

The Story of St Thomas's Church at Minnis Bay, Birchington

1975

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Earliest Years – from 1900

Church services were first held at Minnis Bay as early as 1900¹, when there were no more than 35 houses, including the Coast Guard Cottages, at the Bay. When the first large scale Ordnance Survey map of Birchington was published in 1872, there were no houses at all at Minnis, except the Lower Gore End Farm buildings, now known as Old Bay Cottage, and the St Nicholas Coast Guard Cottages, situated near Plum Pudding Island, at the Point.

It was in about 1900, when Alderman Rayden lent the Exhibition Building for services, which were started mainly for the benefit of Coast Guards who supported the Anglican traditions and their families, who were unable to get to the parish Church. Services were then held on Thursday evenings and also on certain Sundays.

According to the All Saints Parish Magazine of 1902, the then Vicar of Birchington, the Rev. H.A. Serres, and the Churchwardens received an offer of a site for a church on the Birchington Bay Estate, which they provisionally accepted. Nothing seems to have come of this and services continued to be held in Arthur Rayden's Pavilion, which was lent by the Monarch Building Land Company, later called the Birchington Bay Company. This Pavilion was situated on the plot on the north east side of the junction of Arthur Road and Canute Road, in what is now known as 'The Dip'.

It was in April 1904 that the Archbishop gave official approval of services being held in the Pavilion, until such time as a small iron church could be built. This small iron church was never built, but services continued to be held at the Bay in the Pavilion.

In October 1924, the then Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, on behalf of the Diocese, accepted the generous gift from Mrs Kearns, in memory of her husband, Colonel Thomas J. Kearns, of a site for a Church at the Bay, on which was later built the Church of St Thomas. The letter from Archbishop Randall Davidson to the Vicar of Birchington, the Rev. Serres, in which he expresses his joy for Mrs Kearns' generous gift to the parish, can be seen in the Parish Archives.

The Great Gift

In September 1932, the freehold of a plot of land at the junction of Minnis Road and Grenham Bay Avenue was given. The plot had a frontage to Grenham Bay Avenue of 154 feet 10 inches and a frontage to Minnis Road of 124 feet. It was conveyed by Mrs Haidee Ida Kearns (who then lived at

¹ Charles Robert Haig built the first church Ethelbert Road, Minnis Bay in 1885. See Note 1 at the end of this story

'Shiraz', Nasmyth Road, Birchington) to Brevet Lieutenant Colonel George Ingleton Phillips, C.B.E., J.P., of 'Orion', Spencer Road, Birchington, Barrister at Law and also Churchwarden, and to the Rev. Archibald Ormston Hayes, Vicar of Birchington with Acol, as Trustees. The site was for a place of worship to be a church called the Church of St Thomas, where services were to be held according to the Clergy and rites of the Church of England and for no other purpose whatever.

Thus the idea to found an Anglican Church at Minnis Bay was that of Mrs H.I. Kearns, in memory of her late husband, Colonel Thomas Kearns, C.B., C.M.G., Colonel R.A.S.C., who died the 30th June 1920, as a result of war wounds received during the First World War, and who was buried in All Saints Churchyard, Birchington. He was Master of Ceremonies and Mace Bearer to the Lord Mayor of London, Sir Vessey Strong. Mrs Kearns was awarded the O.B.E. for her work during the First World War. She was a great character and a 'John Blunt'.

In addition to the site, Mrs Kearns gave £2,000 towards the cost of the building, a large sum in those days. Just before this, in 1931, the Bishop of Dover preached in All Saints Birchington on behalf of the Archbishop's £50,000 Appeal for the New Churches and Sunday Schools, and in a pamphlet delivered in the Parish, which drew attention to the Service and Sermon, reference was made to the district of Minnis Bay, where a new church was needed.² Minnis Bay was included, because in recent years, there had been a rapid increase in building and the Appeal was necessary for the extension of the Church's work and the due administration of the Sacraments.

