

“Grove House” – The Square, Birchington

By C.W.R. Winter – 1966

Those of us who are fortunate enough to remember our old village of Birchington sixty or more years ago, are staggered almost by the great alterations in every direction that have taken place in the intervening years, by its development into the present busy seaside town.



Previously its charm and quietness were proverbial, when all its interests, its private houses, shops and inns, were centred round its characteristic old world Square, when in a map by Thomas Hill it is shown with its Maypole in position. This was in 1688.

The whole complex was, and still is, unaltered by its beautiful and ancient Parish Church of All Saints, the least altered midst all the change around. In 1895 it was almost a novelty to see

even the horse-drawn charabanc with its load of Margate trippers passing through on its way to the countryside and on to Canterbury. The farmers' wains and carts, and shopmen's vans about their lawful business, and an occasional carriage and pair or a Victoria belonging to the local gentry, made up the total of its traffic, and only the occasional ringing of the Church bells, and the clanging of hammer on an anvil one of the two nearby Forges, broke its settled calm.

But today the scene is vastly altered. The multitude of motor vehicles of all descriptions passing by Grove House is immense in each direction, making it at times a really hazardous task to cross from one side of the Square to the other.

From what has already been written by others it must not be gathered that all the old world charm has vanished from this centre of village life and activity, for many of its ancient houses remain in evidence, in spite of demolitions and the re-erection of modern premises. There are for instance at least four of the William III (1689 – 1702) Flemish period buildings which can be counted within a stone's throw of one another, and in their old world quaintness, with characteristic Dutch gables and old fashioned fittings, namely Laburnam House (now Mulberry's Tea Rooms), The New Inn (later The Pewter Pot), The Smugglers, and of course Grove House – the last three being scheduled under Registration of Ancient Monuments Act. The older generation of villagers used to designate them “the Dykers Houses” in error however, one fears, through having wrongly associated them with the Hollanders, known to have been introduced into our area at this particular period to advise and superintend the erection of sea wall defences and the draining of the marshes to the south



and west of our Island. For it is on record that many were erected in the towns and villages around by local people as well.

To quote only one instance of Milton Place, Broadstairs, that was built by David Culmer and his wife in 1673. Their initials and the date just quoted appear on the gables of this charming old relic of former days. This Culmer family had been in Thanet many decades prior to this residence being erected. An illustration of it and references to many others of this period, viz, Reading Street, Sarre, St. Lawrence Ramsgate, and Margate, may be found in Arch. Cant. Vol XL. Pp 387 – 390.



But now to turn to Grove House. First my thanks must be tendered to Dr. W. A. Mayne, (who bought this property in 1953) for granting me the privilege of the run of his domain to take photographs, make plans, and gather notes for the purpose of this essay, which permission has been invaluable.

The house may easily be missed, as it stands tucked neatly away from the Canterbury Road (it is No. 215) with only its northern gable visible down an alleyway from the Square. It is approached by a tree shaded paved pathway, and has a well stocked old-world garden on its western and southern sides, which greatly adds to its charm and restfulness. The main portion of the building is constructed of dark red brick in Flemish Bond, and its walls have been beautifully mellowed in the passing of the years, while in the lower lean-to portion contemporary yellow brick is in evidence. This originally was only of ground floor height, the upper part of this being added about 1870. It has the Dutch gables both on its northern and southern ends, the latter being especially attractive.

As it stands at present, the house has several problems requiring investigation from an architectural point of view. The first is occasioned by the peculiar arrangement of the ridge of the building. The gabled northern section will be seen to terminate a little more than half way along, in the apex of a dwarfed cement plastered gable, proceeding thence to the southern gable about eighteen inches lower, but not from a point immediately under the first run, by which arrangement the tiling of both sections are not at variance, nor are the



positions of the two attic dormer windows thrown out of alignment. This roof variation points apparently to one of two things, either that originally the building consisted of two cottages afterwards joined into one, or that after the north end section was in progress of erection it was decided to make a southern extension. Everything points however to the fact, that whether conversion or extension, the whole of the building as it now stands was more or less coeval.

There are other points which indicate the suggested conversion or alteration of its original plan, namely, if the façade of the northern section is carefully scrutinised, a blocked up and over-hooded front door can easily be discerned – the marks of the hood, by the way, suggest a Georgian door case had supplanted the original square headed Flemish style – whilst coming to a point a little beyond the centre of the building, a vertical dividing line indicated by the pointing of the brickwork can be traced down from the fascia ovolo moulded boarding immediately under the gutters to the ground, while the original entrance to the southern part can be detected in the lower left hand section of its south wall, with its finely proportioned stepped gable, surmounted by a more modern chimney stack, and its upper and central string courses and stopped up windows. These particulars seem to clinch the argument that we have here conversion, as has already been suggested.

