

## HISTORY OF BIRCHINGTON

### Early settlement in Birchington

The area around Birchington has a surprisingly rich history, commencing with a late Bronze Age site which was exposed between high and low water marks at Minnis Bay. Regrettably, erosion of the coastline has meant that no visible evidence now remains, but fortunately not before excavations revealed a plan of some 24 settlement pits and many artifacts.

Until the 14<sup>th</sup> century there were two settlements in the area, a small fishing community at Gore End (now Minnis Bay) and a slightly larger community clustered around the church (in the Square). Both areas were almost certainly occupied well before the Norman Conquest and appear to be included in the Domesday survey as one of the chapels under Monkton's supervision, together with the 'salt beds and a new fishery'. On the map by Thomas of Elmham, dated c. 1414, Birchington is one of only three places given a community name, as opposed to a church designation. The name has been given a possible connection with a Saxon family name, but that has yet to be proved. The idea that the name Birchington comes from a cluster of Birch trees would seem highly unlikely, since birches usually only thrive on light sandy soil, whereas the ground beneath our feet here is either heavy clay or chalk. The spelling of the village has altered many times over the centuries and there are at least 30 variations in our records.

### The Middle Ages

By 961, Birchington was part of the Manor of Monkton, or 'Monks Town', as all the lands on the western half of Thanet had come under the ownership of the monks of Christ Church Priory in Canterbury. The eastern half, with its headquarters at Minster, was in the hands of St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury. Monkton's land consisted of marshland, pasturage, arable, forest and salt-beds with a new fishery lately included. The Domesday record shows that in the whole of the Monkton Manor there were about 550 people living in some 110 households. We can only guess from this how many of them lived in Birchington and Gore End. However, by the time the first census was taken in 1801 the population for Birchington and Woodchurch was 537. We know by this date that Woodchurch, which also came under Monkton ecclesiastically, had only about 20-30 inhabitants, although at the Domesday census, they were on a par with Birchington, if the size of their church was anything to go by.

There was almost certainly a church standing in Birchington in 1066, possibly built of wood, which would have been rebuilt fairly soon afterwards in stone. Evidence for this can be seen in the outside south wall of the present building, where some of the re-used stones show earlier workmanship from the early Norman style. This first building would have had a simple oblong Nave and Chancel form still seen in unaltered buildings of this period and shown in the excavations of the lost church at Shuart, just two miles west of Birchington. The Chancel was rebuilt and two side chapels were added in c. 1250, together with a tower in the unusual position above the south-east chapel. The north chapel

was paid for by the family who occupied what is now known as Quex, and unusually, this is still valid today.

The nave was then enlarged in c. 1350, by the addition of two half aisles. The original intention had been to build just a large south aisle 'like the new north aisle at St Nicholas-as-Wade', so a 1343 contract states. This had to be altered in the light of the devastation caused by the Black Death of 1347/8. The churchwardens also planned to build a new tower at the SW corner, as the great pillar indicates, but this, too, was abandoned owing to the Black Death. It was during this period that the spire was added to the old tower. This still retains its original framework – much patched and repaired over the centuries with both wood and metal braces.

During the 14<sup>th</sup> century, great storms and floods had caused the small fishing settlement at Gore End to decline. The Black Death reduced the population numbers in both communities, but especially at the smaller one. These epidemics continued through the centuries, evidence for which can be found in the burial registers for the community, which date from 1538.

Gore End and Birchington had become a non-corporate member of the Cinque Port of Dover, through their connection with Margate in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but because they came under Margate, they often do not get a specific mention. This caused some confusion for historians, who assured their readers that Birchington dropped out of the Federation by 1489. This is incorrect, because the church archives contain receipts for Birchington's contributions to what was called 'Composition Money', which dated from 1485 and continuing intermittently until 1610. As the name implies, the contribution was part of a composite one made up of St John's, St Peter's, Birchington, Gore End, Woodchurch and Sarre. In earlier times Birchington was ordered to supply 'victuals' for a boat of the Dover fleet, while Gore End was to help supply 'a boat'. This possibly meant supplying some of the crew for one, or perhaps a small rowing boat that would be needed to ferry the men out to the bigger ship moored in Dover haven.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the community in Birchington was tightly clustered around its church. Most of the workforce was farm labourers who walked out to the farms each day. There were a few shops in the community round the square, as can be seen in the Churchwardens' accounts, from the rent paid by villagers for the shops owned by the Church. We know too, from the Court Rolls of Christ Church Priory held in Canterbury Cathedral, that there were also a large number of brewers and a few bakers. These people had to buy an annual licence (or 'fine') to brew or bake, which was obtained in the 'Feet of Fines' held periodically in Canterbury.

