

# THE CRISPE CHARITY SCHOOL

*by Jennie Burgess, Parish Archivist - based on A. T. Walker's account*

The first school in Birchington and Acol of which there is a record was the charity school established under the will of Anna Gertruy Crispe of Quex Park, who died on March 27<sup>th</sup> 1708. In her will she bequeathed to the Overseers of the Poor of Birchington and Ville of Acol 47 acres of land lying in the parishes of Birchington and Monkton - now known as Crispe Farm. At that time it was let at £18 per annum and the income was to be used "to keep at school with an able Dame or Schoolmaster the number of twelve boys and girls to be taught to learn to read and write and the girls to work needlework, to be educated in good manners and to be at Church orderly, and having learned to read, to give each at leaving School a Bible." Also it was stated that the remaining money, after other bequests had been met, was "to bind some of the boys as an apprentice at some handicraft trade." Almost every trade had apprenticeships, including silk weavers and shoe smiths.

*Young shoe-smith apprentices*



So in 1708 the Crispe Charity School was started in Birchington. It was one of hundreds founded all over England during the reigns of William and Mary and Queen Anne. Schools were badly needed after the Reformation, once nearly all the Church-funded ones were closed down. Initially the State did nothing for the education of the poor and small parishes like Birchington and the Ville of Acol had no form of endowed school. They almost certainly had one or two Dame schools, where an unofficial person taught a few children their letters in return for a small fee.

A copy of the last will of Mistress Anna Crispe, dated 13<sup>th</sup> February 1707, appears in the front of the first volume of the Crispe Charity Land Account Book, where there is also a summary of the terms of the will affecting the school. Mistress Anna was the last of the Crispe family to live at Quex. She was buried in the Quex Chapel of All Saints Church, Birchington, where there is a white marble bust of her. Below this is inscribed a portion of her will, by which she left 47 acres of land in trust for poor widows and education. The monument is by the eminent sculptor William Palmer of London.

The Crispe Charity School was one of the first to be established in East Kent. The first Dame was Elinor Jarvis, whose annual salary was initially £2 11s 8d. By March 1710 she was paid £5 1s 10d for teaching 12 scholars, which she received in four quarterly payments, with an extra 10s 6d for 3 Bibles that were given to scholars leaving school.

Where this first school was situated is not certain - it may well have been in her own home, as a later schoolmaster used his home for teaching his pupils. By 1840 the school was housed at 191 Canterbury Road and the barn that stands at the rear. The house is on the corner of Park Road. The listing on the Tithe Map simply states "School House" for this property, and clearly shows it was not being used for domestic purposes

at this period. It was owned by Stephen Chandler and the Schoolmaster was Thomas Christopher Wilson.



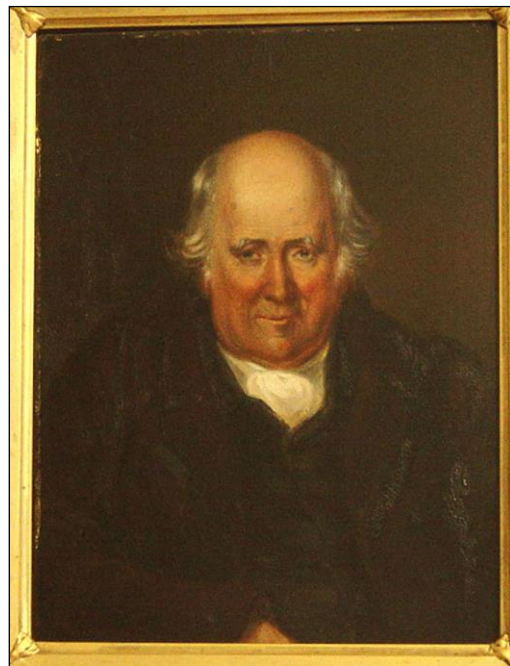
*Elinor Jarvis teaching in her own home*

To return to Elinor Jarvis, she continued as Dame until 1715, when she married Clement Benefield, and she was then followed by Elenor Huse. Mistress Huse resigned at the end of 1729, probably through ill health, as the register records her burial in November the following year. The third Dame, Elizabeth Mirriams, was schoolmistress for 43 years, until 1772.

