

'GROVE HOUSE'

The Square BIRCHINGTON

[This article was originally written in 1965 by **CWRW** from notes written ten years earlier
The typist in February 1966 was C. W. Ronald Winter of 'The Smugglers'.]
Edited by Jennie Burgess, Parish and Heritage Trust Archivist – October 2010



Those of us who are fortunate enough to remember our village of Birchington seventy years ago, are amazed by the great alterations in every direction that have taken place in the intervening years, since its development into a seaside town. Previously, its charm and quiet were proverbial, when all its interests, its private houses, shops and inns were centred round the Square. On a map by Thomas Hill of 1688 it is shown with its Maypole in position.

The whole complex had hardly altered at the end of the 19th century, with its beautiful and ancient Parish Church of All Saints, standing serenely in its corner of the Square. In 1895 it was unusual to see the horse-drawn charabancs with their load of Margate trippers passing through on their way to the countryside or to Canterbury. The farmers' wains and carts and shopmen's horse-drawn vans went about their lawful business and the occasional carriage-and-pair or 'victoria', belonging to the local gentry, made up the total of its traffic. Only the ringing of the church bells and the clanging of the hammers on the anvils in the two nearby Smithies broke its settled calm.

Today, in 1965, the scene is vastly altered. The passing of the multitude of motor vehicles in every direction, and of all descriptions, is immense, making it, at all times, a really hazardous task to cross from one side of the Square to the other. From what has already been written, it must not be gathered that all the old-world charm has vanished from the centre of village life and activity, for many of its ancient houses still remain, in spite of demolitions and 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 around the Square. The houses have characteristic Dutch stepped-gables and sash windows and are 'Laburnum House', the 'New Inn', the 'Smugglers' and, of course, 'Grove House'. The last three are now Grade II listed buildings. The older generation of villagers used to call them "Dykers' Houses", because they wrongly associated them with Hollanders, known to have arrived in our area at this period. They came to advise and superintend the erection of sea wall defences and the draining of the marshes to the south and west of the island. It is now known that although the architecture is influenced by the Low Countries, many of houses in the area were built by the local residents.

To quote only one instance of Milton Place in Broadstairs, that was built by David Culmer and his wife in 1673. Their initials and date appear on the gables of this house. The Culmer family had been in Thanet many decades prior to this residence being built. 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.

Now let us turn to Grove House. First, my thanks must go to Dr W. A. Mayne, who bought this property in 1953, for granting me access to the whole of his property, to take photographs, make plans, and gather notes for the purpose of this essay, which has been invaluable.

The house may easily be missed, as it stands tucked away from the main road (it is No. 215), with only its northern gable visible down an alleyway from the Square. It is approached by a paved pathway and has gardens on its west and south sides, which greatly add to its charm. The main portion of the building is constructed with dark red bricks in what is known, technically, as Flemish bond. (See note at the end of the essay.) In the lower, lean-to contemporary portion of the house, yellow brick is in evidence. This section was originally only ground floor height, the upper part of the building being added about 1870. The house has Dutch gables on both its north and south ends, the latter being particularly attractive.

From an architectural point of view, as it now stands, there are some unusual features. One concerns the unusual arrangement of the ridge of the building. The gabled northern section terminates a little more than halfway along the apex at a small cement-plastered gable, then continuing to the southern gable about eighteen inches lower, but not from a point immediately under the first run. Even with this arrangement, the tiling of both sections is not at variance, nor are the positions of the two attic windows thrown out of alignment. This roof variation points to one of two possibilities. The first is that the original building consisted of two cottages which were later amalgamated. The second possibility is that after the north section was being erected, it was decided extend it further south. Everything points, however, to the fact that whether there was a conversion or an extension, the whole building as it now, stands was coeval.

There are other features 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 suggest a Georgian door case had supplanted the original square-headed Flemish style one. The feature we can now see came to a point a little beyond the centre of the building, where there is a vertical dividing line, indicated by the pointing of the brickwork. This can be traced down from the fascia ovolo-moulded boarding immediately under the gutters to the ground. The original entrance to the southern part of the house can be detected in the lower left hand section of its south wall with its finely proportioned, stepped-gable. This is surmounted by a more modern chimney stack and its upper and central string courses and blocked-up windows. These details seem to clinch the argument that we have here a conversion, as has already been suggested.

Before this alteration, each section would have had a spiral staircase - a feature of this style – situated in the nook between the outer walls and the breast of the great fireplaces, now holding inserted modern grates, which occupy much less space. Whether this stairway was situated east of west of the northern chimney breast cannot now be determined, because the entire outside northern gable has been cement-plastered, so that any window which lit it cannot now be traced. In the south-west nook of the southern portion of the original staircase wall there was a window, which is now blocked up, but plainly visible. In the niche on the other side of the fireplace on the ground floor, the occupants have retained an attractive contemporary cupboard, with shell-hood and shaped shelves. The cupboard in the bedroom above shows its light was obtained from the other blocked-up window. The present entrance to the house was probably made when the major changes in the house took place. At the same time, the current two-flight staircase in the hall, which leads to the first floor and attics, would have been installed, replacing the two spiral flights. The remains of an original window can also be seen in the outside brickwork over the present front door.

