

## BETTY THOMAS – Interview 9<sup>th</sup> May 2002

[Contains the items from the interview relating to Birchington]

I worked for the Gas Board for many years. I started in the office and then when I came back out of the Services – I was in the Air Force during the War, for four years – when I came back, there was a job going in the showrooms, and I thought I rather liked the sound of that. I liked serving the customers. I used to go away on courses – to London – the Old Kent Road, to the Gas School there. During the training you had to sell an appliance to someone and it was all being recorded. And then they had to pick holes in what you had done!

[Elizabeth Denning's name came up in connection with the new surgery interviews.]

I have known Betty Denning for a long time. I knew her sister – I was in the Guides and we used to have a Guider – Kipper Phillips – and we had to do all our badges and Kipper took us all down to Dr Denning, when they lived in Grenham Bay Avenue – I think it was - (St Mildred's Avenue). Dr Denning was a lovely old boy, as Doctors go now.

My dad was one of the founder members of the Chamber of Commerce in Birchington. He was partner in the firm (Pearson's Estate Agents). [She then showed a booklet of old Margate, showing the buildings as they were.] You know it's old because it says you can get to London for £3 - return! Those were the days!

[She then showed a few photographs]

That was my dad when he was presented to the Queen Mother. Look how he's got hold of her hand! Poor old Pemberton up there is looking daggers. And do you know what he [my dad] was saying to her? I was there as well because I accompanied him at many things. This goes back to 1982 or so. The Guild of Players – with Dorrie Parkin was there, they did a show on the stage of all the bathing belles on the same day. My dad was anxious to speak to the Queen Mother. He was a Freeman [of Margate] and he was told 'Oh no, Mr Freeman, you will just be presented as she goes up the line.' There's Gale [Roger – M. P. for North Thanet] And of course, so that she wouldn't run away, Dad got hold of her hand [in both his] – all of a sudden I heard the Queen Mother burst out laughing and I was sitting at a table near .... – apparently he had been to the Guildhall in London, because he was in the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service - in the First World War of course – he had gone up with several people from the Margate end – he used to run the club down here – and he went to London with several of them and the Duke of Edinburgh was the royal person attending, so he came up - during the cocktail hour, I suppose - and said to my father and Alderman Woodard, 'Now you two are the old Royal Flying Corps?'

My father said, 'Yes, we are.' So the Duke of Edinburgh said, 'There are not many of you left, are there?' So my dad said, 'No, no, we're very thin on the ground now.' So the Duke said, 'I think we'll have to have you two stuffed and put in a museum!' So that's what he was saying to the Queen Mother – and that's why she burst out laughing!

I can't remember who the mayor was. He was a Salvation Army man.

[Betty's father's name was John Henry May Thomas known as Jack]

That one is of the partnership of Pearson – that is the old boy [Pearson senior] and that is Alderman Redman – they are all dead now, of course.

That one was a Chamber of Commerce Dinner when Mr and Mrs Barrows [Senior – the founder of the Barrows' businesses in Birchington] were President. That's them in the middle and that's my mum and dad on the left. My dad was President the next year – and you know when they lead you all into the dinner – they were all done up in their evening dress arm in arm, at the Bungalow Hotel, so Dad leads along with everybody trailing behind and leads right up to the Ladies' Toilet! 'Oh, sorry!' he said, and back turned! I reckon that would be 1969 – in the 60's anyway.

This one – I'm going back to Birchington Carnivals – the real ones. The carnivals were wonderful in those days. I can remember going up to Birchington Square one year and the celebrity was a man called Leslie Fuller – he was a comedian and he was mostly at the Winter Gardens and the Lido – and he was on a cart and everybody that was anybody was in Birchington Square that day – and I can remember we all got up there, and you could not have got another person in the Square! The fountain wasn't where it is, it was in a different spot [?] and the Square was packed, absolutely packed.

