

**SPURGEON'S CHILDREN'S HOME
&
BIRCH HILL ESTATE - BIRCHINGTON**



One of the Entrances to Birchington Hall.

By Janet Denyer

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INTRODUCTION

It is always interesting to know the history of an area and as time passes memories held by local people fade and important information is lost unless committed to paper. It is with this in mind that I have embarked upon the task of linking the Birch Hill Estate to the Spurgeon's Children's Home in Birchington.

BACKGROUND TO SPURGEON'S CHILDREN'S HOMES

In Victorian England through the works of Charles Dickens (*Oliver Twist*) the conscience of the nation was aware of the plight of children. During one of his evening prayer meetings Charles Spurgeon, a Baptist Preacher, prayed for guidance on a way to help these children out of the unacceptable social conditions they were enduring. He followed this up with an article in his magazine '*The Sword and the Trowel*' commenting that a great effort should be made to do more and for the means with which to do it.

In 1866 Anne Hillyard, the widow of an Anglican clergyman saw this article and offered a donation of £20,000, the equivalent to £1.5 million today, in order to provide an orphanage for boys. Charles thought that she had meant £200 and questioned the number of noughts she had written, but she did indeed mean £20,000.



***Stained Glass Window Haddon House Board Room
Anne Hillyard & Charles Spurgeon***

Before agreeing to accept the money Charles sought assurance that the needs of her near relations were catered for as the money was inherited from her side of the family. This was duly confirmed and thus was the beginning of a charitable organisation to provide homes with a Christian upbringing for orphaned children.

It was the income from Charles' lecture tours and donations from his many benefactors that continued to fund the homes in Stockwell, Reigate, Cliftonville and lastly Birchington.

CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON



Charles Haddon Spurgeon was born in 1834 to John and Eliza Spurgeon at Kelveden, Essex the eldest of 17 children. His father was a Calvinist Minister which must have had an influence on Charles' future in the church. At the age of 7 Charles was sent to a college in Maidstone, Kent and left to teach at Newmarket Academy in Suffolk.

Christianity came to him at the age of 16 and at 17 he became a Baptist pastor near Waterbeach, Cambridge. At 19 he accepted pastoral charge of New Park Street Chapel, Southwark. It was because of the enormous popularity of his preaching that the Metropolitan Tabernacle in Elephant and Castle was built with seating for 5000 and from which he preached for over 38 years.

The Metropolitan Tabernacle is still used today and although it has been rebuilt twice due to a fire and also damage in WW2 (1939/1945) it still retains some original features including the portico.



Metropolitan Tabernacle

Charles was a charismatic preacher and inspired so many people that larger venues were needed including the Surrey Music Hall and the Crystal Palace where in 1856 he preached to 23,634 without a microphone! He was a prolific author of sermons, texts and hymns which were translated into many languages and are still used today.

He married Susannah Thompson in 1856 and had two children, twins Charles and Thomas who also became preachers. In poor health Charles Spurgeon went to France in 1892 and died aged only 58.

LOCATION AND TIMEFRAME OF SPURGEON'S HOMES

- 1867 Boys Orphanage - Stockwell, London
- 1879 Girls Orphanage - Stockwell, London
- 1899-1925 Convalescent home Cliftonville, Kent
- 1922-1923 Birchington Hall, Kent converted into holiday/convalescent home
- 1939-1946 Birchington Hall not occupied during WW2
- 1939-1951 - Stockwell children evacuated to St David's in Reigate, Surrey
- 1949 Birchington Hall development of surrounding land with homes
- 1951-1953 Children from Reigate moved to Birchington
- 1951-1979 Time that children were on the Birchington Site
- 1961 Chapel built
- 1967 Babies Home opened
- 1970/1971 Birchington Hall demolished
- 1978-1979 Birchington Home closed
- 1980s-2000 Birch Hill Estate Housing Development
- 1979 to the present day - care of children by Spurgeons

STOCKWELL HOME

The Stockwell Orphanage for Boys in Clapham Road, London was the first home to be opened in 1867 with the donation from Anne Hillyard. A large number of the children that were taken in were suffering ill health so it was decided to open a home on the coast where children could enjoy the sea and regain their strength. This prompted the purchase of the home in Cliftonville.