In 1774 the first of a long list of schoolmasters, Gilbert Stringer, served for 33 years. His grave stands at the east end of the churchyard in the shadow of Quex Chapel. The inscription on his tombstone states that he was also Perpetual Parish Officer for 37 years and Treasurer to the Union Workhouse for 30 years. This workhouse stood on the site of Park Lane School. These three jobs must have overlapped and during this time he was also occasionally an Overseer of the Poor in the parish and one of the Guardians of the Workhouse. As can be judged, Stringer was an important official in the community, but up until 1810 his salary at the school never exceeded £10 a year.

It was while he was Master that the Churchwardens and Overseers of Birchington and Acol agreed that "the Boys and Girls who we are pleased to put in the Charity School shall not come in until they are about 8 or 9 years of age and they are to continue there 3 years and no longer. If the parents of these boys and girls neglect to keep them at school, Harvest and Hopping excepting, the Overseers are to turn them out and put in others." They stated that the Schoolmaster "shall learn (sic.) the Boys and Girls to read and work for 3d a week and when the Schoolmaster shall think any Boy of Girl qualified to learn to write ..... the Schoolmaster shall learn each one to write and cipher for 6d a week." In 1789 the Overseers agreed to pay the Schoolmaster an annual salary of £10 16s.

*Gilbert Stringer*



In 1809 the tenant of the Crispe Farm, Mr John Sidders, began paying an increased rent of £51 14s a year. For this reason, the Trustees decided to increase the Schoolmaster's salary to £20 a year, so Gilbert Stringer was then instructed to teach the children to "read and write", but by now he had taken in 19 scholars, instead of the stipulated dozen. Their ages ranged from 5 to 12 years and one of them had been in the school for longer than the stipulated 3 years. Sidders listed the children in the Account Book under 'Birchington' and 'Extra from Birchington' and then 'Ville of Wood' (Acol) and 'Extra from Ville of Wood'. His list gives their ages in 1810 and the date when they entered the school. Seven of these children received Bibles when they left at the end of the usual 3 years. However, the addition of names in excess of the stated 12 was frowned upon by the Churchwardens and Overseers and a few years later the following note appears in the Account Book . . . . .

"At a meeting held January 15<sup>th</sup> 1816 consisting of the 4 present Overseers and some Overseers for the years 1813 and 1814 and several other Parishioners, it was unanimously resolved that they were fully satisfied of the impropriety of Gilbert Stringer the Schoolmaster with having entered in his own handwriting in this Book in the Accounts for the year 1813 a List of children, denominated these as Extra, in number Ten, designated there as if by Agreement. No agreement of the kind having been made or mentioned and he is henceforward desired to make out his Bill with the names of the Twelve Children only agreeable to the Words of the Will."



*Birchington Hall, John Friend's home*

A note is added, "The Tuition of the extra children was advised by Mr John Friend (Overseer) and approved by Dr Scott, (the Vicar of Monkton and Birchington) and was much commended by ye Commissioners appointed to exam the Charities. 1818."

[John Friend owned Birchington Hall and acted a 'Lord of the Manor', in the absence of a prominent family at Quex.]

For a number of years from 1816 onwards only 12 names are entered - 6 from Birchington and 6 from Acol.



*Entrance to Crispe Farm*

But in 1817 Gilbert Stringer's Salary was increased to £36 15s per year and this increase was no doubt due to the fact that the rent from the Crispe Farm was now £150 a year. At the meeting when this was decided, the Vicar of Monkton, the Rev. R. P. Whish was present - which had rarely happened before.

