

A Birchington Childhood. – Janet Robinson

William (Bill) Albert Clarke was born in Birchington in 1906, growing up in the Epple Bay area. Many years later he wrote his memories of his childhood, and I have picked a few of them for this article.



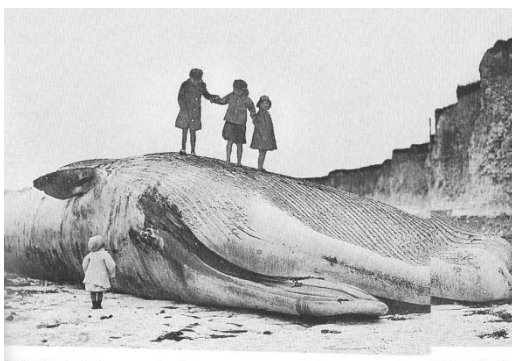
“Epple Bay then was just a narrow inlet. Most boys and girls could swim almost as soon as they could walk. We swam out until we could see the jetty at Margate, where paddle steamers from London and Southend would bring trippers. My grandmother would take us three children to Margate on the August Bank Holiday to watch the steamers come in. There were usually three; the Royal Sovereign, the Golden Eagle, and the Medway Queen. We thought that was a great treat.

Lots of boys and girls would make their way to the sea in bare feet. Some had plimsolls, others rope-soled canvas slippers, usually only fit to throw away at the end of the school holiday. The path ((to Epple Bay) traversed an old brick-field, where we would get red dust on our legs and feet, then find a pool on the shore to produce make-believe blood.

During the First World War the German aeroplanes could only just about make it to London, flying over the south-east coast towns. Armoured cars would go through the village and a man with a megaphone would shout ‘lights out’. The people in our village would collect in each other’s houses and make tea, knowing the planes, called Gothas, would be going back the same way an hour or so later. I remember we would be short of tea at these times, and my mother would burn bread in the oven that would be scalded like tea. At least it made something hot to drink.”

Bill describes walking along Canterbury Road from the top of Epple Road towards The Square, passing Birchington Hall, the home of Mrs Grey.

“Mrs Grey always had donkeys in the field when I was a small lad. A high wall ran at the side of the house where there were stone tablets with the names of the donkeys she had kept. My uncle Fred told me of how they buried one donkey with its hoofs near the surface, and one night he took a saw and cut the hoofs off. They were polished and made into inkwells, which I have seen in the family over the years.”



In the year 1914 there was a great whale washed ashore at Grenham Bay, said to be the largest ever found on the coastline of Britain. I went round to it on the rocks from Epple Bay, it was only a few feet from the chalk cliffs. Some boys had their photos taken standing on the top, which must have been ten or twelve feet off the sand. The jaws were full of blood and its tail part was badly wounded. It was said that it had caught a mine, which in that year had not yet been cleared from the sea. Most people only visited it once, so horrible was the stench. Finally, it was cut up by professionals and put on the fields beyond Park Lane School, while the jaw bones are to be seen in the garden of the Sea View Hotel, forming an archway.”

Bill Clarke also wrote of his walk to school in Park Lane, and the buildings and shops he passed, and some of the local people he knew, and I hope to use these for a short talk at one of our future meetings. His full memoirs are in the files at our museum.