That year, we had a mayor [of Margate] called Alderman [George] Broom Farrar, lived in Queen's Avenue. With the committee, he used to organise the carnivals. There was a Mr Harmer who was at Girling's, the solicitors. There was also the manager and dispenser of Evans the Chemists. That used to be near the Cinema that was [now the Cornerstone Church]. There were about 10 carnival committee people. They all used to dress up – I can see my mum and dad, mum all dressed up in a lavender crinoline with bonnet and Mrs Harmer as well and I think Mrs Farrar was in one as well. It was more or less run by the Chamber of Commerce. Mr Barrows was in it too and the man from Evans lived opposite his shop in Edward Villas.

All the businesses in Station Road had trestle tables outside their shops on carnival day with all the shopkeepers dressed up, selling bugles, balloons, wavers and hats and all up Crescent Road too. Vera Holton was there, doing her bit, with trestle tables there and then we had the carnival procession at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

That particular year, Alderman Farrar had arranged, through the Committee to ask Mr and Mrs Barrows to be 'Mayor and Mayoress' of Birchington. They somehow got their measurements and hired costumes. Mrs Barrows' was a lovely long velvet dress with all the trimmings. Mr Barrows was going to be all dressed up like a Mayor. A boy called Peter Sparrett who lived in Kings Avenue, Minnis Bay and I were the pages and they hired our costumes. That's me looking out of this side of the wee carriage and Peter is looking out of the other side – we were to be the attendants to hold the train. They didn't tell Mr and Mrs Barrows about all this until the day of the carnival – and they refused to do it! These were Claude Barrows parents, not Claude and Nora. So Peter and I had to be the 'mayor and mayoress' of Birchington! – I could have died of embarrassment! The dress was pale blue velvet with a cockade hat.

The man on the right was the stationmaster – I can't remember his name. The building in the background is Willett's Dairy, on the way to the station – where the Paragon is now. I was about 10, so it was about 1931. All

the people in the picture must all be dead now [The youngsters on the back of the coach may be around still.]

I was born in Germany in Wiesbaden – my dad was in the Occupation after the First World War – I came home when I was seven. My father's mother lived at Ramsgate, so father was a Ramsgate boy. We used to come home every year for Christmas to Lowestoft, to my mother's mother, because my mother was Lowestoft lady – that's how they met, because my father was in the Royal Naval Air Service in the Balloons at Lowestoft. I was sick every time I came on the boat – there were no stabilisers in those days.

[Betty told some enjoyable stories about her time in Germany.]

My brother [Norman] was born three years after me, while we were in Germany. My mother came home to Lowestoft to have him and then took him back. How did we come to Birchington? Well, when my dad came out of the Royal Naval Air Service worked with old man Pearson in the Broadstairs office. We didn't have much money in those days after the war. I can remember my dad had an old motorbike and he used to wear a trilby hat! The front of the hat brim would turn up in the wind. Then Mr Pearson thought they should open another office, so he asked my dad if he would come into partnership with him and he opened Birchington's Office.

The first shop was where Delia's is now – it was a tiny office and we had the flat above it. That's where Mr Hall [optician] ended up. We were there for a long time. Where our office is now was Mr Barrows' music shop. He had his leather and shoes on the corner, which is now the newsagent's and next door was one of the sons, Roland (that would be Claude's brother), he was a musician and he ran this music shop with beautiful grand pianos in the window. He used to piano tune for people like Russ Conway and all these stage people

The name of our business was Pearson, Cole and Hardy. There was my father, a man called Snowdon and another very nice man [couldn't remember his name.] The little office was taken over by Geoffrey Hall, the optician and we moved into the music shop and then the partners built the maisonette over the top of the shop. I was about 11 or 12 when it was being built [c. 1935]. I was about eight when I came to Birchington from Ramsgate.

[Recalling the Barrows family who lived next door to them – Mary who was mentally disabled, - she had a twin who died at birth - Claude who had the shoe shop, Roland who had the music shop and Jack was in sports gear – he used to be a traveller for Slazenger's. – wife was Ruby.]