In the Government "Reports on the Charities of Kent" in 1815, it is stated that "the premises (that is the Farm) were let by auction on lease for 8 years from the 11<sup>th</sup> October 1813 to Thomas Sidders at the rent of £51 14s for the first year and £150 for every succeeding year of the term. This rent is considerably above the real value and the land is not expected to produce much more than half the present rent when the lease expires. The tenant has applied for an abatement in his rent, but none has yet been allowed him. The Schoolmaster received £36 15s yearly for teaching 12 boys and girls mentioned in the Will and he takes 12 more in addition, sometimes one or two more. There are never less than 24. They are all taught reading, writing and accounts and the girls are taught needlework, each of the first 12 receiving Bibles on leaving School. The Overseers appoint the first 12, but the selection of the other 12 is generally left to the Schoolmaster." In the Appendix to the Reports is the evidence given by Mr Gilbert Stringer to the Commissioners on Education of the Poor on his visit to the House of Commons.

"He [*Stringer*] said there was an endowed School at Birchington. Previous to Easter 1817 his salary was £20 but at that time it was raised to £36 15s. He said he taught 12 boys and girls, and the 12 taken in addition, reading and writing and arithmetic. There was no allowance for books and stationery - the parents find these themselves. He said he built the school room, which belonged to him. There was no house attached to the School - he had to find that himself. The original 12 scholars and the 12 added lately are always filled up and there are always candidates for a vacancy. The children attended Church regularly. He sent the girls to another school to be taught needlework (it is not known where). There were in the Parish of Birchington and Ville of Acole about 180 children who had not the means of education, about 140 of whom attend regularly at the Sunday School." At this time the population of Birchington with Acol was about 700. It was stated to the Commissioners that the apprentices were taken from the first 12 children and the funds were at that time more than sufficient for the boys who offered to go out to apprenticeships. The apprenticeship fees varied from £10 to £25 and even £35 had once been given.

By 1827 Gilbert Stringer had 28 scholars but in 1828 he ceased to be Schoolmaster and Peter Wootton took his place at the same salary, out of which £10 was to be paid to Gilbert Stringer, probably as a pension, until his death in 1832.

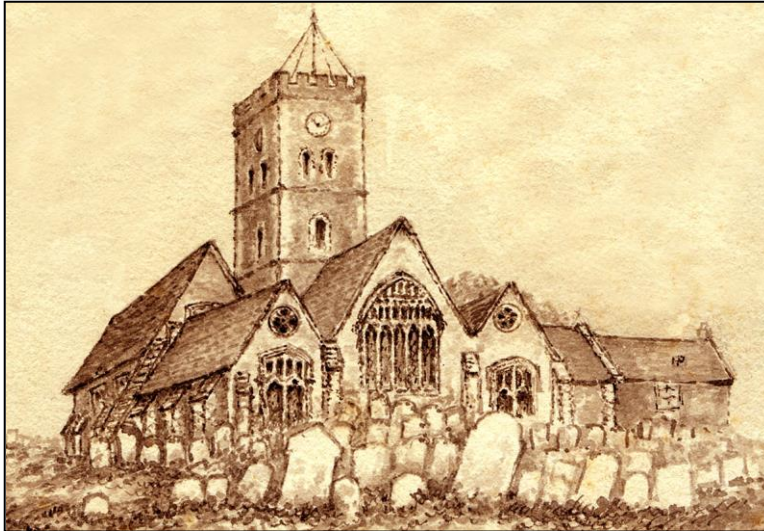
*Monitor helping a younger pupil with reading*

Peter Wootton was Schoolmaster for only a short time, as in 1832 Mr Sympson's name appears in the Account Book receiving the salary. In 1834, he was followed by Michael John Benefield. Two years later Thomas Sidders had become Schoolmaster at the same salary of £36 15s, but in 1839 this was increased to £50, as by then there were 50 children in the school. Lack of accommodation for the increased numbers had



been a problem for the last few years, so in 1836 the Overseers, the Vicar and others held a meeting and agreed to bid the sum not exceeding £130 for the old Union Workhouse in Park Lane, next to the present school. It was being offered for sale, because by now the new Thanet Union Workhouse had been built at Minster. The bid was unsuccessful and the old Workhouse was bought by John Powell Powell Esq. of Quex for £225.

