and Kings Avenue on the west, as far as the old farmhouse at Lower Gore-end, now called Old Bay Cottage.

15 e - 13 [Minnis coastline](#)

The [1840 Tithe Map](#) of Birchington of shows the area as a morass of reedy pools which were flooded at high Spring Tides. The large scale O.S. map of 1872 shows this area as an inlet. This was the stub end of the old haven which stretched much further seawards, so forming quite a respectable haven for the small ships in those early days, with sheltering high ground on the east side of the chalk cliffs that have since been eroded.

15 a - 6 [1872 map](#)

The name Gore-end is from the Old English “gara” meaning a triangular piece of land. The Gore-end or Minnis headland stretched much further seaward than at present. Some idea of the importance of Gore-end can be gauged from the knowledge that it was assessed in its own right as a Non-Corporate limb of the Cinque Port of Dover since early times. In the Dover Chamberlain’s Accounts for 1365-67 appears the following,

“xi s received from the men of Goresende in full receipt until the feast of Easter.”

In the time of Henry VIII, in 1521, representatives from Birchington and Gore-end attended the General Brotheryeld of the Cinque Ports held at Romney.

The port of Gore-end died during the Tudor times due to silting up and the only houses left were the farm buildings of Lower Gore-end. Thus it remained until the middle of the 1800s – an empty space given over to farming until about 1818, when the first Coast Guard Station was established at St. Nicholas-at-Wade near Plum Pudding Island – part of the Kent Coast Blockade.

Map showing site 1840

QUEX

The Manor of Quex has a story of its own. For now, we can just note that the old house, seen on early maps and a drawing of c. 1788, give us an idea of what was there until John Powell Powell demolished it in 1806. It was one of the oldest buildings in Birchington after the Church. It is the only private house marked on the whole of Thomas of Elmham’s Map of Thanet in 1414, where it is named as “Parker” – the name of the family who lived there at that date. Some of the Parkers bequeathed money to the Chapel of Birchington as well as to the Chapel at Wode (Woodchurch).

1688



BIRCHINGTON & DOVER



Birchington for many centuries was - and really still is - a Non-Corporate Limb of the Cinque Port of Dover. Being a Non-Corporate Limb, Birchington, with Gore-end, came under the jurisdiction of the Mayor and Juratts of Dover and not under the county. Dover appointed a Deputy in Birchington to act on its behalf, for all secular matters.

Birchington Coat of Arms

The office of Deputy dates back to perhaps 1200. Birchington shared responsibility for equipping a Dover vessel in time of conflict. It was the Deputy’s duty to collect the Levy - “Composition”, the shared fee - to be paid and sent to Dover, a responsibility we shared with St John’s (Margate), St Peter’s (Broadstairs) and Gore End. We also had the added responsibility to watch the “passage” of Birchington, and not allow anyone to land there without taking the ‘oath of loyalty’. Another duty was to see that all legal documents were sent to Dover for sealing and signing, documents such as Bastardy Orders, Apprenticeship Indentures, Poor Law Orders, etc.

In the Birchington records are many documents signed and sealed by the Mayor and Juratts of Dover, the oldest being of the time of Henry VII, 1490 when Richard Fyneaux was

Mayor of Dover. There is also a receipt dated 1499, when John Byngham was the Mayor and Johanne Philip was the Deputy in Birchington. These have part of the seal attached - that of St. Martin on horseback dividing his cloak and giving one half to the beggar. It is probable that Birchington with Gore-end has been a Limb of Dover since the time of Edward I, 1272, and taxed by Dover usually at 16s 8d a year. It is not clear whether Birchington included Gore-end or if Gore-end included Birchington as a Non-Corporate Limb at this date. Another duty of the Deputy was the taking of prisoners from Birchington to Dover to stand trial and in our records we have entries for expenses for the journey and for guarding overnight prisoners in the Cage beside our Churchyard wall.

ARMADA SESS

One of our most valuable documents in our records is the Armada Sess of 1588.

The Armada Sess was a tax to raise money to help towards the fitting out of one of the Dover ships to fight against the Spanish Armada. The amount to be raised by the combined group was £23 6s 8d, but our part was set at £5 15s 8d. However, this was increased to £6 7s 9d. When our Deputy took the final collection to Dover, it contained the princely sum of £7 2s 6d. The forty names of Birchington people on the list were those whose incomes required this level of support and the amounts vary from 3 pence to 20 shillings.



Among other records signed by the Mayor and Juratts are a Warrant and receipt for money for General Livesay, the commander of the Parliamentary forces in Kent during the Civil War (around the 1640s).