An additional point connected to the two original buildings must be noted. In each of the main gable-heads there is a different pair of initials in evidence. At the north end is 'I. M.', although the second letter is now badly corroded by the weather. In a similar position on the south gable of Grove House appear the initials 'I. C.', which definitely belong to John Covell. (The letter 'I.' was interchangeable as an 'I' or a 'J' at this date.) Covell was a member of a well-known local family of those days, who had, according to J. P. Barrett in his 'Ville of Birchington', no less than twenty grave stones erected to various members of this clan in All Saints churchyard. More information on this family will be found later in these notes.

The ownership initials (and sometimes date figures) on the gables were used as wall anchors on the tie-rods that passed through the masonry to engage the main timbers within the building, thereby knitting and strengthening the stability of the structure. Sometimes only plain crosses with foliated ends were put there for the same purpose, as can be seen on 'Laburnum House' (now known as Mulberry's Tearooms).

Having looked at the main elements of the outside of the property, we will now go within, beginning in the cellar, and eventually progressing to the attics. Until Dr Mayne took over the premises, the under-croft had not been opened or in use for at least 80 years and more. Its entry was through the blocked-up end of a small corridor at the back of the lounge and surgery. This was approached by a flight

of descending brick steps with decayed wooden treads and was originally lit by a blocked-up window on its east side. Cobwebs nearly barred the way in, because they had been almost petrified by damp and the lime from the chalk walling of the well-cut clunch blocks. The old spiders themselves had shared in the same process, presenting a very weird and fossilised appearance.

There was a curious feature in the cellar ceiling, which had been pierced with a small aperture that opened into a trap door in the hall above. It may have been formed to give access for small items of contraband goods to be lowered out of sight in the old smuggling days. The Smuggling Excise Act of 1733, which greatly increased the duty levied for luxury goods, became the spur for a new industry in the towns and villages of the coast around Thanet. There was also a collection of coloured glass beads under some loose red bricks in the cellar floor. The British Museum dated the beads as late seventeenth century, therefore coeval with the building of the house – hidden treasure, indeed.

On the eastern 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 in 1870. The late Mrs Tomlin, who died in 1950, aged 91, remembered the addition of this floor. Outside the north side of this section is the oldest water tank, now filled in.

We will now look at some of the owners of Grove House. In its earliest period, the property was intimately connected with the Covell family, very much in evidence in Birchington's parochial matters, dating back to 1614. At this date Robert Cauvell (as the name was first spelt) was elected as Birchington's Deputy to represent us at the Cinque Port Sessions at Dover. In 1619 his name crops up as the 'loyal 'Musqueteer' militia man, on the 'Muster Roule of the select Companie in the parish of St John (Margate) and Birchington in the Isle of Thanett in the County of Kent', containing the names of 'the Captain, Officers and Soldyers of the same'. (See the Domestic State Papers of James 1 – Vol. CVIII No.9). Once more (his name now spelt Covell), he is 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 of 1662 was levied when every 'house, chamber or lodging' - was charged - 'two shillings yearly to be paid on Lady Day and Michaelmas for every hearth or stove therein'.

The Birchington churchwardens at this time called it the 'Fireharth'. In their list of contributors to this tax, they only specified the occupiers, but with no reference to the names of their dwellings. There is just one property listed as 'Empty House', which contained three hearths. This may have been Grove House and been originally built for Widow Masters, who must have moved from here by the date of this tax schedule. She is shown as the occupant of a larger house which had four hearths. This idea is pure supposition, but would account for the initials 'I. M.' (Isabelle? Masters) on the north gable. Whoever built Grove House was wealthy enough to afford this expensive investment. John Covell appears to have been the next owner or occupier and either extended or improved the original property, as the other end of the house bears his initials.

We learn from an entry in the Parish Church accounts, in connection with the 'great repairs' to the building in 1687 that the Christian name of the Covell name

at this date was Robert, 'the Carpenter'. He was responsible for the bulk of the renewed woodwork in the church. At the same time, Mary East, the owner of the Village Smithy, was responsible for all the ironwork necessary in the repairs of its many windows. This is the first mention of a blacksmith we have so far been able to trace in connection with Grove House. Robert Covell's name is also mentioned on Thomas Hill's map of 1688. At this date he was occupying a small house and land-holding adjacent to East End Farm, near the corner of Margate Road and Epple Road.

We now need to revert to 1666 for a brief moment. We find a relation of Robert's, John Covell and his wife recorded in the Visitation of the Archdeacon of Canterbury at this date. They were brought before the Dean and Chapter's Court 'for standing excommunicate above of forty days and not coming to church'. (See Arch. Cant. XXVI.) It was this man's son – also John – who was born in 1677 and died in 1749, who was very probably responsible for the building of the southern section of Grove House in the late 17th century. A valuable piece of extraneous evidence connecting this last name with the house is supplied by the three early fire-marks to be found on the front exterior of the house. They were all put there by the Sun Insurance Company and luckily two of them are numbered. The other is plain, though clearly from the same company. The numbers refer to the policies, details of which are still held by the company. Dr Mayne obtained the details from the Sun Insurance Company and they are listed below, proving very informative.