The Building Fund and Lieut. Colonel Phillips

A Building Fund for the new church was opened. Lt. Col. Phillips, as Churchwarden and Diocesan Lay Reader, was the person who was in charge of the whole building operation and it was he who conceived the idea to have the Foundation Stone laid with the Masonic Ceremony. He also wanted the Church, as far as possible, to be connected with the Brothers of Birchington Lodge of Freemasons, of which he and the Vicar were members. Col. Phillips was a Barrister at Law of the Middle Temple. He served with the Royal Warwickshire Regiment in the South African War, while, during the First World War, he served as a General Staff Officer on the Imperial General Staff, War Office. In recognition of his work, he was invested with the C.B.E., Military. Following the Boer War, he spent some time in South Africa, where he was appointed Crown Prosecutor. He was particularly well known in Oxford, where he lived after his return from South Africa, and was appointed a Justice of the Peace for Oxfordshire during this period.

During his early days back in England, he began bringing his family down to Birchington during the summer months, before eventually taking up permanent residence in 'Orion' Spencer Road, Birchington.³ He became actively involved with Church life and was a Lay Reader within the Church for 50 years. He was one of the original members of the first Birchington

² By 1932, Haig's Congregational Church in Ethelbert Road was thriving well.

³ Fuller notes on the Phillips Family are kept in the Archives under the name of Kathleen Phillips, his daughter.

Parochial Church Council, formed in the late 1920s. It was to the Church of St Thomas he devoted much of his time and work and where he preached at Evensong on most Sundays, until his sudden death in 1936.

In addition to the £2,000 given by Mrs Kearns towards the cost of building the church, the Archbishop's New Churches' Appeal Fund donated £800; £100 came from the Canterbury Diocesan Fund; £100 came from the Ecclesiastical Commission. Major Powell Cotton gave £20, the Rev. and Mrs H.A. Serres gave £10, Mr Potts of Maidstone Ophthalmic Hospital £10 and there were about 20 other donations, mainly from people living at the Bay.

£7 6s 3d was collected by the children of the Parish. The total donations towards the Building Fund came to £3,236 0s 4d.

Plans for the new church were drawn up by the Architect, T.F.W. Grant, F.R.I.B.A., of London and the contract for the work was awarded to Rice and Son, builders of Margate, who submitted the lowest tender - £2591 – but, in the end, the total cost of the project was over £1896, with several other costs being added later.

By the wish of Mrs Kearns, the donor of the site and the additional £2,000 for the building costs, the Church was dedicated to St Thomas, after her late husband, Thomas Kearns.

Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony

The Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony took place on Saturday 29th October 1932 at 3 pm. It was carried out with full Masonic Ceremonial, an event without precedent in the history of Birchington and probably one that few, if any, of those present had ever seen before, or were likely to see again. It was also unique in as much as a Moslem took such a prominent part in the ceremony – that of laying the foundation stone in a Christian Church.

The Moslem was Col. Nawab Malik, Sir Umar Hayat, Tiwaw, K.C.I.E., C.B.E., M.V.O., A.D.C., who at that time was Master of the Brothers of Birchington Lodge of Freemasons. When not on duty in London as Honorary A.D.C. to His Majesty King George V, or at the India Office, he stayed in Birchington quite near to where Col. Phillips lived. Sir Umar Hayat came from the Punjab, where he was a large landowner and where he did so much to improve the lot of his local people. He studied Religion and the History of Islam during his academic career. He served in the Indian Army with much distinction, in both France and Mesopotamia during the First World War.

The Foundation Stone was laid by the Honourable, the Lord Cornwallis, C.B.E., Deputy Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of Freemasons, England, and the Provincial Grand Master of the Province of Kent.

It was a cold and windy Saturday afternoon, but fortunately it did not rain. As the whole site was covered by a very large tent, all those taking part were protected from the vagaries of the weather and everything went off without a hitch. Three parishioners living next to the site, including Mrs Kearns, who had moved to 'Sunnycot' Grenham Bay Avenue by then, placed their homes at the disposal of the Church, so clothing for the procession and the walk to the site and the ceremony were comfortable. The Garlinge Silver Band was in attendance and not only accompanied the hymns, but also played selections of music prior to the actual Ceremony. The Parish Church

Choir, under its Choirmaster, was there to lead the singing. Large crowds were present, making the work of the Stewards, many of whom were in Masonic Clothing, a difficult matter. As a result, the taking of the collection was difficult, but nevertheless, it amounted to £42 7s 9d, which went into the Building Fund.