### **The Tudor Period**

The first Churchwardens' accounts date from 1531 and give a fascinating picture of the domestic and social life of the community. Out of the 13,000 parishes in England and Wales who hold such records, only a few are as comprehensive and cover such a long period as Birchington. The only breaks in the sequence are 1643-4 and 1650-51, caused by the troubled times during the

Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell. From the church registers, which begin in 1538, we can estimate that the village consisted of some 50-60 households, with about 325 residents in all.

The village, like most of its neighbours, was a very self-contained community, particularly as the Isle of Thanet only had a ferry from the mainland of Kent until the Sarre Bridge was built in 1723. (Even as late as the early 1950s, there was still only a ferry at Grove.) Any wanderers or vagrants were dealt with severely, with the law laying down a period in the stocks followed by a whipping for the first offence. The second offence incurred imprisonment and having their ears bored, while the third could invite the death penalty in extreme cases. The stocks, whipping post and 'cage' or lock-up were situated in the Square, near the churchyard wall. They feature fairly regularly in the Churchwardens' accounts, as repairs and replacements were needed.

For several hundred years, Birchington was not on the main route into Thanet, but situated on a bye-lane from the bottom of Brooksend Hill. Maintaining the serviceable state of this lane was up to residents of the village. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, she made it a legal obligation of each parish to keep all the roads within their boundaries in usable condition. Surveyors of the Highways were to be appointed, who became known as 'Waywardens' and the job was unpaid. The Waywarden was responsible for organizing a group of men to lend carts and others to collect stones from the fields who would then be detailed to repair the potholes and deep ruts. This latter band was often composed of those who were already on 'Parish Relief' (the equivalent of the dole in modern terms).

### **Stuart and Georgian Thanet**

In 1662 – slightly belatedly, the bell ringers of Birchington were allowed to spend 2/- on beer as part of their celebration for the return of Charles II. The population suffered from the Great Plague almost as badly as the great metropolis of London. The registers make very sad reading during this period, with the burials far outnumbering the baptisms. There were also a number of famines, which devastated crops and left the poor at starvation point.

In 1679 and 1688, the first detailed maps of Birchington were drawn by the celebrated Canterbury Surveyor, Thomas Hill. The first map was drawn for St John's College Cambridge, when the College was bequeathed Upper Gore End Farm by Henry Robinson. Hill drew his second map for John Bridges, who was buying Church Hill Farm, which stood on the site of Ferndale Court in Canterbury Road, opposite Kent Gardens. Both maps give a clear idea of how compact the community around the Square was, with only individual farming communities at East End, South End and Gore End.

During the reign of King William III, Margate was the nearest port of embarkation for the Low Countries. Because travellers had to wait for a favourable wind to carry them across the Channel, William would sometimes stay Quex Park while he was waiting to cross over to Holland on royal business. The house the King stayed in was the old original Quex Park mansion, with its foundations laid down by 1414, when it was known as 'Parkers' on Thomas of Elmham's map.

During the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the village continued to be almost completely self-supporting. Conditions had changed very little over the centuries, with people still growing their own food stuffs, and brewing and baking, fattening their pig for the winter and salting down any meat or fish they could acquire. Some of the women still spun and wove, though those who could afford to, bought their hardwearing cloth at the fairs, which periodically came to Minster, St John's or St Peter's. They used the services of local carpenters, wheelwrights and blacksmiths for their shears, spades, hoes, wagons and carts. When they needed new homes or major repairs for them, they also looked to the local tilers, carpenters and thatchers, and of course, at the end of their lives, the local gravedigger and the parson would be called in. All of these people's jobs can be found in the parish registers under the column 'Occupation'.