In 1565, the time of Elizabeth I – Special Commissioners made a return of the number of boats and houses in the full members and Limbs of the Cinque Ports. Gore-end is mentioned as having ships, but Birchington is listed as having 42 inhabited houses but had “neither ship nor boat”. The population of the village at this time was about 200 to 250, allowing 5 persons per house. Margate is recorded as having 108 houses, Broadstairs 98 and Ramsgate 25, but no mention is made of St. Lawrence. So Birchington was still a small agricultural village. In 1584 Vincent Underdown was our Deputy and he certified that there were ‘but 3 fishermen’ at Birchington, all of whom were in the habit of sailing from Margate. In 1620 the Deputy incurred the wrath and displeasure of the Lord Warden, as he had allowed passengers to land at Birchington from the Continent without taking the oath of allegiance to James I. The Deputy was sent for and committed to prison for 14 days and only released after the intervention of Sir Henry Crispe of Quex. In the Domestic State Papers for 1627 there is a list of soldiers billeted in Birchington during the war against France – 15 soldiers and 1 Lieutenant.

RECORDS

Birchington possesses a fine and valuable collection of records which are of considerable historical value.

14 - 138 CW A/c 1531 1st page

The Churchwardens Accounts date from 1531 and continue to the present day. They include two additional items that were stitched into the front of the first volume when the book was finally stitched up. The first one has been dated from about 1350 and the second one states it was written in 1526. They are both land registers (known as Terriers). The Accounts are veritable gold mines as regards information concerning the habits and customs of our forefathers. They were transcribed and indexed by Cyril Coles and Alfred Walker. They contain an enormous amount of information about the village. In early times the Churchwardens were the most important dignitaries in the parish and had, in addition to

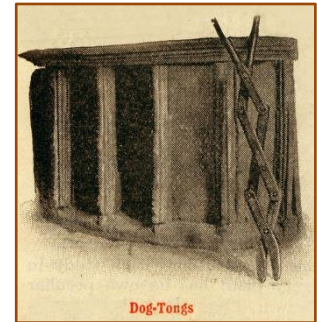
their ecclesiastical duties, many civil duties, now carried out by the local Council. The original book commences in a very humble way, the entire cost of the actual book being 2d, when the first few pages were initially stitched together.

14 - 138 1st page

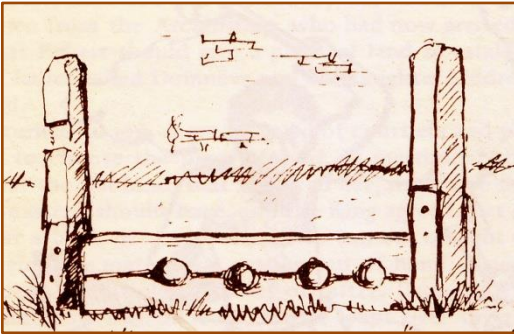
From these accounts we learn that the Church had a stock of sheep and cows – the Churchwardens hired them out to help pay for the Church expenses. There were also a few shops and houses owned by the Church, which brought in a small amount of rent. The minor parish official known as the Dog-Whipper was granted the use of the Dog Acre, an oblong piece of land that ran parallel to Station Road and is now the west half of Alpha Road. The tiny remnant forming the little green opposite the Library is all that is left of the 'acre'.



The Dog Acre & whipper's tongs

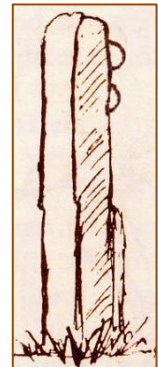


The Churchwardens also had to maintain the stocks and whipping post in the Square as well as the May-pole and the Cage (used to hold culprits overnight).



Stocks by churchyard wall

Whipping post



Cage



Maypole in Square

They also had to make payments for keeping down vermin, the cost of repairs to the Church, wages, and to pay for the 'mete' & 'breyde' consumed by the parishioners when they went 'beating the bounds' each year or ringing the Church bell 'to abate the tempest' all of which items are recorded in their accounts.

REFORMATION IN BIRCHINGTON c. 1530 - 1550

The Churchwardens' Accounts throw some light on how the Reformation affected the people in Birchington during Tudor times. Little alteration seems to have been made to the church service ritual in the time of Henry VIII. These begin to appear after his death in 1547. Candles were handmade by the wax chandler in our Wax House – a stone structure built against the north wall of the churchyard. Frankincense was paid for from rent money. 'Watching the Sepulchre' expenses at Easter-tide and straw brought to cover the earth floor of the church came out of these funds. A hymnal book and a processional book were purchased for ii s viii d. When the Church rituals changed quite dramatically in the reign of Edward VI, iiiii d was paid for 'pulling down the Images', a Communion Book was purchased for iii s iiiii d, the Rood Cloth and Linen cloths were sold to help fund these purchases. A Book of Homilies was bought, the 'Lady Altar' (in the Quex Chapel) and the High Altar were both destroyed and a wooden table replaced the main altar. A Psalter was purchased (ii s). Quex Chapel was not allowed a new altar until Christopher Powell-Cotton offered to re-establish his Chapel as a place of worship in memory of his parents in 1961.

14 - 146 Pulling down altars

The money raised from the sale of the Church goods was also probably used later to repair the bells. In 1552 an Inventory was made of all the Church goods, by order of the Royal Commission and the list is carefully noted at the beginning of the Churchwardens' Account Book in 1531. Henry Crispe of Quex was one of the Commissioners. From this Inventory it seems as if Birchington had been well supplied with vestments at that date. The outlay on candles dropped dramatically for a short time.

