

BIRCHINGTON PLACE or HALL

As early as 1203 there was a place called “Scottestone” in the area now associated with Birchington Hall. The oldest picture we have of the building, at the present moment is dated 1800. It is labeled simply “The Old House”, with additional wording stating, “now Birchington Place, before the alterations”. The painting shows an imposing house with a similar appearance to many of the old Court Houses of the 15th and 16th century. There are some even earlier examples of these Court Houses in England, but the Birchington one probably dates from about 1560, according to the opinion of three experts.



c. 1800

We will look at the alterations shortly, but we need to take note of one of the families who held the land for several generations – the FRIEND family.

The Friends held land elsewhere in Thanet, as well as here in Birchington. By 1620 the name appears in a Baptism Register for All Saints Church. In 1674, William Friend held the land known as ‘Scot’s Down’ or ‘Scot’s Land’, which at that date consisted of 40 acres. In that year, he refused to pay his cess (assessment or rates) to the church and so was ordered to appear at Canterbury assizes, but he failed to turn up. He probably paid it in the end, because the following year he is shown as being rated for 132 acres. This continued until 1680, when the land was inherited by George Friend, who remained in occupation until about 1703. In 1690 George Friend was rated for ‘Scotsdown’ at £20.

All this while, the house appears to have remained in its imposing but fairly compact state which we see by the end of the 1700s. Various members of the Friend family inherited it during this century, including another George Friend, John Friend and George Taddy Friend. At one stage, the Friend family paid nearly half the rates levied in the parish – £616 out of £1,299. Between 1740 and 1792 the estate was enlarged to about 148 acres and by this time is clearly called “Birchington Place”. On the 1840 Tithe Map, the house was in the occupation and ownership of John Friend Esq, sometimes known as John ‘Birchington’ Friend, to differentiate him from his relatives, John ‘Brooksend’ Friend and John ‘Taddy’ Friend. The house was still called ‘Place’ until it was sold in 1852, when it was renamed “Birchington Hall”. On the back of the 1800 painting of the house, the Friend Coat of Arms has been pasted.



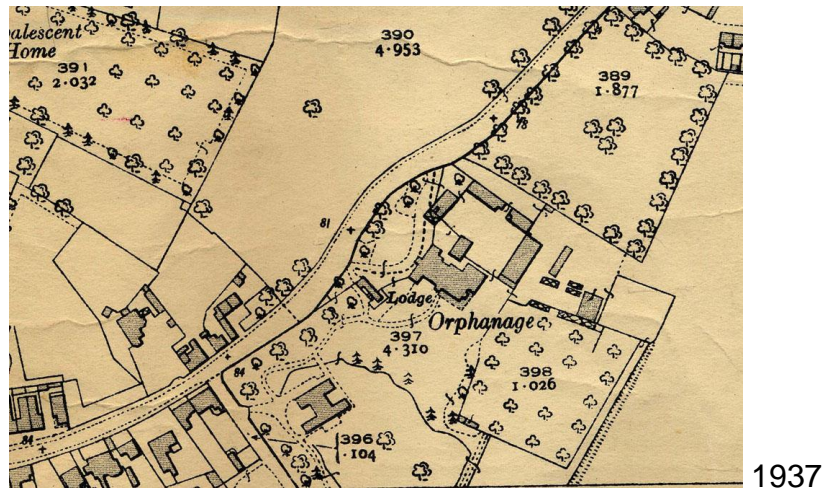
Alterations to the house:

Somewhere between 1800 and 1832, narrow wings were added to each side of the front of the property and the attic floor was given three pointed window gables instead of two dormers in the roof. The height of the roof appears to have been slightly lowered, but it is also possible that the raising of the front façade may give the impression of a less expansive roof. The rest of the large windows were all kept, with the only other addition being in the new pointed porch, covering the original front door and a stucco rendering finish to the whole building, hiding the warm red brick of the old house. The Friend family continued to live there until about 1852, when the house and farm were put up for sale. In the 'Smuggler's' Restaurant hangs a framed map prepared for this sale.