The Ceremony opened with the colourful and dignified procession along the road from the robing houses to the site. Leading the procession were the Provincial Grand Lodge Officers and the Officers and Brothers of Birchington Lodge, accompanying the Right Honourable The Lord Cornwallis, followed by the Clergy and Choir. In the procession were Mr F.J. Cornford, bearing the vessel containing Salt, Major George Potts bearing the ewer with the Oil, Col. G.I. Phillips bearing the ewer with the Wine and Col. Nawab Malik Sir Umar Hayat bearing the Cornucopia with Corn. Sir Umar Hayat wore his Indian dress with a heavy overcoat. Also in the procession, carried on cushions, were the plans of the building, the phials to be deposited underneath the Stone, the Holy Bible, the Plumb Rule, the Level and the Maul. There were, also, the Sword Bearer, and the two Standard Bearers, one carrying the Standard of Lord Cornwallis and the other the Standard of the Province of Kent. The Vicar, the rural Dean and the Ven. Archdeacon of Canterbury, Canon E.H. Hardcastle, M.A., with the Choir followed at the rear of the procession.

The religious service, conducted by the Archdeacon, opened with the singing of Psalm 84, 'O, how amiable are thy dwellings, thou Lord of Hosts', followed by prayers and collects for St Thomas's Day, for Sanctification, for the Benefactors, for the workmen, and finally a prayer for the Dedication and Blessing of the Stone. Then followed the hymn, 'Praise to the Holiest in the height'.

After the religious service followed the purely Masonic part, introduced with a short address by the Lord Cornwallis. Before the Foundation Stone was tested and laid, two phials were placed in the cavity beneath where the stone was to rest. In the one phial were coins of the realm – one of each of the 1932 mint, while in the other phial, the following were placed:

- A copy of the day's ceremony
- A copy of the Birchington Magazine for October 1932
- A poster announcing the Ceremony
- A copy of the 'Times' newspaper of 27th October 1932
- A copy of the 'News Chronicle' for 27th October 1932
- A copy of the 'Isle of Thanet Gazette' of 28th October 1932

A metal plate was placed over the cavity and cement spread over it. After the stone was lowered by three distinct movements and adjusted by the Architect, Lord Cornwallis struck it with the Maul on the four corners, saying,

"With Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice may our work be founded."

He then tested the stone with the Plumb Rule, the Level and the Square and as it was proved plumb, level and square, he struck it with the Maul and declared it to be well and truly laid, in the name of the Great Architect of the Universe.

The vessels containing the Salt, Oil, Wine and Corn were then carried round the stone four times and, each in turn, presented to Lord Cornwallis, who then sprinkled the stone with Corn, the symbol of Plenty; next with Wine, the symbol of Joy and Gladness; then with Oil, a symbol of Charity and finally with Salt, a symbol of Hospitality and Friendship – the symbolism of each act being described and appropriate verses sung.

The hymn 'The Church's one Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord' was sung, a collection was taken and the Archdeacon gave a short address, commenting on the uniqueness of the ceremony they had been engaged in. He said he hoped that all would be inspired by the liberality of the donor of the site and give freely and cheerfully to the Building Fund. He then pronounced the Benediction and the Service ended with the singing of the Te Deum and the National Anthem. So ended an event without precedent in the History of Birchington. The procession was reformed and slowly walked back to the houses where the robing had taken place.

In the Parish Magazine for the following month, November 1932, the Vicar emphasised how very highly privileged the Parish was to have Lord Cornwallis and the Officers of the Provincial Grand Lodge of Kent to come to perform this wonderful ceremony. Thanks were expressed to them for all they did and they were assured that their kindness in coming and the beauty of the Service would always remain a fragrant and grateful memory.

Gratitude was also expressed in the Magazine to Col. Phillips for his good offices and for the way he threw himself wholeheartedly into all the detailed organisation required. Thanks were also given to the Brothers of Birchington Lodge of Freemasons.

Accounts of this unique ceremony, with photographs, appeared in many newspapers, not only locally, but also nationally, as well as some overseas versions. It appeared in some Canadian Newspapers, too. Pathé's Gazette made a short film of the event, which was shown in their News Film in many cinemas during the following week.

After the ceremony, something took place, which has never been recorded. It caused consternation and was even reported to the Police. On the morning following the ceremony, the foundation stone and the two phials were missing – they had been removed. After some enquires, they were found to be resting quite comfortably at Mrs Kearns' house! They had been removed by the workmen after the ceremony, as the structure needed attention. They were not put back until the following week. A number of people who went to see the stone the next day were most surprised and bewildered.