With the accession of Catholic Queen Mary I in 1553, the restoration of the Roman Catholic traditions is shown by the entries in the Churchwardens' Book. Payments were made for the return of the images: wax candles were again made in the Wax House and Pre-Reformation customs were restored.

With the accession of the 22 year old Queen Elizabeth I in 1558, the Reformation continued once more in Birchington. The great Sir Henry Crispe of Quex took 24 pounds of wax to offset the cost of tiles, glass, etc, which he had supplied for the Church, but our Rood Beam and Loft were not pulled down until 1572.

14 - 148 pulling down the rood

During this time of the Reformation in Birchington, the Ville had the same Curate, William Miles, who seems to have adapted himself very well to each of the changes. He lived in the 'Church House' near the Churchyard wall, for which he paid v s. a year. He died in Birchington in 1560 but was buried in Monkton Church near the font.

Photo of Monkton Church

Photo of registers

PARISH REGISTERS

The 26 volumes of Parish Registers of Baptisms, Marriages and Burials date from 1538. They date from the time of Henry VIII and are some of the oldest in Thanet. From the number of entries each year, considerable information can be obtained about the size of the

village. Up to 1618 the entries are in Latin. Up to 1837, the time of the passing of the Registration Acts, when registration became the concern of the civil authorities, the Registers have been transcribed and indexed.

14 - 169 Baptism Register, Cecilia Cantis

The first entry in the Baptism Register of 1538 is in Latin and is of Cecilia Cantis – baptised on 22nd November, sadly the first name in the burial register is also of little Cecilia, who was buried 15th March 1538. It must be noted that at this period the year began on 25th March – the Feast of the Annunciation or Lady Day, so Cecilia’s burial on 15th March was still 1538.

14 - 166 Burial register

From the Burial register can be seen when there were epidemics and plagues, also they can be of help in ascertaining an estimate of the population before the first census in 1801.

In the book “*The Parish Chest*” by W.E. Tate, published in 1946, it suggests that the best way to obtain an approximate figure for the population is to multiply the mean annual number of deaths by thirty one. Another method suggested is to work out a yearly average of Baptisms for ten consecutive years and multiply by thirty. I have tried both methods and find that the population of Birchington for the time of Elizabeth I was about 300. This was in the time of the great Sir Henry Crispe of Quex who was known as the “King of the Island”. He was Sheriff of Kent in 1558.

During the 17th century, not only do we have the Churchwardens’ Account Books but also the Poor Books – the accounts of the Overseers of the Poor, appointed under the Poor Laws, especially under the great Poor Law of Elizabeth I of 1601.

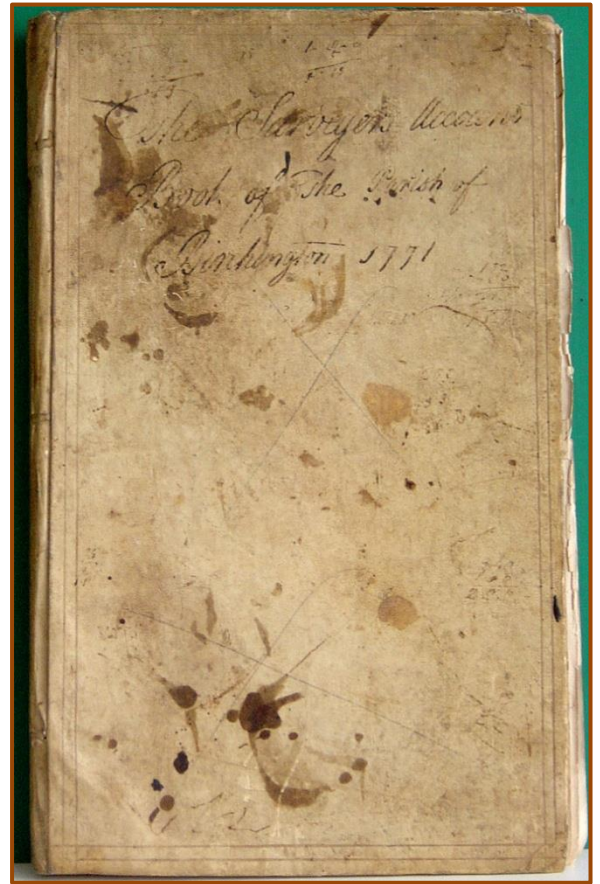
By this law, the parish was required to appoint Overseers of the Poor whose duty was, with the Churchwardens, to levy rates for the Relief of the Poor. The Churchwardens of Birchington considered the Poor Law so important that an extract from the Law was written in their Account Book. Once a year at Easter time the Vestry elected these unpaid parish officials, the Churchwardens, and the Overseers of the Poor, and later the Surveyors of the Highways, and when it is considered that a great deal of what is now done by the District Council at a considerable cost, was performed in the 17th and 18th centuries by a few unpaid local men who only claimed very small amounts of expenses.

They must have been men of outstanding quality, especially as some could not even read or write. These men levied sesses or rates, relieved the poor, apprenticed poor and orphan children, built Poor Houses, and did much to find work for the unemployed. We still have their accounts dating from 1611 to 1840 except for the period 1676 to 1738 which are missing.

