

SURF BOAT DISASTER REPORT
Isle of Thanet Gazette 29 – 2 – 1897
BIRCHINGTON BAY FLOODED
Destruction of the sea wall and Promenade

(The words in italics in square brackets were added in 2014)

The visitation [*storm*] at Birchington was of a brief but destructive character. “It was all done in twenty minutes” says **Mr Alderman Rayden**, the owner of the Birchington Bay Estate with its sea wall and promenade. The damage even in this time must be some thousands of pounds in extent. The promenade which commences at a raised point to the east of the Bay and extends for about a mile in the direction of Reculver, has been much damaged, though it does not present anything like the scene of destruction at Westgate. The extraordinary violence of the hurricane, however, tore up the surface in many places and at some points, deep fissures have been cut into the wall, and large portions either carried away with the receding waves, or dashed with other wreckage across the wide drive (*promenade*) which runs along the sea front.

In the valley (*the Dip*) behind the sea wall, and in front of the residences erected in the locality, stands what has always been known as the “Exhibition Building”, a large erection of somewhat temporary character [*made of wood*], which Mr Rayden generously put up many years ago [*12 years ago in 1885*] for the purpose of holding an Exhibition on a large scale for a charitable object.¹ This building now stands in the midst of a lake and very little more than the roof is visible. During the afternoon of the storm, the waves poured over the damaged sea wall into the valley [Dip] without let or hindrance, changing a pretty spot into a temporary swamp. There are two large conservatories near the building and these were also flooded in eight to ten feet of water.

We regret to hear that much valuable property of a perishable character belonging to Mr Rayden was stored in the Exhibition Building, as well as a number of family relics. It is feared that most of these have been rendered valueless. In a few days, however, the whole of the water will be pumped out and every effort made to speedily repair, as far as possible, the damage done.

While cost of the larger disasters in other places round the coast will, in every case, be distributed over a number of persons, that at Birchington falls entirely on one man, Mr Alderman Rayden. That gentleman has spent a fortune, to say nothing of the most persevering efforts over a number of years in developing the estate and

¹ In 1883-4 Arthur Rayden bought almost all the farmland from the Lower Gore End Farm (now called Old Bay Cottage) in the Bay for development into an area similar to that already in existence at Westgate. He formed a company called the **Birchington Bay Freehold Land & Estate Company Limited**. His manager in 1897-8 was James E. Keen. We hold a drawing of about 1885, showing what was envisaged as the development at Minnis Bay. This included a pier, a church, several large hotels, long terraces of grand houses and wide greens along the edge of the promenade.

In order to sell the land, he decided to install an attraction in the Dip – hence the Exhibition Building – and chartered trains from London to bring visitors to Birchington Station. He then hired small carriages and horses to ferry his visitors down to the Bay. Unfortunately, many people who came were not hugely wealthy, so only bought small plots of land. Only one long terrace was built, along with three short terraces, but no pier and the one hotel did not arrive until 1905. The green spaces were laid out – and are one of the few pieces that still remain of the original plans.

The writer of the article was given the impression that all the development at the Bay was a philanthropic venture, when in reality the work was all done to protect his own business venture!

protecting the sea front. He has accomplished this in the face of many difficulties and discouragements and much sympathy is felt for him in the present disaster.