Very few children received any kind of education apart from the rich, who had tutors and governesses, although there were a few older women who earned an extra copper or two by opening a Dame School in their kitchens. As soon as most children were able to wield a broom or carry timber or water they were expected to help and would often join their older siblings at work in the fields or in whatever task their parents were employed. Wages were low and no work meant no pay, as often happened in bad weather during the hard, cold winters. Recreation time was very limited and all totally 'homegrown'. The adults, too, had very little time to relax and there was no such thing as retirement - you died 'in harness' in most cases.

### **18<sup>th</sup> Century Birchington**

In 1807 Anna Gertruy Crispe, the last of three sisters from the Quex estate died. In her will she left a 47 acre farm in Acol in a Trust, to provide for a school for 12 village children, which opened in 1708. It was grossly inadequate for the number of children who needed schooling, but it was a start. Eventually, with the help of an act of Parliament, the number was doubled. The Trust also provided help for five widows and paid the indenture fees for apprentices to the many trades in the village. Over 80 of these Indenture Certificates are still held in the church archives. The Trust still functions, giving relief to ten widows and grants to any youngsters in the parish who are in further education between the ages of 16 and 25. It also provides grants for all the local youth organizations who apply.

Through poverty and appallingly low wages in legitimate occupations, Smuggling became rife. The latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century records show many references to smuggling in the Birchington area. The village was still quite isolated so there was plenty of scope for this activity along the lonely coastline between Epple and Minnis, with its seven 'seaways' through the cliffs down to the shore. They made ideal landing places, with some handy caves scoured out of the chalk, for storing smuggled goods on dark, moonless nights. These activities continued on into the next century, until the government eventually removed the huge import and export taxes, which had made smuggling so profitable.

### **19<sup>th</sup> Century – Georgian and Victorian Eras**

By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Birchington had been in decline for possibly a hundred years or more. This was due to several reasons and was sharply commented upon in William Cobbett's Rural Ride through Thanet in 1828. The surrounding farmland was in the hands of only three or four wealthy families and the businesses in the village were all very small affairs, employing only one or two assistants at most. This meant that there was little or no middle class, which, in turn, led to a pauperized and dependent body of labourers. The village still came under a curate supplied by the vicar of Monkton, who was very poorly paid and who had little standing with the wealthy farmers. However, after the accession of Queen Victoria, Parliament began to try and address the problems of the poor in both town and country. People like Lord Shaftsbury and William Wilberforce began to colour the thinking of their fellows, and Quakers like Elizabeth Fry and the Rowntree families brought hope to thousands of underprivileged citizens.

The building of the new road through West Brook to Margate in 1812 brought the village into much closer contact with her more affluent neighbours to the east. The same widening of horizons had occurred when the new bridge at Sarre, replacing the ferry, had made the way south much easier after 1723. The new advances in health education and human biology very slowly helped to reduce the mortality rate, particularly among children, so that the 1801 population of 537 had, by 1851, increased to 885. Most of the men still worked on the land, but with agricultural wages only around 2/- (10p) a day and the cost of food very high, there was considerable rioting and breaking of agricultural machinery, which was replacing the large gangs of men needed to as few as two or three men. A group of men and women from the west side of Thanet, including some from Birchington and Acol, went across to Hengrove Farm to damage one of the 'new-fangled' machines. They paid a heavy price for this protest as they were all convicted and transported to 'Van Dieman's Land' (Tasmania) the day after Christmas Day 1830.

Following this period, the public-spirited villagers and the Overseers of the Poor undertook the task of supplementing the wages of the poor by buying in grain at the market price and then selling it on more cheaply to the labourers. A small 'sess' (assessment or tax) was levied to cover the difference, but only those who were better paid, including the local farmers, contributed to it.

