



Preserving the Past for the Future

Newsletter

www.birchingtonheritage.org.uk

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Queen Bertha's Old Students' Visit



Speech Day - Queen Bertha's old girls - 1957-58

On Saturday the 25th April about 40 old students from Queen Bertha's Boarding School held a grand Reunion in Birchington to celebrate the 50 years since the school closed and the 80 years since it was founded. The school used to occupy two large houses on the eleven-acres now used for Queen Bertha's Avenue, which was built 1961-63. The girls usually meet in London each year, but with two such special anniversaries they decided to come back to their old haunts in Birchington.

After meeting for coffee in Mulberry's Tea Rooms, two of their number, who are Lay Readers, led a Thanksgiving Service in All Saints Church, where some of the furniture from their old Chapel still stands. They then walked over to the Smuggler's Restaurant for an excellent lunch and a good long chat. Their final destination was the Birchington Heritage Trust Museum, where they were able to browse through the large collection of memorabilia in the Queen Bertha file and also watch a PowerPoint programme of over 70 images from the old days at the school.

The girls were already planning their next gathering in London for 2010. It says a huge amount about the value their school days mean to them that they still try to meet together after all this time, despite the age and infirmity of some. The thoughtful ethos of the school rang out in all their conversation and anecdotes, with much laughter and great enjoyment. The Museum will now hold many more pictures and anecdotes from those old days, as well as a tunic and blazer, along with one of their dramatic red cloaks, donated by two of our visitors.

BHT Barn Dance raises £90

The Trust's Social Committee organised a Barn Dance on April 17th in the Village Centre hall. We made a profit of about £90, which tells you it was not overcrowded - but for those who came, it proved a most enjoyable evening. It was full of laughter and good fellowship, as the couples got to grips with some delightful new dances, as well as some old favourites.



Caller Annette Peters arranges next dance

The caller, Annette Peters from Faversham, was excellent and the music was greatly enjoyed by even the few who were only onlookers. The dancers all had a very good time and the 'bring & share' supper proved a great success as usual. The Social Committee would like to thank you for your support.



"Swing your partner"

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The March B.H.T. talk, given by local archer, Mal Argent, had the intriguing title "The Butts and No Butts". He explained his name (or should it be *nom de guerre*) actually means "bad silver" or "bad money" in French and then proceeded to describe his clothes and weapons. Mal was resplendent in his archer's costume of blue tunic with a leather belt holding his knife and sword, hose, codpiece, boots and link mail which was riveted chain mail as opposed to metal armour which was much heavier.



Mal Argent - Archer

In his hand he carried a large longbow almost as tall as himself. This was a self bow made of one wood, in this case yew, and carved from one large branch which would have been large enough to make 2 or 3 bows of varying thicknesses. The wood was taken from the middle of the branch to give it power and "taken to string" when young to give it its bend. There was a shortage of yew in this country during the Hundred Years War and much of the yew was imported from France and Italy.

The ends of the bow, to which the string is attached, are known as 'thicknesses' and these were made of horn. The string has loops at each end which fit over the thicknesses and Mal showed us how a poacher would remove the string, put it in his pocket and use the bow as a walking stick if anyone was coming. The string should not be kept permanently on the bow in any case or it will distort it. Strings stretch when wet, so a spare would be kept dry by the archer "under his hat", hence the expression. At full stretch this bow had an 80 pound draw-weight, which, as one of the audience discovered, means it takes a great deal of strength to draw it.

His second bow was shorter and made from two different woods, hickory and lance wood, laminated together with the knocks made of buffalo horn. An added bonus was that the maker of this horn knock was in the audience and they had an interesting discussion about the draw-weight, which in this case was much less.

Its arrows were also much smaller. Arrow shafts were made of different softwoods: cedar was good but pine was common. Different arrowheads were used for different purposes with standard, broadhead and crescent moon heads. The fletchings (feathers) are fixed at an angle to make them fly straight and spin. The smaller the fletchings, the longer the distance they could fly. They could pierce chain mail, but not metal armour. Flutings strengthened the arrows without adding to the weight.