Before this alteration each section would have had its spiral staircase, a feature of this style, situated in the nook between the outer walls and the breast of the great fireplaces, now built in with modern grates occupying much less space to take their place. Whether this stairway was situated east or west of the northern chimney breast cannot now be determined as all the outside northern gable wall has been cement plastered, so that any window lighting it cannot be traced, but in the southern portion the original staircase wall has been situated in the south west nook as the window, now blocked up, is plainly shown, whilst the niche on the other side of the fireplace here on the ground floor still retains a lovely contemporary cupboard, with shell hood and shaped shelves, and the cupboard in the bedroom above shows that its light was obtained from the other blocked window. The present entrance was probably made when the transformation of the premises took place, and at the same time the present two flight staircase in the hall leading to the first floor and attics would have been installed to take the place of the disused spiral ones. Remains of an original window can be traced on brickwork over the present front door.

Just one other point bearing on this joining of the two original buildings must be noted, namely that in the two main gable heads, two different sets of initials can be seen. On the northern one I.M. can be made out, although its second letter has been badly eroded by the weather. In a similar position on the southern gable of Grove House appear the initials I.C., which definitely can be traced as belonging to a John Covell, a member of a well known local family of those days, which had, according to Barrett in his *“Ville of Birchington”* no less than twenty-two grave stones erected to various members of this family in our well kept Churchyard. More particulars of this family will be forthcoming a little later on.

But here must be mentioned in reference to this curious custom of placing ownership initial letters and figures, they functioned as wall anchors, their tie rods or tongs passing through the masonry to engage main timbers within the building thereby knitting and strengthening the fabric



generally. This is mainly because the gable walls stand outside the roofing timbers. Sometimes only plain bars with foliated ends were put to this same purpose, as may be seen in the gable end of Laburnam House already mentioned. (The south gable requires fuller description. Its two string courses, its arched gable and pediment, and later dated chimney stacks.)



The principal outside problems and features of Grove House have been touched on, and attention must now be directed to its inside layout, beginning with the cellar and then

proceeding to the rooms and attics generally. This undercroft, until the doctor took over the premises, had not been opened or been in use for 80 or more years. It was found to be entered from the blocked end of a small corridor at the back of the lounge and surgery of the doctor's residence, and approached by a flight of descending brick steps with decayed narrow wooden treads. It was originally lit by a blocked up window on its east side. Cobwebs almost barred the way in, these had been strangely petrified by damp in conjunction with lime from the excellent chalk walling of well cut clunch blocks. The spiders also shared in the same process, presenting a very weird and fossilised appearance. One curious feature was noted, where at one place the ceiling was pierced and a small square aperture passed upward to a trap door in the hall floor above, making one think it may have had connection with the old smuggling days, forming a secret hideaway entrance for contraband if of convenient size. The Smuggling Excise Act of 1733 and increased duties levied later on, formed the groundwork of a new industry in all the towns and villages of the coast of Thanet. Barrett says that few people are aware of how wholesale was the manner of this traffic.

One other feature connected with the cellar must be mentioned. It was the discovery under the loose red bricks of its flooring of a varied collection of coloured glass beads which were pronounced by the British Museum authorities as belonging to the late seventeenth century, therefore coeval with the building itself : hidden treasure indeed.

With respect to the extension on the east side of the house now used as a living room with a scullery attached, only its ground floor belongs to the original building. The upper storey was added within living memory. The late Mrs. Tomlin, who died in 1950 aged 91, remembered its addition. Outside the north side of the section just described is the original old fashioned cobble paved little yard with the cover of its underlying rain water tank now filled in.





We must now add a few words relating to the different owners and occupiers of Grove House to complete the survey of this subject. In its early days the property will be found to be intimately connected with the Covell family, very much in evidence in Birchington parochial matters dating back to 1614 when Robert Cauvell (as the name is first spelt) was elected as Birchington local Deputy to attend the Cinque Port Sessions at Dover. In 1619 his name crops up as a loyal 'Musqueteer' militia man in the 'Muster Roule of the Select Companie in the parish of St. John's (Margate) and Birchington in the Isle of Thanett in the County of Kent', containing names of the Captain, officers and souldyers of the same.' (See Domestic State Papers. James I Vol CVIII No. 9)

Once more his name, now spelt Covell, is to be found amongst those paying the Chimney Tax on two hearths in 1662 (see Barrett's History of the Ville of Birchington). The Chimney Tax of Charles II, 1662, was levied

when 'every house, chamber or lodging' was charged 2/- yearly 'to be paid on Lady Day and Michaelmas for every fire -hearth or stove therein.'