In 1849, the little Charity School was still going strong, but there were as many as another 100 children in the village receiving no education at all. It was at this point that the National School movement built and opened the first purpose-built school in the village. It stood in Park Lane, where the present school's car park now stands. In 1869, the little Charity School closed down and the funds were initially diverted to the new school, but as this became better funded, the Trust scheme was altered to its present rules. By 1855, there were three inns around the Square, two grocers, two butchers, three bakers and two blacksmiths all grouped around the Square. There were also three windmills on the outskirts of the village. Horse-drawn coaches came through from Canterbury and stopped at The New Inn in the Square (The Three Legged Toad) to refresh the horses after their long pull up Brooksend Hill.

1863 saw the arrival of the London, Chatham and Dover Railway and a gradual and dramatic change in the fortunes of the village. The line was laid through the open farmland to the north and west of the village and gave Birchington a direct link with London and the north Kent coast. Previously in 1846 the railway travelled to Margate via Canterbury and Ramsgate, so did not affect the inhabitants of Birchington very much at all. In 1864, just a year after our section was opened, the Railway Hotel was built (now The Sea View Hotel) and opened in February 1865. Also in 1864, the South Eastern Gazette was writing of the possibility of a 'building development in Birchington, close to the railway' – the Bungalow Hotel was built in 1870 and the Tower Bungalows were all up by about 1880.

In 1867 the first 'bungalow' in England was built at Westgate by a London architect called John Taylor. The small town of Westgate had begun to grow up round the railway on farmland two miles east of Birchington. John Taylor's partner, John Pollard Seddon had purchased land between the railway and the sea at the time of the great railway boom. For some reason the bungalow development at Westgate proved hard to sell, so the two men decided to try their luck at Birchington. Between 1870 and 1872 they began building their 'Tower Bungalows' on either side of the Coleman Stairs Gap. Perfect privacy was assured, as there was no public right of way along the cliffs at this part. The Tower Bungalow Estate thus developed and expanded over the next ten years and was occupied by professional men and their families, from London's artistic and literary circles.

During the summer months, visitors from London came down to enjoy the quiet and exclusive atmosphere and by 1878, the name of the station had become 'Birchington-on-Sea', which it still is to this day. In 1879 a stone, wattle and mud embankment had been built across the 'lagoon' at Minnis Bay, which appears on the 1840 Tithe Map. It was a wedge (or gore) shaped morass of weedy pools that regularly flooded at very high tides. This was all that was left of the tiny haven that had once given the community the name of 'Gore End' and had proved so vital in Birchington's early history. The new embankment enabled the land behind it to be drained and used for housing. By 1882, the farmland behind this area at Minnis Bay was also beginning to be bought up and developed by the Birchington Bay Estate Co. and the London and Country Estate Co.

By 1871, the population of Birchington, standing at 1110, had increased so much more than her 'mother' parish of Monkton, that the new Vicar, the Rev. John Alcock, applied to the Diocese to allow the village to become a parish in its own right. This was granted on the assumption that the numbers would continue to grow. By 1881 there were already 1400 and the local guidebooks now described the village as 'being even more removed from its noisy neighbour Margate than was Westgate'. Erasmus Wilson of the Royal Sea Bathing Hospital at Margate stated that the area was felt to be 'an uncontaminated playground for large families and a secluded sanatorium for invalids. A person would consume during any 24 hours, twice as much air at Birchington-on-Sea as he will in the same given time in London.'

During the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Birchington's expansion was so rapid that, to meet local demands, we had three brickfields, one in Park Lane, one at Lower Gore End Farm and the third at Epple Bay. This last one was owned by the Powell-Cottons at Quex Park. A large variety of properties were developed, semi-detached villas of two and three storeys, terraces and, of course, including the new fashion for bungalows. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Birchington had become a busy seaside community, with a large influx of visitors during the summer months. Many of these visitors were from a more affluent middle class who bought houses locally, initially using them from perhaps May until September, and eventually a number came to live in them full time when they retired. Quite a large proportion of the new houses that were built were designed to be used as apartments to be let out to visitors. The owners of many of the ordinary houses also let rooms during those busy summer months.