Stockwell Home

During WW2 children from Stockwell were evacuated to homes in Reigate and Dorking for safety. Just as well as the Stockwell site was bombed.

After the war it was decided to sell the Stockwell site which had fallen into disrepair and would have been too costly to repair. It was the funds from this sale that enabled the Birchington site to be developed



Stockwell girls at school 1894

CLIFTONVILLE HOLIDAY HOME

In 1899 the first home to be opened in Thanet was in Cliftonville, Kent the inspiration of Thomas Spurgeon, the brother of Charles. Young children were cared for here and it was also a place of convalescence. It closed in 1925 and the children transferred to Birchington.



Cliftonville Home 1900

The building is still there at 205 Northdown Road occupied until recently by Martell Press and it is just possible to see the lettering 'Spurgeon's Seaside Home' above the top windows below the gable.



Cliftonville building today

BIRCHINGTON HALL HOLIDAY HOME

It was decided that the funds raised in memory of Charles Spurgeon in 1917 at the Golden Jubilee celebrations for the Stockwell home foundation should be used to purchase another holiday home and this was how Birchington Hall was chosen.

The Spurgeon's Trust bought the Hall in 1922 together with 40 acres of adjoining farmland worked by a tenant farmer, the income from which went to Spurgeons.

The Hall was converted into dormitories and staff quarters and made into a seaside convalescent and holiday home for children from Stockwell. When the Cliftonville Home closed all the children relocated to Birchington Hall.



Birchington Hall – 1925

Between the years of 1923 and 1953 it is estimated that around 280 children were cared for in the Hall and some were as young as 4 years old. In the 1930s a separate Sick Bay building was added in the grounds for children of all ages.

During WW2 Birchington was declared a 'war zone' being near to Manston Airfield and on the coast, so all the children were moved to Surrey.

It was in 1949 that plans were drawn up to develop the grounds surrounding the Hall and this was the beginning of the second purpose built accommodation.

BIRCHINGTON HALL HISTORY

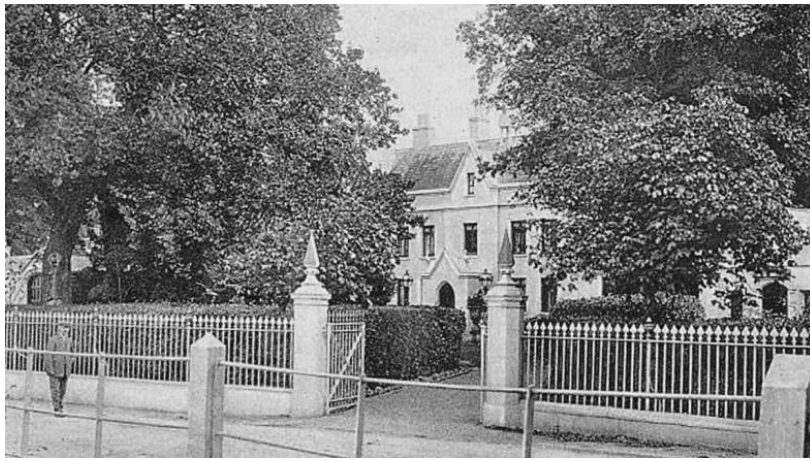
Located fronting onto Canterbury Road with surrounding farmland reaching out to Park Lane, it is believed that this was the site of a dwelling known as 'Scotsdown' in 1560.

In 1620 it was in the hands of the Friend family of Thanet who owned it for the next 230 years. Between 1740 and 1792 the estate was enlarged and it was at this time the name was changed to '*Birchington Place*'.

In the early 1800's the property was again altered including narrow wings added each side and the attic floor given pointed window gables, together with the addition of a new pointed porch. The most unforgiving aspect of these renovations was that the whole building was covered in white stucco which hid the brickwork and consequently the great age of the building.