The Carnival – I can remember one year, Barrows, being a sports shop, Mary went as W. G. Grace, [the great cricketer], and Mary was rather tubby – I was dressed up as a jockey. In Birchington Square we used to have costume shop – got in for the carnival. I'll tell you where it is, Wanstall [the butcher's] – that's where the costume shop was. You could hire the costume for the day. I was done up in pink silk as a jockey – my brother went as a policeman. A friend of mine, Connie Holwell – her father was stationmaster, (not the one in the other photo), I still write to her – she's my age – we were kids of 10 or 11 and we used to go up to the old Park Lane School – and we were all dressed up and went up to the school. After the carnival and the procession, we used to all go down to the Beresford [Hotel], where the old

house Wild Air was, for the judging [of the fancy dress]. Connie went dressed as a casualty in first aid – so there were the four of us, Mary, my brother, {Norman} Connie and me – we none of us got a prize! Then we had sports down there, running – 50 yards, 100 yards – all along the cliffs.

Further along, after the sports, there were sideshows – like at Dreamland – horse racing all lit up with electric lights and you could back a winner. Then there was hoopla, coconut shies – all along the top there, all arranged by the carnival committee. It was a really good entertainment – you looked forward to it every year. Everyone pulled together, everyone was friendly – and they are now – I've only got to walk up the street in Birchington and I see somebody I know. My brother says, 'Isn't there anybody you don't know?'

[Told a lovely story about meeting an old WAAF Association lady in France!]

[Which school did you go to after Park Lane?]

Well I wasn't brainy enough – my friend Connie and I, and all of us, went in for the County School Scholarship – then those who weren't brainy enough to get to the County School, which I wasn't, but she was, so I went to Lausanne House – it was a lovely school, I enjoyed it – and she went to the County School.

When I left school, I went to a commercial college – Bank's College in Hawley Street – it was an old boy and his son, ran it – the father taught me shorthand typing and book-keeping. I had another friend in Crescent Road – Jean Stewart – who I was at school with me at the Central, Lausanne House – her father was chief clerk at the Gas Board – the Gas Company – which was the old Westgate and Birchington Gas and Water Company at Westgate. It was under the arcade in Station Road Westgate, just beyond Ethelbert Road. And that was my showroom and it was a private company. The offices were upstairs. There was Mr Stewart and Mr Cockburn was in charge, and they sent a note to Bank's College to say they wanted a shorthand typist – and I was one of them. I went for my test and Mr Stewart was there – and I knew him because he was my friend's dad. Mr Cockburn asked, "what sort of a salary were you thinking of?"

Mr Banks had said, "Don't accept anything less than 25 shillings a week." That was big money – so I said they had told me to ask for 25 – 'Oh, I don't know about that.' And then after a bit of humming and haa-ing, he said he agreed to the 25s. I said, "Have I got the job then?" And he said "Yes."

I cycled home and half an hour to an hour later the phone went (we had an extension to the one down in dad's office below) It was Mr Cockburn for me and he said 'I'm awfully sorry, but we've given you the job – and we'd like you to have it, but we can't offer you 25s. a week – will you accept £1 a week, because the boy that you will be working under is getting 25s. a week and we couldn't have that!' Bob Perkins was the boy - I'm still friendly with his sister – she lives in Claire Court [in Kent Gardens] – he's dead.

[Dad had listened in on the phone downstairs and he came up to talk about it and pointed out that because it was so near, it was only going to be 2d. on the bus to Westgate and She could cycle – so that would take care of the other 5s.]

So I accepted the job and I worked for them for 43 years! The firm was taken over by the South Eastern Gas Board now disbanded. In the 1970's,

Birchington and Westgate were closed and we all had to go over to Margate and I worked in Addington Street in the big offices there until I went into showrooms. I liked my showrooms – I ended up as a manager.

[What changes in Birchington would you particularly comment on?]

When we first came to Birchington, there were mud roads. I can remember coming from Ramsgate to Birchington – we hadn't got a car in those days – so we came by train and we got off the station and the first building that I saw was Willett's Dairy, then there were mud roads, your road – Alpha Road, was mud and Albion Road was all mud. I can remember seeing Dog Acre – all field – the first building after that was an Italian restaurant run by an Italian called Mr Fagnoni [lived at Eaglescliff in Station Approach – his café was in Station Road, about where Girling's offices were.] It was a lovely restaurant and they sold the beautiful cakes. Mr Newman had a little grocer's shop there. There was the Vogue – a nice hairdresser – Susan Scott went there later. The Vogue used to be on the corner of Crescent Road (where the bakers is now) and that's how Jack [Thurgood], got to know her. She was a beautiful looking lady and she worked in the hairdressers there – Pearl Bing – he went out with Pearl, but he eventually married Ruby.