The Birchington Churchwardens at the time called it the 'Fireharth'. In his list of contributors to this tax, only the names of the occupiers are specified, with no names of their dwellings. Only one unnamed Empty House with three hearths is among the list. This may have been Grove House and have originally been built for Widow Masters who perhaps had moved from here, which presumably had only 3 firehearths, to a larger building containing four as shown on schedule. This is pure guess work but it will account for the initials I.M. on the north gable as her initials as builder of the property (Isabella Masters?) which building was taken over by John Covell and explains the south gable bearing his initials.

Further we learn from an entry in the Parish Church accounts respecting the great repairs to that building in 1687, his name here shown as Robert Cowell the Carpenter as being responsible for the bulk of the renewed woodwork therein. At the same time a Mary East the owner of the Village Smithy, under whom all the ironwork necessary for the repair of its many windows was executed. This is the first mention so far traced of this Smithy property so intimately connected with Grove House. Robert Covell's name also will be



found on Thomas Hill's unique map of the parish dated 1688. Covell was then apparently occupying a small house and holding adjacent to East End Farm on the Margate Road.

But to go back to the year 1666 - We find a relative of his John Covell and his wife according to the record of the Visitation of the Archdeacon of Canterbury at this date, as being brought before his court for standing excommunicate above forty days and not coming to church. (See Arch. Cant. XXV.) It was this man's son also named John born 1677 and died 1749 who in all probability was responsible for the building of Grove House, late in the seventeenth century. A valuable piece of extraneous evidence connecting this last named with this property is supplied by the three early discs of the Sun Insurance Company still occupying positions on the façade of the building, two fortunately numbered, and one plain. The numbers referred to the early policies, full particulars of which Dr. Mayne obtained from the Sun Insurance Company, and which proved so interesting and informative that they are given here in full.



Policy No. 157634. Dated June 2nd. 1757.

Fenttin Covell of Birchington in the County of Kent, Blacksmith
in his Dwelling House only brick and tiled
situated aforesaid not exceeding One hundred & Sixty pounds

£ 160

Premium On his Household Goods and Furniture therein
11/- not exceeding Ninety Pounds

£ 90

Renewable On his Wearing apparel therein not exceeding
1758 Fifty Pounds.

£ 50

Agency On his Barn and Stable, Smiths Forge and Coal
Creed. House in one building
 Thatched separate from the Dwelling House not
 exceeding One Hundred Pounds

£ 100

Total

£ 400

(He was probably son of John aforesaid)

This second policy is dated 29th September 1805.

Policy No. 780994.

John Covell of Chatham in Kent, gentleman,
on a House only at Birchington in Kent in the
tenure of Edward Young, Blacksmith, brick and
tiles not exceeding One hundred and sixty pounds. £ 160

On Barn Stable Smith's Forge and Coal House
adjoining near not exceeding One hundred
pounds. £ 100

House only in rear in tenure of John Sidders,
Farmer, brick and tiled not exceeding One
hundred pounds. £ 100

Barn and Stable only near thatched not
exceeding Twenty pounds on each £ 40

Total £ 400

(This was probably son of Fenttin)

The property evidently changes ownership soon after 1805, for one finds the Birchington
Tithe Map Terrier dated 1840-1 states the following particulars of these holdings.

- On Page 8.

<u>Owner</u>	<u>Occupier</u>	<u>Plan No.</u>	<u>Description</u>	a. r. p.
John Friend.	Edward Young Sr.	53	Yard and Building	18
do.	do.		do. do.	7

and on page 16 is recorded

Edward Young Sr.	John Wilson.	59	Blacksmith's Shop	2
do.	Edw: Young Sr.	60	House and Garden	14

This last item of course refers to Grove House itself

It has been traced that since Edward Young's occupation of the residence, the following
have resided here.

Mrs. Holness and her daughter (who married W. Tomlin and died
in 1949 aged 91, hence born 1858)

Mr. Knott

Mr. Tom Pointer, Village Postmaster

Mr. G. Brock

Mr. Adams, a Barrister

Mr. J. W. Girling, a Margate Solicitor

Miss Chambers

Dr. W. A. Mayne

Some of the occupants of the Forge are as follows

George Hurst (1680)
Mary East (1687)
Fenttin Covell (1757)
Edward Young (1805)
John Wilson (1839)
Josiah Lyon Adams (Retired 1871)
Mr. Knott, Coachbuilder
Mr. G. Brock, who turned it into a cycle shop (1934)

C. W. R. Winter
Typed from original notes, February 1966



The blacksmith's forge, attached to the north gable of Grove House - 2006