The First Service – and beyond

The first Service in the new Church was held on Christmas Day 1932, when the Vicar was the Celebrant, with 80 communicants being present, although, at this stage, the church was not yet finished.

The Dedication of the new Church took place on Sunday 5th February 1933 by the Bishop of Dover, in the presence of a large congregation. One of those present was the Rev. H.A. Serres, the Vicar under whose care the first idea of a new church had grown. Others present included the Rev. Canon G.W. Healy, the Rev. A.O. Hayes, the current Vicar of Birchington, the Rev.

W.G. Boyd, Rural Dean and the Rev. R.M. Eglin, Curate. From this time onwards, until the beginning of the Second World War, services were held at St Thomas's every Sunday, both Holy communion and Evensong.

On Sunday 29th October 1933, on the Anniversary of the Laying of the Foundation Stone, at the Holy Communion Service, the Altar in the Side Chapel was dedicated to the service of God. This Chapel was oak panelled, decorated and furnished by members of the Brothers of Birchington Lodge of Freemasons, as a memorial to those members of the Lodge who 'are summoned to the Grand Lodge above'. On the west wall of the Chapel, on the oak panelling, are the names of those who had died. These names include the Right Hon. The Lord Cornwallis, who died the 29th September 1935. A special Celebration was held at the Church of St Thomas in his memory at the 3rd Anniversary of the Stone Laying, the Celebrant being the Rev. Grenville Sharp, who was then Vicar of Birchington. The names now also include those of Lt. Col. Phillips, who died in 1936 and Major Nawab, Sir Umar Hayat Khan, who died in 1944.

Gifts and Furnishings

Some of the furnishings of the new church came from the original church at the Pavilion in the Dip and included a fine brass alms dish, which had been used there. Some items came from All Saints Church, including a Lectern and a Reading Desk and some were bought with money given for this purpose. The Font came from St Mildred's Church at Acol. The font had been bought in 1900 by several ladies, but by 1933 was in poor condition. It was restored and then eventually returned to Acol and a replacement placed in St Thomas's Baptistry.

Major Hunter presented a Crucifix with a bronze figure, which had been in a demolished church on the Western Front in the First World War. The Cross and Candlesticks for the side chapel, which have since been stolen, were given by Dr Potts.

In 1933, a silver Chalice was given by Mrs E.L. Hunter. It is six and a half inches high, with a diameter of four and half inches. Its hallmarks indicate it was made in Sheffield in 1904. Mrs Martin of 'Tappington' in Shakespeare Road, gave a silver Chalice – a continental piece of the 16th or 17th century, imported and remade in Chester in 1899. This piece is ten and a half inches high. Mrs G.I. Phillips presented a silver Paten, which has the Sheffield hallmarks on it, with a date of 1904.

In 1964, a new silver Chalice and Paten were presented by Miss Margaret Worsley, to the memory of her brother, Dr Allan Worsley. The Chalice is seven inches high and the diameter of the Paten is six and a half inches.

The first Children's Service was held in February 1933, when 10 children were present and the first Baptism was in March 1933, at the Children's Service.

The Church of St Thomas suffered a severe blow on March 11th 1936, when Col. G.I. Phillips died very suddenly at the age of 69 in Malta, while on a journey to the Holy Land with his daughter Kathleen. A Memorial Service was held for him in the Parish Church and at St Thomas's. The obituary in the Birchington Parish Magazine says this of him:

'He did much for this place, both in her church life and in the everyday activities of the village. For 50 years, he served his Church as Lay Reader and his opinion was of great value in the various Councils of the Church. It was largely due to his initiative and the generosity of Mrs Kearns that St Thomas's Church was built.'

A memorial tablet of white Portland stone was erected to his memory on the north wall of the nave of St Thomas's Church, opposite the Foundation Stone. Mrs G.I. Phillips presented a fine Sanctuary chair to the Church in memory of her husband. It has a carved mitre in the centre of the back panel and was used by him in his own study at 'Orion'.

In 1937 a Hammond Organ was installed, at a cost of £450 and a grille and reverberation chamber were built over the side chapel. The choir Stalls were made and given by Mr C. Hawkes in 1939 and the Children's Corner planned and furnished by the Rev. Peter Birkett in 1938.