Another book that was missing was connected with our highways. One of the unpaid officials that was created in 1555, under Queen Mary I was the ‘Surveyor of the Highways’ – known locally as Waywardens. Until Mary’s father’s reign, the roads were kept in some sort of order by local landowners and by the Church, who owned large tracts of land. When Henry closed all the Monasteries and took their lands, he ignored the responsibilities that went with those possessions, which beside the roads, also included caring for the poor and providing education for young people, so the country’s highways not only became almost unusable, but they also became clogged up with poverty-stricken beggars, struggling from one settlement to the next, begging for help.

The new Waywardens were ordered to keep accounts of the money they raised by rates from the wealthiest section of the community, plus a list of the people who supplied the stones and the carts and horses to deliver the stones to the areas needing them. They also kept a record of those they found to do the hard work and what they were paid. Mary's sister, Elizabeth continued and improved this service. These books are a wonderful record of our whole community, from the wealthiest to the poorest, who were often the unemployed or men from the workhouse.

However, one of our Waywardens' books was missing. When it was finally returned to us, it had travelled to New Zealand and back with members of the Neame family. It was accidentally packed into their belongings in 1930 when they sold Evergreen Farmhouse (now 'The Smugglers'). It was then taken to New Zealand when some from the next generation emigrated there in the 1950s. The book was finally rediscovered when the last of that generation died and their home was being dismantled and the contents shared or sold in c. 2005. A granddaughter, Naomi Walker, noticed the name of *Birchington* handwritten on the cover, and took the trouble to track down our Birchington Heritage Trust web-site. Later that year, Naomi hand-delivered the book to our Museum, much to our delight.



WAYWARDENS' missing book

POPULATION

The population in 1611 was about 300 and in the first sess we have, there were 22 ratepayers. Sir Henry Crispe of Quex paid £1 6s 2d, the highest, and the lowest was 5d. In these accounts appear a number of obsolete words such as "tovet", a measure of corn of 2 pecks, a "bodge" – a quarter of a bushel or a peck, "socking" that is wrapping the corpse in its grave clothes, (a "winding sheet"), an "ell" a measure of length about 1¼ yards, a "skillet", a cooking pot, etc.

In 1604 the ecclesiastical parishes of Birchington and Wode, (Acol) were united. Each parish appointed one Churchwarden and two sidesmen, but each appointed two Overseers and two Surveyors of the Highways. The custom then commenced for each parish to keep its own separate accounts and Poor Books, and we still have the Poor Books of the Ville of Wood or Acol.

Looking back over the preceding centuries, the poor of Birchington, including orphans, were reasonably well cared for, considering the times in which they lived. The 81 Apprenticeship Indentures, which we still hold, support this. Many of these apprenticeships were funded by Anna Crispe's Charity. The Poor Books, the Registers and the Churchwardens' Account Books throw some light on the times of scarcity and plague, and the steps taken to combat famine and epidemics. During times of scarcity and plagues, assessments were made by the Churchwardens and Overseers to buy corn in bulk for the poor and the corn so purchased was sold cheaply to the poor, as in 1621, and in 1630 and 1631. There have been several outbreaks of plague in Birchington, as shown by the Burial Registers and the Poor Books.

14 - 157 Burial Reg.

In the year 1544 there were 50 burials – a bad year – when the average at that time was about 12 in a population of about 350. The worst outbreak for us since the 1348 Black Death outbreak occurred in 1637, when Birchington was “visited” by “God’s heavy hand”. In that year there were 64 burials when the average was less than 20. The Minister at Birchington at the time was George Stancombe who remained at his post and buried all 64 and wrote the word “plague” against the names of 35. Of these, 14 were the bread winners so the 40 remaining ratepayers had to find quite large sums of money to provide for the widows, orphans and sick. During this year there were no less than 5 cesses levied for the “necessary relief of the poor and visited sicke people”. In the years 1625 and 1626 there was an outbreak when there were 72 burials for the two years, many of whom were the breadwinners.



In the 17th century the parish stocks and the whipping post still stood by the churchyard wall in the Square. The Maypole was set up and taken down again in the Square during Cromwell’s time. A “Dog whipper” was appointed to whip the “dogges” out of the Church, and later to keep order on Sundays among the boys in the Church, and ‘sitting on the Churchyard wall’.

Dog Whipper

The first man recorded as our Dog-whipper was “Old Hayward” in 1622 – and he received the sum of 8s for the year and was also granted the use of the piece of land known as “Dog Acre”. The last remains of this acre are now an important small plot of green oasis in our very urban village heart. [Dog Acre Map](#)

When people travelled from place to place, they needed to carry with them testimonials or briefs. A brief was really a mandate for collection for some supposedly deserving reason and was addressed to the Minister and the Churchwardens. Birchington has a number of records of “briefs”, and the amount of the help given. Collections were given for sufferers of the Great Plague in London, for “visiting sicke people”, and to help towards the rebuilding of St. Paul’s Cathedral after the Great Fire of London.