From this date onwards, it would appear from the accounts that the Governors of the Charity paid for the materials needed in the school, including 'scrip cards', pencils, copy books, pens and slate pencils. During this time a new system of educating children was developing, provoked mainly by the increase in numbers seeking education. It was known as the Monitorial System and was proving very effective. However, Mr Sidders



continued to teach in the old system, with very poor results appearing every time the children were tested. A Committee was appointed in 1850 to report on his work and it was decided to attend the schoolroom to hear the examination of the children by an examiner conversant with the new system.

*St Lawrence Church  
Ramsgate, c. 1840*

The Committee wanted the examiner's opinion and advice, so a sub-committee of 4 local people visited the school and reported that they considered Mr Thomas Sidders "insufficient to teach upon the present system on which the Education is generally conducted throughout the Country, but at the same time, we earnestly recommend the Overseers to continue Mr Sidders as Schoolmaster, remembering the many years he has been the Master of the Crispe School, provided he regularly attend for three months the instruction of Mr Johnson at his school at St Lawrence and make himself an efficient Master of the present system of Education."

Mr Sidders agreed to the recommendation and attended St Lawrence School, where Mr Johnson reported favourably on him. There is no doubt that he was being introduced to the Monitorial System, so popular at the time. This system advocated that a group of the more intelligent senior pupils was appointed as monitors. These monitors came to school early and were given concentrated instruction by the Master.

When the rest of the scholars arrived, they were divided into small groups, with each group guided by a monitor who passed on the instruction obtained from the Master. He would superintend the work of the whole school while the monitors instructed their groups. Towards the end of the school day, the Master would test each group to see whether they had learned the lessons.

Mr Johnson, in his report on Thomas Sidders, stated:

"Mr Sidders has applied himself to working the System with that diligence and ardour which should at all times characterise a teacher of the young and I have no hesitation in saying that you will, in a few months time, notice a decided improvement in those dear children entrusted to him, by the working of the New System. I may also add that he has acknowledged the Old System to be erroneous."

*This house (191 Canterbury Road) is shown as the 'Charity School' on the 1840 Tithe Map*



As a result of all this work, Mr Sidders was 'elected' Master of the Crispe School until 1851 and a number of books were procured - religious and secular - slates and pencils were bought and maps of England, the World, Europe and Palestine were bought and presumably displayed around the walls of the schoolroom. A Visiting Committee was appointed with the duty of visiting the school each

month. Mr Sidders' salary was now £48 per annum. It is interesting to note that for many years and during all these discussions involving the future of Thomas Sidders, neither the Vicar of the Parish of Monkton, the Rev. R. P. Whish, nor the Curate for Birchington, the Rev. H. F. Whish, his son, was ever present at the meetings. The fact that the Crispe Charity was not an ecclesiastical foundation was probably at the root of this situation. The Chairman of the Visitors was the Rev. G. W. Sicklemore, MA, Vicar of St Lawrence, Ramsgate.

In 1862, Thomas Sidders retired and it appears that the Charity School closed. By now the National School in Park Lane, opened in 1849, was well established. In December 1862, the Governors of the Crispe Charity agreed that thanks be conveyed to Mr Sidders for the "zeal and assiduity with which he has conducted the Crispe Charity School for the last 27 years and greatly regret that the state of their funds renders it impossible to recommend a retiring allowance." However, the following year it was agreed to award him a pension of £10 annually for life. This decision caused considerable discussion between the Managers of the National School and the Governors of the Crispe Charity, so that in the end the Vicar, the Rev. R. P. Whish said, "for peace's sake the proposals regarding the pension are accepted by the National School Managers"! It must be remembered that none of the schoolmasters or schoolmistresses mentioned up until now had received any training for the task at all. The pension of £10 was paid to Thomas Sidders until 1868 when he died. Any money that was left after paying for Quex Chapel and the widows' allowances was donated to the National School in Park Lane.