The Friend family finally sold the house and estate in 1852 and records show it was purchased by James Laming of Margate in 1853.

In the late 1860's or early 1870's it was in the ownership of Thomas & Susan Gray and it was they who changed the name to '*Birchington Hall*'. By inheritance it passed to Louisa Gray who married Oscar Worthington and they sold it, together with its 40 acres of land to Spurgeon's in 1922.



Birchington Hall 1934

Spurgeon's developed the surrounding site to such an extent that Birchington Hall became redundant and it was demolished in 1970/71. At the time it was not seen to be of architectural interest because of the many external alterations and sadly has been lost for posterity.

INFRASTRUCTURE OF BIRCHINGTON SITE

In 1949 although 6 double blocks of purpose built accommodation containing smaller units were planned on the farmland surrounding the Hall, only 3 were actually built. The General Contractors were Rice & Son Ltd of Margate. This development was funded by the sale of the Stockwell site.



Aerial view Birchington Site

The layout was three chevrons within which were four houses and to each block was attached a kitchen serving the four houses.

In 1951 the first block was opened in the grounds around the Hall. This was for the younger boys from St David's, Reigate and the houses were named Kelveden, Westwood, Stambourn and Waterbeach. All were named after locations relevant to Charles Spurgeon.



Individual block of 4 houses

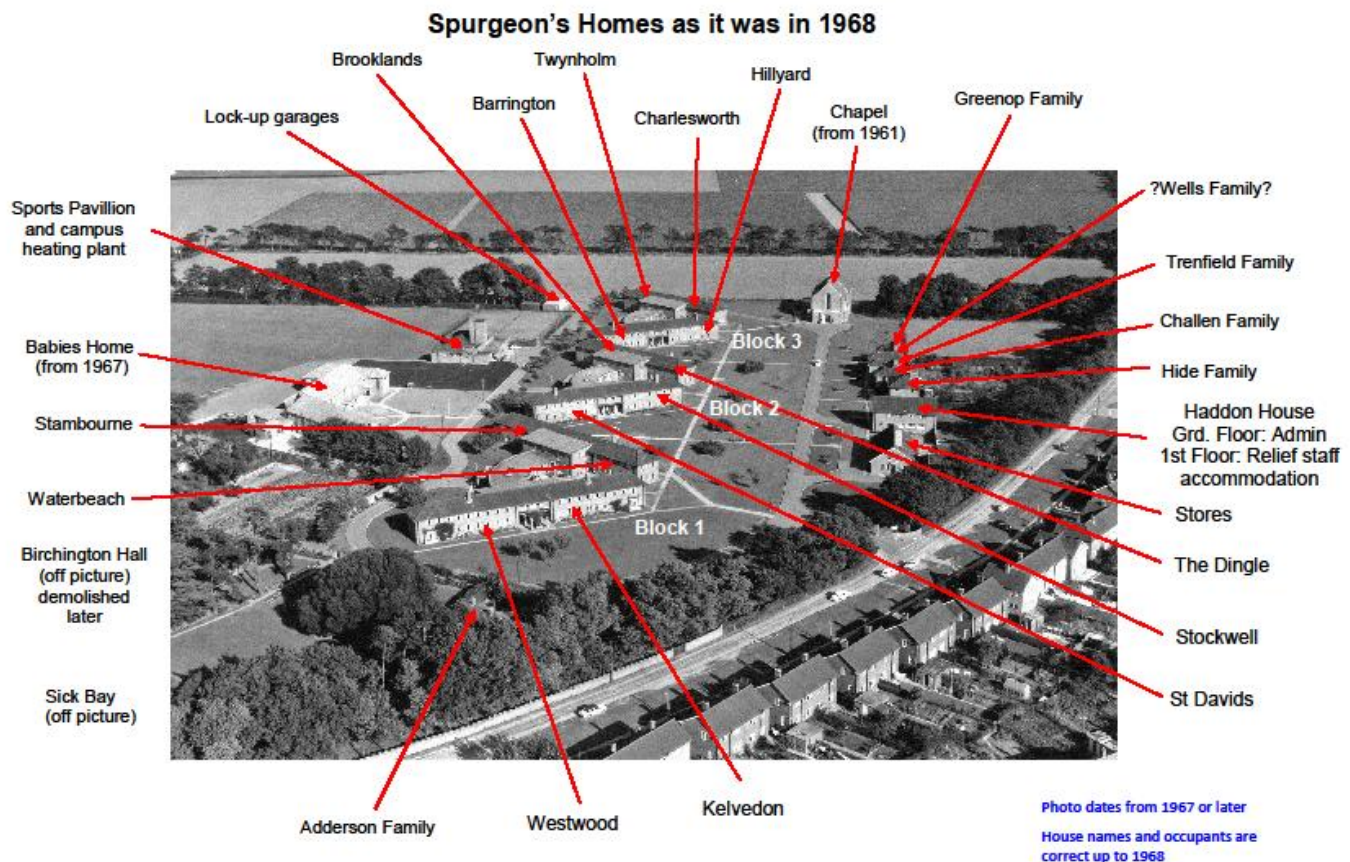
When the boys arrived there were still horses in the stables from the Hall and Homestead Farm was being worked by a tenant farmer, albeit on a smaller scale as most of the land had been used to build the blocks on.