During the Second World War the services at St Thomas's were much curtailed, mainly due to the difficulties caused by the 'black-out' and also the lack of staff. By 1942, the church was virtually closed, except for Holy Communion. There were very few people living at the Bay by this time and the Vicar wrote in the Parish Magazine in 1942,

'The Bay, in these days, is rather like a City of the Dead!'

After the War, with the people returning to their homes and new people moving in, the Church soon sprang to life again.

Post War Years

In 1951, Mrs Kearns, the great pillar of St Thomas's, died at the age of 89 years. During the Second World War, she gave up her own house, 'Sunnycot' in Grenham Bay Avenue, and went to live with Mr and Mrs A. Hodges at Woodford House School, in Station Road Birchington. When they retired, she continued to spend most of her time with them in their home at Wendover. She was buried in Birchington Churchyard with her husband (on the right side of the path as you enter by the lych gate).

Various donors have also given sets of Vestments, Altar Frontals and other items to St Thomas's Church. In 1952, the Charity Commissioners approved and established a scheme whereby the Diocesan Board of Finance became the Custodian Trustees and the Birchington Parochial Church Council the Managing Trustees.

In 1953, a strip of land adjoining the Minnis Road – about 90 square yards – was sold to Margate Corporation for road widening. The conveyance of this strip is attached to the original conveyance of 1932 and held in the Parish Archives. In 1958, the Church was sprayed against woodworm at a cost of £67.

In 1972, the new gas heating was installed.

There are two other memorial tablets in the Church. One is to Mr Frederick H. Bacon, who died in 1954 and who did so much for the Church. The other memorial is to Dr Denning, 'the beloved physician' of Birchington, who lived in Alpha Road during his working life and retired to his house in St Mildred's Avenue, where he died in 1960.

The church is inspected by the Appointed Architect under the Inspection of Churches Measure (1955), every five years, and his report on the necessary repairs, to be carried out under his supervision, is held in the Archives of All Saints Church. By this means the church is well cared for.

Much of the information in this booklet has been gleaned from the Scrap Books first kept by Mrs Roberts of Minnis Bay and followed on by Miss Hunt.

Note 1: In 1885, Arthur Rayden, a Parish Councillor and London Stockbroker who had moved to Birchington with his family, put up a large wooden building in the 'Dip' at Minnis Bay to accommodate a very successful 'Art Exhibition and Fancy Fair'. Its purpose was to attract visitors to Minnis Bay and also to help raise funds for the Institute in the Square, for the 'Youth Work' that they were beginning to undertake.

The Exhibition was a huge success, with special trains from London bringing down large crowds. At the end of the project, there was quite a lot of timber left over and it was from this that the first Bay Church was built in that same year. Charles Robert Haig had come to live in Minnis Bay with his young family and he realised that this growing community needed a place of worship. To this purpose, he bought a piece of land in the corner of what became Ethelbert Road, next to the Minnis Bay Coast Guard Station houses and beside his own home.

He then acquired the timber that had been left over from the Exhibition Building and also engaged the workmen who had been used on this project. Within two weeks, the Church was complete and a service was being held within it. Initially, the Church was inter-denominational and when it was first built, a text was painted on its external wall saying: 'All one in Christ Jesus'. Although all denominations were warmly welcomed into this community, their services had a distinctly 'free church' flavour.

This situation continued for several years, until those people of specific Anglican persuasion felt they wanted a service more like the ones they had been used to within the Anglican Churches from which they had come. It was at this point, in 1900, that the Exhibition Building itself was used for their services, and where page one of this document takes up the story.

Margaret Haig also tells of the earliest 'Sand Services', run each summer time by an elderly gentleman named Mr Tyler. This was in the years between 1885 and 1900. She says they attracted thirty or more children every weekday morning. They gathered round the red and white C.S.S.M. banner and sang choruses, listened to readings from the Bible and to Mr Tyler's very interesting talks. He usually illustrated these talks with 'visual aids', as we now term them.

In 2002, these same services were still held, now under the banner of 'Scripture Union' and based at both St Thomas's and the U.R.C. Churches, as well as the Methodist and Baptist Churches up in the village. There were over 350 children involved during the 2002 sessions.