In 1876 a new church ('St Giles', later renamed 'St Mildred') was built in Plumstone Lane, Acol, which doubled as the venue for a school for the village children, to save

them trekking up the hills to either Minster School or Park Lane School in Birchington. The Crispe Charity contributed to the running costs of this school from its outset, and ceased its contribution to the National School in Park Lane. However, the school element of this venture closed just ten years later, so the Trustees asked to have their Scheme re-ordered by the Charity Commissioners. From then on the main portion of the funds went to children in further education or apprenticeships. The new scheme now, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, also includes youth groups.



*The fireplace in St Mildred's Church, now blocked up*

Sometime during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the number of widows was increased from five to ten and they were given cash rather than goods. The allowance for the upkeep of Quex Chapel was set at £28, which is what it remained until in 2008. The Trustees tried to get it raised with help from the owner of the chapel (Mr

Christopher Powell-Cotton) in about 2000, but the Charity Commissioners refused to sanction it. However, they did allow the Trustees to increase the amount given to the widows from £14 a year to £50 in about 1998, when a new lease and greatly increased rent were amicably negotiated with the long-time tenant, Mr David Fuller. The increase in the Quex Chapel contribution was finally granted in 2011, after the next rent review had raised the amount enough for the Commissioners to look favourably on the request.



*The derelict toilets can still be seen on the north wall of the church ground*

By the mid-1970s full-blown apprenticeships were rare, but even today (2012) young people still ask for help with tools and equipment for training to become carpenters, electricians and hairdressers. There are just two qualifications to validate a request for a grant. The youngsters must be (a) between the ages of 16 and 24 and (b) they must be resident in the parish of Birchington with Acol. The youth groups must be active in Birchington and cover the ages from 5 to 24 to be entitled to a grant.

The clause in the will covering the care of Quex Chapel is included on the memorial to Anna Gertruy Crispe in Quex Chapel. When visitors read it, they often smile when they realise that the 'char', Ellen Window, is commemorated on the slab along with her mistress. Ellen was ordered to make sure that the chapel was kept clean and sparkling

for its occupants each Sunday, a job which is still carried out today by a band of dedicated volunteers from among the All Saints' congregation, who use the grant of £50 to buy dusters, cloths and polish etc.



The posy presented in honour of Anna and her gift to Birchington & Acol

The Quex Chapel has seen many changes since Anna's death in 1708, including the removal of her great family pew in 1863, but she would certainly be very satisfied that it is still kept clean and tidy, three hundred years later. She would also be delighted to know that her investment in that small farm at Acol continues to help fund the education of young people in the village and still brings relief to some of our elderly widows each year. Long may the Crispe Charity remain active!

In 2008, the Trustees and some of the most recent beneficiaries of the Charity held a 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration in All Saints Church, during which the story of the Charity and its school was told by various participants. Hymns from around beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were included and a posy, provided by Maureen Hudson, was placed at the foot of the memorial to Anna Crispe in Quex Chapel.







*The celebration cake baked and iced by Marge Barker*

At the end of the formal part of the celebration, a large cake (which was baked and decorated for us by Marge Barker) was shared with all those present. These included the current Trustees, a number of past and present students who have benefited from the charity in recent years, the farmer whose family has now rented the farm for three generations and the Vicar of All Saints, the Rev. Don Witts. As well as accompanying the hymns the Parish Organist, Tim Attride, also played us some music which Anna Crispe could have known and heard in her lifetime in Birchington.



Birchington Heritage Trust - 2012  
Register Charity: 1099250  
[www.birchingtonheritage.org.uk](http://www.birchingtonheritage.org.uk)