

SAND SERVICES at MINNIS BAY

by Elinor Izzard

Exactly when the Sand Services were started at Minnis Bay - or "Birchington Bay" as it was known originally - is unknown, but it was some time in the 1890s and they went on year after year for some considerable time.

There was no "Team" in those early days, only a single, white-haired old gentleman named Mr Tyler. Every morning except Sunday, he put up a red banner on the sands with the words "Children's Special Mission". Later on, this became "Children's Special Service Mission". About 20 or 30 children gathered round - children of visitors and residents, children from the Coast Guard Station at Minnis Bay and the black cottages where the farm workers and the men who worked on the brickfield at Lower Gore End lived.

As today, there were choruses (though not the same ones!), Bible readings, prayers and talks. The talks were illustrated by what we now call "visual aids". I remember one in which Mr Tyler showed all the flags that were used for signalling at sea - but I have forgotten the lesson he drew from it!

Sometimes there were "object" lessons when every child brought an object to illustrate an appropriate text - like a lily from "Consider the lilies ...", or a piece of bread from "I am the bread of Life".

There were no games or competitions in the afternoons, but some of the children used to follow Mr Tyler around, interested in his hobby of "photographing" seaweeds. To do this he used sheets of sensitised photographic paper, and when he saw a suitable piece of seaweed floating in a little rock pool, he would put the sheet of paper under it and bring it carefully up to the surface and spread it out in all its delicacy. After a few moments exposure to the light, the image of the seaweed was clearly

shown in every detail on the paper and could be "fixed" by simply immersing it in salt water.

How long the Sand Services went on under Mr Tyler, I do not know - or whether there were any interruptions over that time, but they were certainly going strong before the First World War. At that time, there was much activity before the services, with the children building sand seats and sometimes a quite elaborate pulpit, decorated with shells and seaweed. There was also a rather wheezy harmonium to lead the singing, wheeled on the promenade above the site for that day's service.

The outbreak of the First World War on August the 4th 1914 brought the services to an end, but they were started again in the 1920s. This time they were led by teams of two or three young men, who were studying for the Ministry or the Mission Field. At that period there were all sorts of interesting events - a grand picnic to Plum Pudding Island, or a Harvest Festival, from which the children took the fruit and other gifts over to the Victoria Home for Children, which occupied the building now the Day Hospital at Westbrook.

At one time there were over 100 children on roll and there were competitions in which other Sand Services Groups round the coast joined in - singing competitions, cricket matches and a tennis tournament, in which, more than once, Birchington carried off the cup!

So the Sand Services have had a long and varied, if not quite continuous, history at Minnis Bay.

Elinor Izzard

Beach Mission
at Minnis Bay
in c. 1900