[What other businesses were there on your side of the road?]

Next door to Hall's shop [where the Key Shop is now] was a little lady who kept a high class dress shop and sold the most beautiful antique dolls. I used to look in the window at these dolls - they had a special name – all dressed up in velvet – baby dolls about 6-8 inches high – the property belongs to Pearson's [they still own Delia and the Key Shop now]. I went in and asked how much was one of the little dolls – it was a colossal price – I told my mum, but she said it was too expensive – they were 'exclusive'. One day, I went out and she called me – I was about 7 or 8, I suppose – and she gave me one of these little dolls – I had it for years and years – in fact it might still be in the attic! Even the face was all in velvet with little eyes and features painted on.

Edward Villas, opposite to me were private houses at this time – all the way down. I can remember one lady lived there – I can't remember her name, but her son is still about. She lived in Edward Villas and they were old-fashioned houses and the front was just gardens – there were front gardens most of the way along.

[The last garden to be dug up in 2001 was in front of Tandori Nite Indian Restaurant]

There used to be a garage there – the Page twins – my brother used to take his car down to be mended there. Then they ended up in Cliftonville – a big garage there.

The Wayside with the big parrots outside [carved out of wood] - Mrs Kellett and her son used to run it – a very nice lady. She used to run the Wayside as a restaurant and the little shop, which is now the jewellers, used to be a little cake shop. My mother used to send me over there to buy some of their lovely nut-bread loaves – home-made, you know – they used to make all these cakes and the beautiful nut loaf, which was about 9d. in old money - scones, fresh every day. It was a lovely restaurant – we often used to go over there and have a meal – teas and lunches. In the end I think she took over the Bandbox.

[Mention was made of the three Erlebach boys from Woodford House who died in W. W. 1]

My brother [Norman] went to Woodford House. Every Friday night they used to have concerts and Miss Erlebach, one of the old ladies, she had a big bun at the back of her head. She used to be the pianist – there was Miss Edie - my brother hated it – and he didn't like Mr Hodges either. There were Mr and Mrs Hodges, who ran the school and there were Mrs Hodges' sisters, Miss Erlebach and Miss Edie. Miss Edie was a big woman and had glasses – the pince-nez ones – and she had the bun at the back. All the boys were there – and I had a lovely time with all these boys – and Miss Elsie [Edie?] used to play the piano and up would go her bun – she'd get so excited and her bun would go up and down! It was a nice school – my brother did very well there – he was a surveyor – he learnt a lot from them – but he did take exams afterwards. Norman stayed there until he was 15 or 16.

[Looking at a picture of Mr Hodges and some of the students at Woodford House]

There's old Hodge and there's Chris [Jenner], (I knew his mother and his father) – that looks like Willetts, and isn't that [Leslie] Jameson, and that's David Hall?

Jameson is in New Zealand now and he comes down to me – well Norman's a friend of his – he's a farmer in N. Z. and has a wife and two children I think. He sometimes stayed at the Linington's – Jameson and Norman came to lunch with me.

[Looking at a photo showing Minnis Bay with the Bay Hotel in the background.]

We used to get really big people in the theatre world down there at Minnis Bay then and I can remember being down on the beach with our family and Charles Laughton was down there – he had a little tiny bathing suit with a great big belly hanging out and a great big sombrero hat on.

We used to have the Beresford Hotel – we used to have some big do's down there – all the so-called stars – Herbert Marshall (a big film star in the old days). There was also Wing Commander Reggie Presland – he lived in Skyros.

[In the 1939 Kelly's he is listed as living at 'Greenheyes', Harold Road.]

He has a son and a daughter – a nurse – my dad was on the council with him – he used to run a great big grey Bentley – he had several cars. He used to pick my dad up for the council meetings – they used to have PRE-Council meetings – they had to discuss everything that was going to be discussed – dad would get in the Bentley – all open and his trilby hat flapping up at the front again! Reggie used have a plane at Manston – he invited to take my dad to Paris [he didn't go!].