Help was given to travelling people with passes – to maimed soldiers making their way home, to seamen, to a “poor slave whose tongue was cut out”. In the Churchwardens Books and the Poor Books are many such entries where help was given. During the Civil War in the time of Charles I and the Commonwealth period, it is quite probable that the

Cripes of Quex were Royalists. In 1642 Dr. Meric Casaubon (a local cleric) was a staunch believer in the Divine Right of Kings.

Vow and Covenant

13 a – 2 & 3

Vow & Covenant

In 1643 all the men of Birchington over the age of 18 years were obliged to sign the Vow and Covenant and later the Solemn League and Covenant, expressing their support of the Parliament against the forces of the King, Charles I. On the 10th and 17th July, (Sundays 1643), 171 men signed after it had been read out to them in the Church and of the 171 men, 129 made marks as they were unable to write their names. In the following March 3rd and 10th 1643 – old style – again Sundays, the longer version called the ‘Solemn League and Covenant’ was read in the Church and on this occasion 127 men made their marks after raising their right hands, in token of assent, out of 168 present. George Stancombe, the Minister added their names after their marks. We still have this historic document – it was not destroyed as ordered by Parliament at the Restoration in 1660. There are very few such documents still in existence. Why ours were not destroyed is not known.

It was during the Commonwealth period in 1657 that Henry Crispe of Quex was kidnapped from Quex Mansion and taken from Gore-end to Bruges in Flanders and there held to ransom for the sum of £3000 – a huge sum for those days (£3,7 million today). Cromwell thought it was a plot to raise money for the Royalist cause. I am sure the affair gave rise to a good deal of talk and excitement in the village at that time. At the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, the King’s Arms were repainted and restored in the Church, but the board has since disappeared. 1666

was the Great Fire of London, in which Old St Paul’s Cathedral was burnt down. The people of Birchington sent up a contribution towards its rebuilding.

13 a – 4

B’ton’s donation to St Paul’s

In 1669 there was another “visitation” of the plague, nearly as fatal as in 1637. At this time there were 57 burials and of these, 42 were buried in the months of September and October, 6 being buried on one day, in a population of less than 400. I doubt if the entries in the Burial Register were made by the Minister at the time, as the handwriting is different and almost illegible. We had no Curate at this date, so the Vicar of Monkton probably got one of his flock who could write to do the job. There were 4 sesses in this year for the poor and for “reparasons” (repairs) to the Poor Houses – in the April, July, October and the following January, sesses levied on the 48 ratepayers, each paying from £2 7s 8d (the Cripes) down to 2d from the poorest ratepayers, and 14 paid extra for “ability”, or in other words, as they were able. Some of the poor were given from 3s a week down to 6d a week, but the money was spent not only on weekly allowances, but for clothing and shoes for the poor, and at their burial for coffins, laying forth, for burial fees etc.

It is in the late 1600s that we first read of the large number of rats and other vermin in Birchington and of the sums of money paid out by the Churchwardens for their destruction. It was the responsibility of the Churchwardens to keep down vermin, some of which today are not considered as such but are preserved. Rooks, weasels, badgers, sparrowhawks, kites, and even snakes were caught and killed and paid for by the Churchwardens. In some years Birchington seems to have been over run with rats.

As late as 1773, 4,137 rats were killed and a ½d per tail was paid out by the Churchwardens who had to count the tails before the money was paid out. The large number is not surprising when it is considered that Birchington had no main drainage or piped water until the beginning of the 20th century, and all garbage and rubbish was thrown out of the house in to the roadway or on to the heap in the garden where rats flourished. Sparrows also were caught and killed and their heads counted and paid for by the Churchwardens – at 3d per dozen. Several thousand of sparrows were killed in some years – up to 1830 when over 20,000 sparrows in that year were accounted for. The sparrows were voracious eater of the grain at harvest time.

Quakers**14 – 159 Quakers**

A small Quaker community existed in Birchington towards the end of the 17th century and into the 18th century and some of these caused difficulties and trouble to the village officials at that time, as the entries in the Churchwarden and Poor Books show. They refused to pay their sess or have their children baptised in the Church like the rest of the village population. The one man who caused the Churchwardens and Overseers much trouble and whose name appears often in the records is Elias Hatcher. His name appears year after year (as this entry in the Churchwardens Account shows),

Pic of Elias Hatcher“1695 Elias Hatcher, Quaker paid noe sess”.

The parish officials became so concerned at the continued refusal and obstinacy of Elias Hatcher that they wrote out in full in the account book the Toleration Act of 1695 by which it was enacted that the solemn affirmation and declaration of Quakers should be accepted instead of an oath. At length the parishioners appointed him an Overseer, responsible for the collecting of the sess and from that time there are no more entries of Elias Hatcher not paying his sess! The document recording his appointment was considered so important that it was preserved and we still have it signed by the Mayor of Dover, Tho. Bradley. Their meeting House was very near the present Wesleyan Methodist Chapel and near to it was the

Quaker Burial place.