### **20<sup>th</sup> Century – Modern-day Birchington**

The expansion of Birchington during this last century has been phenomenal, rising from just over 2000 residents in 1901 to 14,750 by the year 2000. The steepest rise began in the 1960s, when the demolition of all the boarding schools and hotels began, followed by a good number of the large older houses. Every site was redeveloped at a much higher density than before, for example, when Walnut Tree Cottage was pulled down in 1967, (built in c. 1680) it had housed two families. The site now holds 36 flats and a warden's bungalow. This pattern has been repeated through the village. The other common feature during the century has been the tendency for owners to sell off parts of their gardens and have additional houses built on the sites. This has had the effect of giving the village a much denser feeling.

The first large development occurred just before and just after W.W. 2, when farmland at the south end of the village was bought by alderman Farrar, who eventually lived in Queen's Avenue at Minnis Bay. He had an estate of small bungalows built on it. These were followed soon after by the redevelopment of Queen Bertha's School site, Woodland Avenue off Park Lane and the Sherwood Estate off King Edward Road, both on farmland. Then came the flats at Minnis Bay on the site of the Bay Hotel, the new shops in Station Road on the old Victorian houses, Ocean Close on one of the brickfields and Woodford Court on Woodford House School site. These were soon followed by Carmel Court, on the old house's site, then the Cunningham Close, etc and Grenville Gardens, both on farmland sites. When the Station Road development began, one of the old houses due for demolition housed Birchington's Public Library, so this had to be replaced. We were lucky enough to be given purpose-built one in Alpha Road in 1967, with an art gallery adjoining it.

The 1970s continued this rapid growth with Moray Avenue and St Magnus Close growing up where the Beresford Hotel had stood and Sandpiper Court filling in the last of the Carmel Court gardens. Dane Road extended out further towards Plum Pudding Island and the Rossetti Bungalow site spawned 7 detached houses. Through the 1980s the listed building called Kent House opposite Jenner's old garage was demolished for 5 small properties, Grenham House School was replaced with Homebirch and Hunting Gate, while Spurgeon's

Homes gave way to the first phase of the Birch Hill Estate. In Park Lane, the old allotments were used for Stringer Drive and Holton Close and then Wanstall Court was also built on allotments behind Alpha Road car park. Then in 1985, the Bungalow Hotel was demolished to make way for Bierce Court. One other memorable addition in 1974 was the Village Centre, built behind the library and funded by the community through the highly successful Quexpo fundraising events in Quex Park, between 1970 and 1985.

Coming into 2000, the Central Garage in Station Road was pulled down to house a children's home and later two shops, Wild Air on the sea front was replaced by another block of flats and East End Piece has become Rosewood Way. There have, of course, been the usual spate of infilling into large gardens and several more small developments are in the pipeline. If Birchington is to survive, it has got to be allowed to change, but long-time residents want it to retain its character, with the new buildings harmonizing into the community, not sticking out like 'sore thumbs'. The development at the Queen's Head Hotel is an example of how a good project can take shape, with the change from a pub to three town houses. Strangely enough, in the 1679 map, there is an inn on this site, but by 1840, the Tithe map shows this had been converted into three 'dwellings'. This old Wealden house was pulled down and replaced by the present building in c. 1850-55 as a purpose built inn and now we are watching history repeating itself once more. In Minnis road, there was an empty factory site, which had previously housed the Malt Houses. This was eventually developed at this period and became The Maltings and Upper Maltings.

One of the most difficult aspects of all this influx of new residents is that very little thought has been given to enlarging the infrastructure of the community. The water and sewage systems were updated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but in the 1981 census we stood at 9,628, where as by 2,001 we were at least 14,750 and still rising. The problem of traffic and parking is an ongoing one and strangely enough, the other shortage is in petrol stations, with only one remaining. The shortage of Doctors in a very cramped surgery has recently been rectified with the building of a large, well-designed barn-like building on farmland at the top of Minnis Road.

The other area that still needs serious consideration is the lack of facilities for the youth of the village. Whether the building of a gym, swimming pool and indoor games centre would solve this is a debatable point, but with the size of the present population, it must surely be a possible notion.