

**WEALDEN HOUSE : (Queen's Head Inn)**

The present Queen's Head is a large square building of three floors, standing in Birchington Square. The front has been altered over the years and in 1996 underwent extensive repairs to the top floor and the façade at the roof level on the front of the building. Its rear elevation is of unknapped flint and appears older than the front.

In a local history collection in Margate Library, there is a watercolour of a village landscape, inscribed at the foot of the picture – 'Birchington 1848'. There is no specific written information to indicate the whereabouts of the scene, but by putting together seven different elements in the picture, it is clear that it was drawn in Birchington Square. The central property shows a Wealden house with a build date of late 1400's to mid 1500's, on the site of the present Queen's Head.<sup>1</sup> The ground area covered by the present building is the same as that shown for the Wealden house. There is an alley to the left of the house, which matches the one between the Queen's Head and the shop next door. The shop was certainly functioning in 1848 and shortly afterwards, in about 1870, it was run as a general store by James Hinkley, who also 'collector of Her Majesty's taxes'.

To the right of the Wealden house can be seen a narrow lane, which matches the present Park Lane. It is still so confined that it only has a very narrow pavement on the far side and none at all on the Queen's Head side. In the painting there is a large brick-built house on the opposite corner of the lane entrance, which again matches the house that stood here until c.1920. The picture is a very accurate depiction of this building. In the lower right hand side of the picture is a flint wall, which tallies with the wall of All Saints churchyard, with the gate in roughly the same position it stands today. The foreground of the painting shows a large, open, shingled area, which appears in all the earliest photographs of the Square dating back to 1880. It is the only open, gravelled space in the village. The other open space, known as Dog Acre, was cultivated at this period.<sup>2</sup> If the artist had been sitting on a bench outside the Powell Arms when he drew his picture, this is exactly what he would have seen in front of him.

Having established that this is the position for the Wealden house by looking at present day features, we can also find evidence for it on a map drawn by Thomas Hill in 1679. St John's College Cambridge was left Upper Gore End Farm in 1642, by the will of John Robinson. The farm lies on the western outskirts of Birchington and in 1680 a fresh lease was drawn up for a new tenant. The farm consisted of separate plots of land spread all around the area, so the map needed to include the heart of the village. Thomas Hill had made a rather crude interpretation of how it appeared in this period. He drew a much more accurate version ten years later for another land-owner. In the 1679 map, he drew a large house roughly where the present Queen's Head

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Dermott, Buildings Conservation Officer for Thanet Council

<sup>2</sup> This area is now a public garden, known as 'Dog Acre'.

stands, displaying an inn sign. There is one other property with a similar sign on the same side of the Square.

From this information, it would be safe to say that the Wealden house was another of the properties that stood in the village in medieval times. Looking at the present building of the Queen's Head, it would appear that the old Wealden house was either demolished or encased in the later façade. The present publican says there are some very old timbers in the upper floors of the building, which do not fit with the rest of the woodwork, so were either re-used or were incorporated into the new structure in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The house shown in the watercolour has a large central block with an overhanging upper storey and a porch covering the front door (a later addition) to the left hand side. To the right of the main block is a jettied two storey addition, which butts right up to the lane, just as the present Queen's Head does. The extension to the left is not in the traditional position for this style of house, as it appears to project straight forward from the main block, rather than butting onto its end wall. The windows and shutters are almost certainly Victorian replacements of the original ones. The shutters are only on the ground floor and could well have been installed for safety reasons, because the property stands right on the main thoroughfare.

There is a large multi-flued chimney-stack towards the right hand end of the main block and also two smaller ones, which appear to belong to each of the jetties. However, it is just possible that the left hand chimney belongs to the shop across the alley and the right hand one belongs to the cottages, which stood close behind the house until they were only demolished in c. 1965. The long, wide pitch of the tiled roof, especially noticeable when compared with the shop on the left, is a clear indication of the age and structure of the Wealden house below it and was probably thatched when the house was first built.

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