15 e – Quaker meeting house – Southdown House

King William III occasionally stayed at Quex; we know this because the bell ringers welcomed him by the ringing of the Church bells, when the Churchwardens paid for their beer.

Buried in Woollen 1678**14 – 172 Burial in woollen**

The Burial in Woollen Act was passed to increase the manufacture of wool in England and lessen the import of linen. This was in the days before the use of coffins became common. It was enacted that no corpse should be buried in any material other than sheep's wool, and an affidavit was required to be made that the Act had been complied with. In the Registers are a large number of certificates stating that the burial was 'in woollen'.

Crispe Charity School**Photo of farm**

In 1708 the first Charity School in Birchington was established, when the Crispe Charity was set up from a bequest in Mistress Anna Gertruy Crispe's will. She bequeathed 47 acres of farm land to the Parish, now known as the Crispe Farm. The income from this was to be used to improve the lot of 5 poor widows of Birchington and Acol, and for education, as well a pay for the Quex Chapel to be kept clean. Much of the income was used to establish and maintain a school with an "able Dame or Schoolmaster "for 12 boys and girls to be taught and learn to read and write", the girls to "worke needleworke", and to apprentice boys "to some handicraft trade". As a result, the Crispe Charity School came into existence in Birchington in 1709, one of the earliest Charity Schools in East Kent. It remained in existence for well over a hundred years, in fact not long after the opening of the National School in Birchington in 1849.

Photos of school barn outside

The Scheme regulating the Charity has been revised by the Charity Commissioners several times. The Charity still owns the Crispe Farm in Acol and the income, which is now considerably more than in 1709, helps many young people in their further education, as well as organisations catering for the youth of the parish by giving financial assistance. The widows' assistance continues, as does the donation to the church for the upkeep of Quex Chapel, still privately owned by the Quex Estate.

Drawing of the barn inside

Beating the Bounds

Beating the Bounds at Acol + a boundary stone

The custom of "Beating the Bounds" of the parish was observed in Birchington for several hundred years and references to this ancient custom, and records of money spent, are duly recorded in the Churchwardens' Account Books. The earliest record is dated 1531 when vi d was spent in bread and drink. Again in 1663 £1 10s was spent when the parishioners went the bounds of the parish, to buy bread, beer, fish, tobacco, meat, and butter. It was customary to put a small boy through a window at Quex, and into an oven and out again at Brooksend – these places being on the boundary line. Boundaries were marked by stones, a few of which are still in existence. The expenses reached their height in 1713 when they came to £4 5s 3d for meat, bread, and beer, "when we went the bounds of the parish". The custom lasted until the late 1800s, and has been spasmodically continued into the 20th C.

Photo of Beating the Bounds in 1935

Smuggling

Smuggling pic

Smuggling has taken place along the coast from Reculver to Birchington for some hundreds of years and there are a number of stories of encounters with smugglers along this stretch of coast and a few people of Birchington regarded it as an honourable occupation, especially when food was dear and some men were unemployed. In 1804 the parish officials agreed that "no person is to have gristing who neglects a day's work in smuggling or wrecking without the leave of the Master they work for." Gristing was the cheapest quality of grain to be ground for making course bread.

In the Burial Register, the burial of Thomas Hollands, aged 35, is recorded on 23rd March 1814. Under the heading "Occupation", the Vicar has written "SMUGGLER". It was still considered an honourable occupation at that date. Early in 1800 the first Coastguard Stations were built as part of the Coast Blockade – from St. Nicholas, near Plum Pudding Island, to Epple Bay. At Minnis the Coast Guard houses were the first dwellings to be built there after the Old Bay Cottage. This has stood at Minnis Bay since c. 1450, with additions and repairs in c. 1600. The Coast Guard terrace ceased to be used for the Coast Guards by c. 1923 and each property was sold to the public from then on. There are several references in old newspapers and our own records of smuggling and Coastguards in Birchington.

Population

Photo of crowd in the Square

It appears that the population of Birchington declined during the first half of the 1700s to less than 300, as shown by the Registers. It seems also as if there was quite a decrease in the number of small ratepayers and an increase in the number of large ratepayers. With the coming of the 19th century there was a gradual rise in the population as shown by the Census returns of 1801 onwards. In 1801 the population was 537 living in 100 houses. This number increased gradually until the coming of the railway in 1863 when the population rose from 813 in 1861 to 1152 in 1871. By 1900 it had reached over 2000, living in 447 houses. From then on Birchington north of the railway line developed with the introduction of bungalows – the first estate of them in this country.

Poor Law

Pic of Poor people

Birchington has always done its best, as far as it was able, to relieve the poor of the parish, the widows, the aged, the disabled and orphans. The great Poor Law of Elizabeth I of 1601 formed the very foundation of poor law administration in the parish for well over two centuries. It was badly needed after her father Henry VIII closed down all the monasteries.

These were the main source of help for the poor until the 1540s. At first the poor were relieved in their own homes and given "out relief". Later in the 1600s a few of the poor were housed in what became known as the Poor Houses – probably the Minister's House situated near the Churchyard wall, which had not been lived in since Mr. George Stancombe, Minister, died in 1647. On several occasions the parish officials repaired these houses as shown in the Poor Books.

