

OCEAN CLOSE CHRISTMAS LIGHTS 1995-2000

It was December 1995 when a few neighbours in a quiet cul-de-sac in Birchington decided, on a whim, that it would be fun to switch on the Christmas lights at the same time each evening. The second Sunday at 4pm was agreed upon. A few days later we were astonished to see people were actually coming to see the lights and this inspired a certain gentleman to put a small bucket out in his front garden to see if people would actually stop and put money in. When the bucket was brought indoors at 10.30 that night he was surprised to see it contained twelve pounds and forty seven pence! (£12.47).

The next evening a rain barrel, painted white with silver tinsel around the rim, was placed under a lamp post. It was then agreed that any money collected must go to a good cause. Sadly, in Ocean Close at that time, there was a lady with terminal cancer and another neighbour in the Close had recently died from the same dreadful disease. It was decided by the neighbours any money collected would go to Pilgrims Hospice, Margate. A notice was made to this effect and placed by the barrel. (The two red brick curved walls bearing the name 'Pilgrims Hospice', which can be seen from Ramsgate Road, were erected with the money collected from the Christmas lights).

By New Year's Eve the amazing sum of three thousand five hundred pounds (£3,500) had been collected in just over 3 weeks. This spurred more houses to join in with even bigger and better decorations the following year and so '**Ocean Close Christmas Lights**' was born.

The following year, 1996, thirteen thousand pounds (£13,000) was collected.

In 1997 an amazing sum of thirty five thousand pounds (£35,000) was collected. It must be noted that this was over a period of just four weeks and the money went to the Cancer Care Appeal at the Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother Hospital. This was reported in the National as well as the local press. It must also be noted that there are just 23 dwellings in Ocean Close – a mixture of houses, chalet bungalows and bungalows.

All the decorations were really superb, as well as the fairy lights there was a life size nativity scene, a Father Christmas Grotto complete with an elf to help hand out sweets, and a talking Christmas tree. Literally hundreds of people came each evening to see the lights and Ocean Close was put on the map! The sheer volume of people and traffic meant that after the first 2 years we were advised by the police to close the road, and road cones and diversion signs were obtained from the Council, paid for by the residents.

By the third year a committee had been formed amongst the neighbours and it was agreed that money collected in future years be divided between several charities. The fourth year twenty eight thousand pounds (£28,000) was raised and the fifth and last year twenty thousand pounds (£20,000). The charities

for that final year were: Cancer Care Appeal at the QEQM, Demelza House, Kent Air Ambulance and Pilgrims Hospice at Margate, all receiving five thousand pounds (£5,000).

Over the 5 years of lights, voluntary entertainment was presented by the following: Chatham House Choir, The Thanet Male Voice Choir, Bosom Pals Support Group, The Salvation Army, The Vocal Chords and many more. Refreshments were provided by the neighbours.

Coaches arrived from places such as The School for the Deaf and several residential homes for the elderly. People came by the hundreds each evening. It was a truly magical time but without the co-operation of all the residents it would not have been so successful. Evening meal times during December were disrupted but we were kept fortified by feasting on homemade mince pies, sausage rolls and roasted chestnuts – not to mention the mulled wine and hot toddies!

One evening a wealthy French man flew from France in his private aircraft, when approaching Manston Airport he was confused by all the lights and asked Air Control the reason for the extra lights and was informed they were from street decorations in Ocean Close. The pilot landed his plane only to take off a short time later to fly back to France to collect his wife and fly back again to see the lights! This was reported in the Daily Telegraph Newspaper.

In view of the large number of people arriving in the Close each evening we were advised to take out an Insurance Policy to cover any accidents. This we did for five million pounds (£5,000,000).

Father Christmas came in his beautiful red sleigh each evening and welcomed children into his grotto – a large queue of parents with their children went down the road and disappeared around the corner! Two desks were made, one painted blue, the other pink, with matching note paper and pens for the boys and girls to write their letters to Father Christmas. A post box was also made for the children to post their letters.

Many letters were posted each evening and each one was read by Father Christmas and his helpers over a nightcap at the end of the day. The letters mostly asked for toys, games, books etc but a few were very sad asking, in one case, for a boy to have anew liver. (The young lad received his liver transplant during the year and came back to see Father Christmas the following Christmas). Another letter was asking Father Christmas to stop his father from hitting mummy.

After 5 wonderfully exciting and very financially successful years, the lights were switched off for the last time, as street vendors, plying their wares, were profiting from our illuminations. As the vendors were licensed and came from as far away as Essex, the local police were unable to intervene.

SO ENDED THE CHRISTMAS LIGHTS AT OCEAN CLOSE