In 1953 the two remaining blocks were opened. The houses were named Stockwell, St David's, The Dingle and Brooklands which were for the girls and Barrington, Hillyard, Charlesworth and Twynholm for the boys.

By 1956 around 16/17 acres remained and was farmed by Liningtons in two fields. One field along by Park Road is still owned and farmed for Spurgeon's today.

Also included in the scope of the redevelopment was an impressive Sports Pavilion which incorporated an oil fired central heating system in the basement. This provided the houses with heating and hot water all year round.

Haddon House was the administration building and it was from this nerve centre that the whole site was run. Separate houses were built on the Park Road edge of the site and occupied by the families of the Principal, the Secretary, the Steward, Sports Master and Head Gardener.





Chapel 1962

In 1961 the Chapel was built on site with seating for up to 200. The Baptist Minister shared the ministry with Birchington Village Baptist Church. The Choir apart from singing in the Chapel also performed off site.



Babies Home 1967

Initially babies and children under 7 were housed in Birchington Hall. There was a separate day nursery building where children up to 4 years would go until they began school. However, in 1967 a new Babies Home with its own kitchen and laundry was built and the Hall was no longer needed, although it continued to be used for storage until it was demolished in 1970/71.



Dining room within a house

The dining room in each house was served from one of the main kitchens. The children would, however, lay the tables and wash up the dishes after meals.

The houses had from 6 to 8 bedrooms and housed between 12 to 14 children the older ones having their own bedrooms. The children were aged between four and sixteen and where possible, brothers and sisters were kept in the same house. Each house was a distinct family in itself in the care of a married couple or two house mothers.



Single Bedroom



Shared Bedroom



Playroom

Each individual house had its own front door and was arranged over two floors with bedrooms, dining room, sitting room, playroom/games room and also a quiet room for study.



Games Room

DAY TO DAY LIFE OF THE CHILDREN

The children were woken at 0630 am, followed by prayers and breakfast then they went off to school. They helped around the house making their own beds and doing other household chores. Pocket money was given according to age and in the 1940's up to the age of 9 it was 3d per week.

The children attended local schools including Birchington Primary School, King Ethelbert, Dane Court, Clarendon House and Chatham House and therefore integrated with the local communities.

There was a fully equipped Sick Bay building with a resident nurse and was attended by the local GP and Dentist. A local barber attended the needs of the boys.



Boys in the 1950s

There were cricket, football, netball and rounders teams who played against each house and local schools. The resident Sports Master organised all the matches and coached the teams.