15 c – 20 Alms Houses

Almshouses

They were in use until about 1811, when new Almshouses in Gas Row were built, and remained in use until the 1930s when they were condemned and demolished, and the site sold. In 1761 the Churchwardens and Overseers made a contract with the parish officials of St. Peter's for some of the poor and children to be provided for in the Workhouse at St. Peter's.

15 c – 26 Work House

Workhouse

There are records of payments made for sending the poor and children to St. Peter's and for charges for caring for them there. In 1794 Birchington united with the Vill of Wood, Monkton and the Vill of Sarre to build its own Workhouse under what is known as Gilbert's Act of 1781/2 – in the time of George III. It was built on land in Park Lane next to what later became the National School, conveyed to the Overseers by the Churchwardens. There are still detailed records of this Workhouse, its cost, furnishing, cost of running, names of the Masters and Overseers, and even of the food supplied to the inmates, also of the work done by the inmates, such as spinning, weaving, rope making, rough sheet making etc. The Workhouse remained in use until 1834 when it was closed, with the opening of the Union Workhouse at Minster, later known as Hill House Hospital. The Birchington Workhouse was sold to John Powell Powell of Quex for £225.

Agricultural Riots 1830

Pic of hulk etc

A few Birchington and Acol men and one woman were involved in the Agricultural Riots of 1830, sometimes known as the Swing Riots, when most of the men of the place worked on the land for a wage a little more than two shillings a day. There was considerable unemployment at the time and the cost of food, especially bread and wheat was very high. Desperate field labourers marched about in a riotous manner demanding a wage of half a crown a day. Farm machinery, especially threshing machines newly introduced were broken and there were also acts of incendiary (mainly in burning haystacks) in Birchington and other places in East Kent. The introduction of the threshing machine was resented as it caused unemployment among farm workers, because by the introduction of the machine there was no longer any need for the work to be done by the flail during the winter months, when often that was the only work to be done, and no work meant no pay. Nine people from Birchington and Acol were convicted for breaking a threshing machine near Margate, and sentenced to seven years transportation to Van Dieman's Land – now Tasmania. They went by the convict ship 'Eliza' and we still have records of them. The wife and children of one Acol man joined him in Van Dieman's Land and his descendants still live in Australia, and have been in touch with us in Birchington.

15 c – 28 National School

National School

The Birchington National School in Park Lane was opened in 1849 after some opposition from the Governors of the Crispe Charity, whose Charity School eventually closed in 1862. The Governors of the Charity then contributed quite a large proportion of their income

towards the maintenance of the Church National School. This annual contribution to the National School continued until 1956 when the school became a controlled C. of E. School.

 15 a – 14 Railway Station

Railway

The coming of the railway to Birchington in October 1863 gave a considerable impetus to the growth and development of the place. It was then possible to travel by train from Birchington to London easily and comfortably. Birchington began to develop into a healthy seaside resort, within reasonable train distance from London.

 15 e – 27 Orion

Bungalows

Soon after this, houses and bungalows began to be built north of the railway line. Many of the bungalows were designed and built first by John Taylor and then by John Pollard Seddon, including The Bungalow Hotel, The Rossetti Bungalow, the Tower Bungalows etc. Seddon himself lived in Rossetti Bungalow and in his booklet on the bungalows he described the place as "The Village of Hygeia". These Indian style bungalows were reputed to be the first to be built in this country - as an estate.

15 e – 28 Frescoes on the Coach Houses
 + signature on Poets' Corner (south side)

George Frampton

The Coach Houses of Seddon's buildings were ornamented by sgraffito work by George Frampton in the early 1880s, who was later knighted. Sir George Frampton also designed the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens, and the memorial statue to Edith Cavell in c. 1916.

Other artists have lived in Birchington north of the railway line, including Sir Alfred Gilbert, the sculptor, and Solomon J. Solomon R.A., who lived at Whitecliff and whose brother-in-law, Delissa Joseph designed the large north-facing studio built into the chalk cliffs at the bottom of the garden. Joseph also designed the original 'Carmel Court' and 'North Sea Lodge' in Darwin Road

 15 e – 29 Rossetti

Rossetti

Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti came to stay in Birchington in the bungalow later to become known as the Rossetti Bungalow. His friends hoped the clean Kent air might help his failing health. Unfortunately this didn't happen and he died on the 9th April 1882, and was buried in Birchington Churchyard. His grave is marked by a striking white sandstone monument in the form of an Irish Cross, designed by his friend Ford Madox Brown. Soon after, Rossetti's mother placed a stained glass window in Birchington Church to his memory and people visit Birchington every year to see the grave and the window. 14 – 110 Grave

14 – 91 & 92 Window

One light of the window is a reproduction of one of Rossetti's own paintings of the Passover, and the other was specially designed by Frederick Shield, another of Rossetti's Pre-Raphaelite friends and represents Jesus healing the blind man outside the gates of Bethesda. Unfortunately bungalow in which Rossetti's died was sold in 1953 and later demolished and replaced by seven detached houses.

