

Gaps in Birchington's cliffs

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Birchington has 7 access gaps in the cliffs, initially cut by farmers to harvest the seaweed they needed for fertilising their land. One of the gaps goes back to at least 1350, as the Church land registry or 'Terrier' of that date shows, and two others are listed in the 1526 Terrier.



They later made excellent routes for the smugglers, when they landed their booty and needed a quick exit from the beaches!

One of the gaps has an interesting name – Coleman's Stairs. When I first went down to the bottom of it, I expected to find some stairs – but there was no sign of them. It wasn't until I was given a photo showing the gap in 1919, long before the lower promenade was constructed after the 1953 storm, that I realised the stairs had now been swallowed up in the concrete apron built as part of the cliff defences.

But who was this Coleman?

John Coleman was a man of some substance, who owned several acres of land in the Epple Bay area during the late 16th and early 17th centuries. In one of the earliest maps of the village it gives the name of the road we now call 'Albion Road' (leading from Station Road to the sea & Gap) as "Colman's' Road".

Whether it was he who had the gap cut in the cliffs to help fertilise his farmland with seaweed, we do not know, but the Gap has always been known as Coleman's Stairs.

When John Colman died during a Plague epidemic in 1619, his will indicated that he was a wealthy man. The fact that his name has remained attached to this area for over 400 years tells us quite a lot about the high esteem in which he and his family was held by his fellow villagers at that time.

The Coleman family was highly respected in the community and at different times members held the post of Overseer of the Poor – a very responsible job, elected by the Annual Vestry – and as Churchwarden.

There are several views of the Gap taken from the top looking down towards the sea and the area is still seen as an area where fairly high status properties were (and still are) built.

Other names of the Gaps include Grenham Bay Avenue Gap, Green Road Gap, Beresford Gap, an unnamed Gap in Epple Bay Avenue (between 'Smugglers Gap' and 'The Moorings') and finally Epple Gap. There is also a gap slightly nearer to Epple Bay in a private garden, but it only reaches half way up the garden, never quite reaching the road. Epple Bay itself used to have two gaps very close together, but by the time the Powell-Cotton brickfield was closed at the top of the cliffs in the 1930s, this had been filled in.