Spurgeon's Football Team



Inside the Sports Pavilion

The Sports Pavilion was an important part of campus life with glass doors opening onto the cricket ground and football pitches and contained changing rooms and showers. There was a separate billiards/snooker room, a TV room and table tennis was played in the main hall. Prize giving took place in the hall and church services were held there until the Chapel was built in 1961. It could also be utilised as a play area in the winter months.



Spurgeon's Cricket Team



Drama Group

Many activities were held in the Sports Pavilion i.e. gymnastics, ballroom dancing, film shows and hand bell ringing. The drama group rehearsed and put on plays and sometimes outside entertainers would put on a show for the children.

Annual Meetings were held for Sponsors and Old Scholars at the Metropolitan Tabernacle and Westminster Central Hall. From 1967 these were repeated at the Winter Gardens, Margate for the benefit of local supporters. It was at these occasions the Choir, Bell Ringers and Drama Group would perform.

The children were also able to join the Scouts and Girls' Brigade Groups in the Village. On hot summer days they were taken by the site mini bus to Epple, West or Minnis Bays for rock pooling or swimming and at Minnis Bay they had a beach hut.



Afternoon Tea



Children playing in the grounds

There was a tuck shop open on Saturday mornings where some of the children helped out. Other activities included tending the allotments or being in the Choir.

There were tennis courts adjacent to the Pavilion and the surrounding pitches, together with other play areas which were all well used during the summer months.

Sundays involved a morning church service when children went to churches of their own denomination or attended a service in Birchington Hall. An evening service for everyone was also held in the Hall, but this moved to the Chapel when it was built in 1961. There was always a roast lunch on Sundays and this was most often followed by an afternoon walk.



Children having fun



Birchington Station 1950s

During the Summer and Christmas holidays some of the children went home. These were children from single parent families or from homes where it was not possible to cope with them on a full time basis. Others were invited to spend part of the holidays with local families. Where this was not possible there were many activities organised for the remaining children.



Christmas 1978

ADMINISTRATION OF THE SITE

As with any large organisation, the presence of Spurgeon's in Birchington provided local people with employment and income for local businesses.

The Trustees

From 1867 the Charity was run and administered from Stockwell by the Board of Trustees, but when Birchington became the only site in 1953 it became the registered Head Office of Spurgeon's.

The Principal & Matron

Under the Board of Trustees management of the site was jointly in the hands of the Principal/Matron and the Secretary. The Principal had responsibility for the welfare of the children, together with the employment and overseeing of house parents.

The Secretary

The Secretary was responsible for all the financial activities of the site assisted by the administrative staff. They were housed on the ground floor of Haddon House where they and the Principal had offices.

Haddon House

Within Haddon House was the Board Room where the Trustees of Spurgeon's would convene. It had a strong room where trust and title deeds for the various properties held as investments by Spurgeon's were kept. All the children's admission/demotion records together with staff records and suppliers contracts were retained there. Wages and salaries were also held here before distribution to staff. There was a switchboard with 3 external lines and 12 extensions .



Haddon House

The upper floor of Haddon House provided accommodation for the relief staff who were not attached to any particular house so, when not staying in one of the houses when house parents were away, they had somewhere to live.

Number of Children at Birchington

According to records held between 1923 and 1978 it is estimated that over 2100 children were cared for, either on a permanent or temporary basis at Spurgeon's, Birchington. This was split between 1274 boys and 826 girls ranging in ages from birth to 14 and depending on length of stay.

Minimum age for entry has varied over the years. Early on it was 6 for boys and 7 for girls, then reduced to 4 years and in 1954 babies were taken. The maximum age though was 11 years and they could remain until completion of their education. Initially children came to Spurgeon's through their local Church/Minister. In later years Local Authorities were involved and in these circumstances they would fund the children.

By 1963 over 200 boys and girls were in residence at Birchington and the annual cost of running the home at that time was around £52,000. Fund raising was on-going and came from legacies, churches and investments held by Spurgeon's as no Government money was given. Local businesses gave sponsorship and an annual fete was held in the grounds.