 15 b – 25 Methodist Chapel

Methodist Chapel

The Methodist Church, with its clock, was built in 1830 – the clock is reputed to have been on the old Margate Pier before being erected on the Chapel. In front of the Chapel was the old Quakers' Meeting Place (now a private house called 'Southdown', whose garden may have been part of their burial ground).

Birchington – A Separate Ecclesiastical Parish

1871 was an important date in the history of Birchington to many people, for in that year Birchington-with-Acol became a separate ecclesiastical parish with its own Vicar and Vicarage, separate from Monkton to which it had been attached since Saxon times. The first Vicar of Birchington-with-Acol was John Price Alcock M.A., who remained here for 17 years, so although Birchington has such an ancient Church, it has only had ten Vicars up to 2016. It was during Alcock's incumbency in 1887 that the clock was installed in the tower to commemorate the Queen's Golden Jubilee. At the same time the Tower was restored, the spire re-shingled and the bells recast and re-hung. Major William Morrison Bell gave the Clock, while much of the Tower restoration was paid for by Mrs. Gray of Birchington Hall, later Spurgeons Homes, and now Birch Hill Estate. The Golden Jubilee was celebrated in Birchington, and the streets, especially the Square, were decorated, and over 500 children were provided with tea and a Jubilee medal. The old folks were given a 'meat tea' and a Jubilee plate – in the grounds of Birchington Hall.

In 1885 a big Exhibition was held at Minnis Bay. It was housed in an Exhibition Building especially erected for the purpose by Alderman Arthur Rayden. The funds raised from this Exhibition were to help fund the Institute, situated in the Square. This was the first Birchington Community Centre. Several thousand people visited the Exhibition and special trains were chartered to run to Birchington. The Exhibition Building was severely damaged by the great storm of December 1897, when considerable damage was done at Minnis Bay.

Photo of the building in the floods of 1897

The Birchington Parish Council, under the overall supervision of the Eastry Rural District Council, governed Birchington until 1935. At this date Birchington was taken over by Margate Borough Council, who wanted to increase their population and income. This lasted until the formation of the Thanet District Council in 1972. However, the majority of Birchington residents are hoping that before long Birchington will once again have its own Parish Council. [This was achieved in 1986]

Photo of the signing of the agreement with Derek Raven

Schools

Like other seaside places, Birchington had a few good private schools - such as:

Grenham House (1910-1984), in Grenham Road, now 'Home Birch' and 'Hunting Gate'.

15 d – 24 & 25

Woodford House School in Station Road founded in 1892 by the Erlebach family, and now developed into the Woodford Court Estate in the 1960s

15 b – 20

Queen Bertha's Girls Public School founded in 1929, and developed into Queen Bertha's Avenue in the late 1959.

15 b – 26 Fernleigh

There were also a few smaller private schools in private houses.

Hotels

Unfortunately Birchington now has no hotels left - the last one being

The Bungalow Hotel built in 1872, demolished in 1984 **15 d - 18**
now Bierce Court flats. Lyell Court Flats were built on the hotel's tennis courts.

The **Beresford Hotel**, beside Beresford Gap **15 d -20** formerly the seaside home of the Admiral Lord Beresford R.N. A.D.C. to Her Majesty Queen Victoria, closed in 1967 and later developed into the Beresford Housing Estate. It was a 5 Star Hotel in its heyday.

The Bay Hotel at Minnis Bay was built in 1905 and demolished in 1964 with high rise flats built on this site.

Photo of The Bay Hotel

Manston Railway**Light Railway** **13 c – 11 Map of line**

Few people remember the light railway which ran from the main railway at Minnis Bay across the fields to Manston Aerodrome, built in 1917 and taken up in 1926. It was used to take supplies from the main railway line to the airfield. It was nearly 3 miles long and crossed the Canterbury Road, the Acol Road, and then across fields towards Sparrow Castle Pumping Station. Its terminus was where Pouces met the airfield. The terminus platforms were still in situ in 1961 until c. 1969, used mainly for loading sacks of coal onto coal lorries that were based there.

Spurgeons**15 b – 31 B'ton Hall**

Spurgeons Homes, which closed in 1978, were built on farm land belonging to Birchington Hall and grounds. The Hall and farm were bought in c. 1922 after the Homes raised quite a large sum of money during their 50th anniversary in 1917. The site is now quite densely built on, although many of the old trees were saved and now grace the Birch Hill Estate.

Population – again **Photo**

There was considerable growth in the population towards the end of the 19th century and during the 20th century. In the last hundred years the population of the village has grown from about 1,300 to about 5,000 in 1960 and over 10,000 in 2,000 A.D. – mainly due to all the building on the hotel, school and Spurgeon sites. In 1901 there were 450 houses – today, because of the increased density of occupation on those large green and sparsely occupied sites, the population is now about 15,000. (2016 AD). For all this increase, the area round the Square still has its 'Village' atmosphere about it. All but one of the original buildings (Rush's Cafe), seen in the 1900 photos, remain in place, with just a few of them now having new facades.

Aerial views of Spurgeons – and Birch Hill