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 and Sixty pounds | 160 |
| Premium On his Household Goods and Furniture therein not exceeding 11/- Ninety Pounds | 90 |
| On his wearing apparel therein not exceeding Fifty Pounds | 50 |
| Renewable 1758 | |
| Agency On his Barn and Stable, Smith's Forge and Coal House in Creed one building, Thatched, separate from the dwelling House, not exceeding One Hundred Pounds | 100 |
| (He was probably the son of Fenttin) | <u>£400</u> |

| <u>POLICY No. 780944 - dated 29th September 1805</u> | | £ |
|--|--|--------------------|
| Premium | John Covell of Chatham in Kent, gentleman, on a House 11/6 only at Birchington in Kent in the tenure of Edward Young, Blacksmith, brick and tiled, 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 |
| Renewable Midsummer 1806 | House only, in rear, in the tenure of John Sidders, Farmer, brick and tiled, not exceeding One Hundred Pounds | 100 |
| Agency Cobb | Barn and Stable only, rear thatched, not exceeding Twenty Pounds on each | 40 |
| | | <u>£400</u> |
| | J. Watts W. Hamilton W. Watts | |

The property evidently changed ownership soon after 1805, for one finds on the 1840 Tithe Map Terrier, these following particulars –

| <u>Owner</u> | <u>Occupier</u> | <u>Plan No.</u> | <u>Description</u> | <u>a.</u> | <u>p.</u> | <u>r.</u> |
|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| John Friend | Edward Young | 53 | Yard & building | - | - | 18 |
| " | " | 58 | " " | - | - | 7 |
| Edward Young | John Wilson | 59 | Blacksmith's shop | - | - | 2 |
| " | Edw. Young | 60 | House & garden (This was Grove House) | - | - | 14 |

Following on Edward Young, the list of occupants was –

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

?? Mr Henry Knott – Coach-smith later Coach Builder 1890s
(lived in Grove Cottage in 1920)

Mr Thomas Pointer, the Postmaster and publisher of post cards (1896)

Mr Adam Walker (1906-1912)

Mr Arthur Firman (1915-1916)

Miss Phillips (1920)

Mr George Brockington – Cycle dealer (1924-1938)

Mr Godfrey Bailey, Solicitor (1948)

Miss Chambers (1951)

Mr Adams (Barrister) (date?)

Mr J. W. Girling (Margate Solicitor) (date?)

Dr William Mayne (1953 - 1957)

Dr Denis Merritt (1957 - 21st Dec 1988)

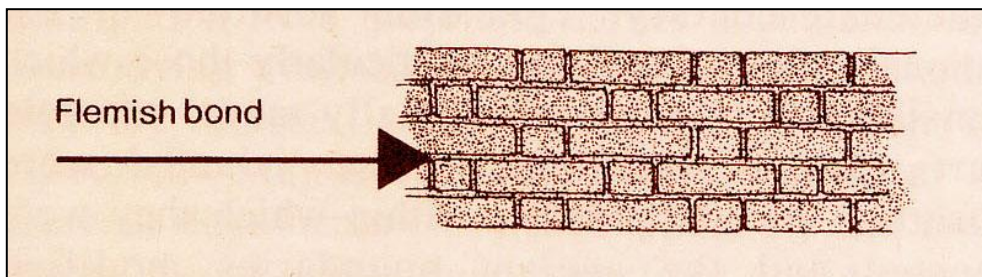
Mrs Belinda Merritt – (1957 - 2010+)

Occupants of the Forge were –

George Hurst (1680)
 Mary East (1687)
 Fenttin Covell (1757)
 Edward Young (1805)
 John Wilson (1839)
 Josiah Lyon Adams (retired in 1871)
 Mr Henry Knott – Coachbuilder (1890s)
 Mr George Brock(ington?) – Cycle Dealer (1934)

My knowledge of building technicalities has been too limited to bring out all the many points of interest this old place has given rise to, but those who would like to pursue further their study of the William III period of Flemish style houses will find a wealth of information in B. H. St John O'Neil's article on 'Some Seventeenth Century Houses in Great Yarmouth'. This has accompanying plans and photographs to illustrate the letterpress, which recently appeared in *Archaeologia* No 95 (1953)

Note by J M Burgess - from page 2 – FLEMISH BOND



In Flemish bonding, each course of bricks has alternative sequences of 'headers' and 'stretchers' (the ends and long sides of the bricks). There are two walls built side by side in this way, but with no cavity between them. This style of bonding was current from about 1600 until towards the end of the 19th century. It was not until 1895 when a law was passed making cavity walling a statutory requirement. Flemish bonding became very popular from the 17th century onwards, due to the influence from the Low Countries, as large numbers of the disaffected and persecuted Huguenots fled across the Channel.



[Ron Winter ignored Church Hill Cottage, the fifth 17th C. property, as its gables were plain.]