In 1977 the site began to close, the children were relocated to foster homes and by March 1978 there were only 20 children left in residence. The site finally closed in 1979.

Staff at Birchington

It is estimated that over 70 people were employed in some capacity on the site at any one time. These included house parents, nursery carers, domestic, office and catering staff, gardeners etc.



Staff at Spurgeon's 1966/67

The Stores

The Stores kept a huge number of items from food to clothing all of which were delivered by the site van.



Inside Food Stores

Clothing, including school uniforms, amounted to 900 new outfits each year and shoes could total 1500 pairs. Linen needed to be provided and there was constant work for the sewing room. Laundry was done off site, although in later years individual houses had access to washing machines for clothing.

Catering/Maintenance/Gardeners

There were three kitchens supplying up to 1000 meals daily to the whole site including the staff. Catering staff came in on a daily basis and food was requisitioned each day and delivered by the Stores. They also used produce from the allotments.

Maintenance staff were employed for the repair and upkeep of the buildings inside and out. Gardeners were employed to maintain the extensive grounds and sports pitches and also the allotments.



One of the kitchens serving 4 houses

CHANGES IN CHILD CARE

In the 1970s there was a change in the social child-care climate to place children into smaller 'foster' style homes. In 1979 the Trust changed to become Spurgeons Child Care and developed Foster Homes and Day Care Centres. The Birchington children were relocated to homes in the Bromley, Luton and Bedford areas.

Thus ended an era begun in 1867 with Charles Spurgeon providing Children's Homes and ending in 1978 at Birchington. This stretched over 111 years of which 55 years were in Birchington.

SPURGEON'S TODAY

The work that Charles Spurgeon started in 1867 still continues in the UK today for the care and nurture of vulnerable children and is a true legacy to his name. It is still a Christian based charity involved in a range of support groups, drop-in centres, play groups, counselling for children and parents. It is administered from its Head Office in Rushden, Northamptonshire. For further information go to www.spurgeons.org

IMPACT ON BIRCHINGTON

The closing of the Spurgeon's site at Birchington in 1979 had a distinct impact on the prosperity of the Village and local area. Businesses supplying goods and services were affected as were individuals who lost their employment.

SPURGEON'S BIRCHINGTON REUNIONS

In 2002 and 2010 former residents of Birchington Spurgeon's held reunions in The Village Centre to meet old friends and reminisce on their time at Spurgeon's. They came from as far afield as New Zealand, Canada and Timor. Some visited the Birch Hill Estate and puzzled over where they lived as it was so very different from their days spent there.

Many Old Scholars have moved into new technology and links are now being maintained via the Internet and in particular Facebook.

BIRCH HILL ESTATE

In the 1980s Spurgeon's sold the site to Stirling Homes for housing development. The site comprised of the blocks of homes which had been occupied by the children and staff. These homes were retained and converted into 36 self-contained apartments. Two of the roads were given names associated with Spurgeon's - Charlesworth Drive (after Revd. V J Charlesworth the first headmaster of Stockwell Boys Home) and Barrington Crescent (after the Girls Orphanage in Barrington Road, Brixton, London).



Aerial view in 2000

The final phase of the Birch Hill development was in 2000 when over 90 new homes were built on the site of Birchington Hall and the surrounding land. The architects retained a number of trees from the Hall days which had protected status and incorporated these into the design and naming roads Pine Tree, Ash Tree and Cedar Closes.



Birch Hill Estate in 2000

So that the rich heritage of Spurgeon's was remembered and dedicated to the many children that found refuge, the residents of Birch Hill Estate kindly agreed to place the stone plaque, which had originally been on an inner wall at Spurgeon's Birchington, at the entrance to Birch Hill. It records the foundation by Charles Haddon Spurgeon of the homes in Stockwell, Reigate and Birchington.



Situated at the entrance to the Birch Hill Estate

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Birchington Heritage Trust - 2013

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www.birchingtonheritage.org.uk