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## Random Notes on Birchington's Past - By V. J. Torr

Recently I offered to the Vicar the chance to make known to the people of Birchington some of the many interesting mass of notes I have in my possession on the history of Birchington, and in this first instalment I must say to my readers that I am sure they will not mind a certain amount of jumping about as to periods of time, for it will make the task simpler to set down what first comes to hand.

Perhaps I may take for granted that nearly all my readers know that the name "Isle of Thanet" is not a mere figure of speech, for Thanet was anciently a real island with a broad waterway to the south and west, through which shipping could pass. After the end of the Roman occupation of Britain, this channel (the Wantsum) began gradually to contract and silt up, but the process was so slow that it was not till the year 1485 that it was first proposed to make a bridge (superseding the immemorial ferry) from Sarre to the mainland in the Chislet parish. It was also after the departure of the Roman garrisons that the two Wantsum fortresses of Reculver and Richborough began to fall into decay and eventually ruin. The former had more influence than the latter on the later development of Thanet.

The Isle of Thanet has always formed part of the Diocesan and Archdeaconry of Canterbury, and the Rural Deanery of Westbere (a little place just off the way to Canterbury) originally stretched from just west of Whitstable to the North Foreland, and then followed the River Stour into the city and so back to Seasalter. The modern modification has carved up this area into two – the Isle of Thanet becoming its own deanery.

No understanding of Thanet History can be obtained without reference to the once mighty Benedictine Abbey of St. Augustine, just outside the city wall of Canterbury. This ancient foundation was always monastic from the time of St. Augustine till the Dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII. There was great rivalry between this house and the neighbouring Priory of Christ Church, whose church was and is the Cathedral, and relations between them ranged from frigid politeness to sharp quarrels. Christ Church owned the church and manor of Monkton from 961 – always Birchington's 'parent' – but St. Augustine's held the larger eastern half of the island, and indeed built some of the ancient parish churches.

There had been a noted nunnery at the Thanet Minster from the early Saxon times, whose greatest boast was the possession of the body of St. Mildred. After the long ordeal of the Danish ravages in Kent, England steadied down under King Canute, who in 1027 gave Minster to St. Augustine's. The new owners started off badly, for on Whitsunday night of that year they secretly removed the precious body and made off with it for their own house in Canterbury. But hardly had they got clear of Minster than the deed was discovered and the angry people went in hot pursuit, but vainly, for the monks' start was just enough to get them over the Sarre ferry while the pursuers fumed on the water's edge. And St. Mildred never came back!

Modern Thanet, alas! is now largely over-built, and its attractive coastline wears a different aspect from a few generations ago. What with the airfield, sprawling suburbs of Ramsgate and Margate, and a host of schools, convents, hospitals and convalescent homes, it is not too easy to recall its appearance during the long ages under our review. The island lived by

farming and the sea, and was noted for the wide extent and excellence of its cornfields; while even its few towns were little places like the average Cornish fishing port today.

Coming now to Birchington, the chief thing in it is of course All Saints' Church - for centuries, like Woodchurch, a mere chapel of Monkton, over the hill to the south, from the top of which commands such lovely views away into Kent. The first sight of Birchington Church from afar is, of course, the steeple, topped by one of the most ancient weather vanes in Kent, and dated 1699.

Now we can tie this up with one of the many interesting records kept in the Chapter Library at Canterbury, relating to the Archdeacon's proceedings throughout Westbere and other rural deaneries. But if you notice that there is some degree of time-lag, are we not perfectly familiar, in modern England, with the slow tempo of many things which get done in half the time in some other countries?

In the "Visitations" volume covering the years 1675-98, we find a case presented in court that in 1694 the Birchington steeple, "by long neglect of former officers is in ruin and much in need of repair". Not far away and earlier on (in 1641), they were in the same case in Sandwich, where St. Peter's steeple, used by shipping in the Downs as a landmark, was giving trouble. But perhaps, owing to the Civil War and Commonwealth upset, nothing effective was done until, just twenty years later, most of it collapsed into the church. The lesson had been learned, and in two more years the rebuilding was well under way.

Thanet has always been subject to fierce winds, and when in 1694 the Birchington spire was surveyed by a carpenter called Long, he warned the parish the winds might 'shake it down', and estimated the necessary repairs at £40. So the then Vicar, Mr. Ayling, whose gravestone still lies in Monkton Church, gave his people the facts and advised the officers to make the usual "sess" or tax, on each household. But all they would agree to was one that was too small to pay the whole cost of repair, and so back to Canterbury went the case. The Archdeacon's official there, called the "judge"; and Churchwarden Bridges was admonished to make a second and sufficient sess, whether they liked it or not, and got on with the steeple repairs fast enough for a certificate of at least part-progress to be put into court by Michaelmas of 1694.

Even so, the whole job probably took some time longer, and the apex would be the last thing to be done. Can we reasonably doubt, therefore, that this vane, dated and probably erected by 1699, marks the end of the case? For there may well have been another hold-up when all the shingles were on, this time due to the village blacksmith, rather than the carpenter's delays.

John Ayling held the Monkton living for a long time (1662-1710). As early as 1666 the Churchwardens of Birchington "ran him in" at Canterbury for 'sometimes wearing a purple hood' in church, or else none at all; for omitting to hold service on Wednesdays and Fridays; and on St. Andrew's Day baptizing a child not in church but at home. But the Vicar got his own back on them, because in the same year, we find him sending into court six parishioners' names for 'not receiving the Holy Sacrament' during 1665, and two more for 'keeping their hats on' through both service and sermon! We do not know what happened either way, but no doubt there was some degree of "all uncharitableness" in Birchington for some little time after!