In 1861, the new owners managed to get the road to Margate diverted slightly north, to take the traffic slightly further away from their front door. This is very obvious in a map of 1937. When Thomas Gray bought the property and farm in the late 1860s or early 1870s, he renamed it 'Birchington Hall'. At one period after this the road, which was known as 'Road to St John's' and Margate Road,

became 'Hall Avenue' for a while. This is how it is labeled on a number of postcards of the early 1900s.



1937

The house became the focus of many local celebrations and much charitable hospitality. Thomas Gray and his wife Susan played a prominent part in village and Church life, holding teas and Christmas celebrations in the house and grounds for the oldest and youngest members of the community. During the summertime, they had summer fetes and children's sports and teas in the grounds. These events are frequently alluded to in the School Log Books and the Parish Magazines of the time. After Mr Gray died in about 1900, his wife was cared for by her niece. When Mrs Gray died in about 1915, the niece married Dr Oscar Worthington, the brother of Dr Harry Worthington. Having inherited the property in her aunt's will, soon after this they put the house and farm were put up for sale.

During 1917 Spurgeon's Boys' Orphanage in Stockwell celebrated its Golden Jubilee with a large Fund Raising campaign. The Orphanages had already bought a 'Seaside Holiday Home' in Cliftonville, bought in 1899) the building now occupied by Martell Press. The old name is still just visible at the top of the façade. As a result of the fund raising, the Trustees of the charity decided to buy Birchington Hall and forty acres of its farmland in 1919. For a while, the Cliftonville and Birchington sites were both being used, but by 1923, the Cliftonville Home was sold and from then on, the children came down to Birchington for their holidays or recuperation from illnesses.



c. 1920

The house and farm continued to be used in this way until the outbreak of World War 2, when the children in Stockwell were evacuated to Reigate and Dorking in Surrey. After the war, the Trustees of the Orphanages decided that the Stockwell buildings were in such a poor state, it would be wiser to sell them for building land and use the capital to build new accommodation for the children in Birchington. Thus, in 1951, the first section of the development, the Boys' blocks, were opened and the boys moved down, followed by the girls two years later. The Chapel was built in 1961 and stood at the rear edge of the site. It was used for Sunday Evening and weekday Services, as the children all went to their own denominations of churches on Sunday mornings.

The old Birchington Hall was used as a Baby Home from about 1954 and continued as such until the new purpose-built home was opened in 1966. The old house continued to be used for a short while after this, mainly for storage, but was eventually abandoned. Sadly, nothing was known about its ancient history at this time, as the old 1800 picture did not see the light of day until 2003, when a copy of it was given to the Birchington Heritage Trust. So when it was decided to pull down the white stucco covered building in **1967**, the event went almost unnoticed. The Homes themselves were closed only a few years later, in 1978, due mainly to new thinking on the way young children should be raised. It was felt that the concept of large Homes was no longer the best way to deal with the situation. Supporting the families in their own homes was felt to be far better, with carefully vetted fostering being used as a last resort.

The site was sold to the developers Stirling Homes soon after this and has since emerged as the Birch Hill Estate by the mid 1980s. Many of the roads on the site commemorate significant people with Spurgeon connections. The final area, covering the ground where the old Hall stood, was not developed until 2000 and has three quiet closes on it, with many of the old trees being retained. Two of the old wells from those early days were uncovered while work was in progress.

The plot of land opposite the house on the north side of the Canterbury Road was part of the Birchington Hall farmland. It was from this meadow that the 1800 picture of the house was painted. When Spurgeon's put the property on the market, Thanet District Council bought this small piece and in recent years it has become 'Crispe Park'. It might have been more appropriate to have named it Friend's Park or Gray Park, or even Spurgeon's park, in honour of its history, as it has never ever had any connection with the Crispe Family of Quex Park.