A mark on the string showed where the arrow was placed. In battle the archers would aim for weak areas or horses and their aim was to cut and impede movement. A heavy bow could send an arrow up to three quarters of a mile, but it would not be very accurate. At 300 yards a group could be targeted and a person at 200 yards. Arrows were fired with a shooting angle of 45° usually; the arrow lost power going up and gained some as it went down. Mal was quick to challenge the myth of an arrow splitting another in two.

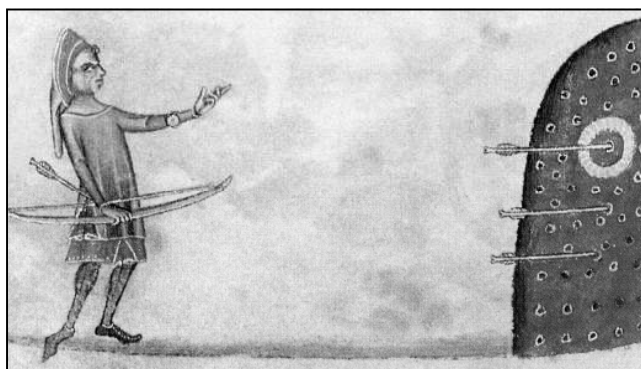
One advantage of the longbow over the crossbow was that it could be fired arrows more quickly, at the rate of 10-12 per minute. The arrows were not kept in a quiver slung over the back, as shown in pictures, because it would have been very difficult to withdraw them at speed. On the way to the butts they would have been carried in a basket or, on a march, stuck in the archer's belt.

In battle, they would be stuck in the ground, probably by a helper who, if he did well and was alive at the end of the day, might receive a 1d. In a battle up to 3,000 arrows an hour might be shot and at Agincourt, the English archers actually ran out of arrows.

And so to the butts! Bowmen were trained from knee high and exercised picking up bags of sand to strengthen their arms. They would go on to draw bigger and bigger bows. They strove to "pass muster" and so be paid as an archer. But the butts were not like the modern archery targets we all know. The target in medieval times was a simple wand at which the arrows were fired at ten arrows a minute or fifteen by a good archer. Targets which consisted of a bag of straw with a red heart on it were later used by ladies. Practice would take place on a Sunday after church and the law which ordered archers to do this has never been rescinded.



Stringing Longbow



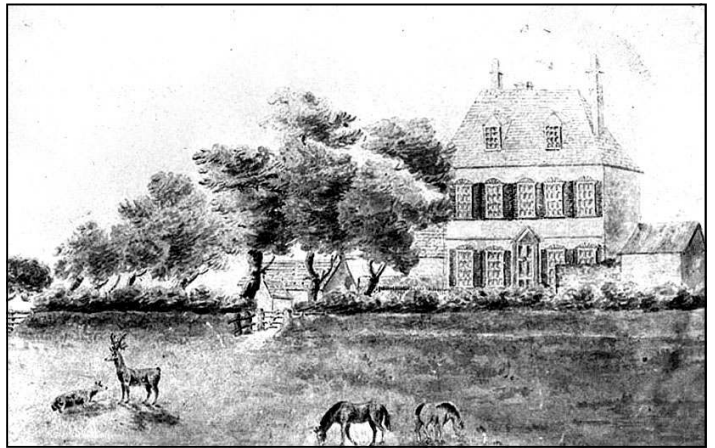
Archer & target

Birchington Hall was situated on Canterbury Road opposite what is now Crispe Park. Its grounds are now the Birch Hill estate, the house stood between Park Road and the new Charlesworth Drive.

As early as 1203 there was a place called "Scottestone" in the area now associated with Birchington Hall. The oldest picture we have of the building is dated 1800. It is labelled simply "The Old House", with additional wording stating, "now Birchington Place, before the alterations". The painting shows an imposing house with a similar appearance to many of the old Court Houses of the 15th and 16th century. The Birchington one probably dates from about 1560, according to the opinion of three experts.

For several generations the house and land was in the hands of the FRIEND family. In 1620 the name appears in a Baptism Register for All Saints Church. In 1674, William Friend held the land known as 'Scot's Down' or 'Scot's Land', which at that date consisted of 40 acres, and the following year he is shown as being rated for 132 acres. This continued until 1680, when the land was inherited by George Friend, who remained in occupation until about 1703. In 1690 George Friend was rated for 'Scotsdown' at £20.

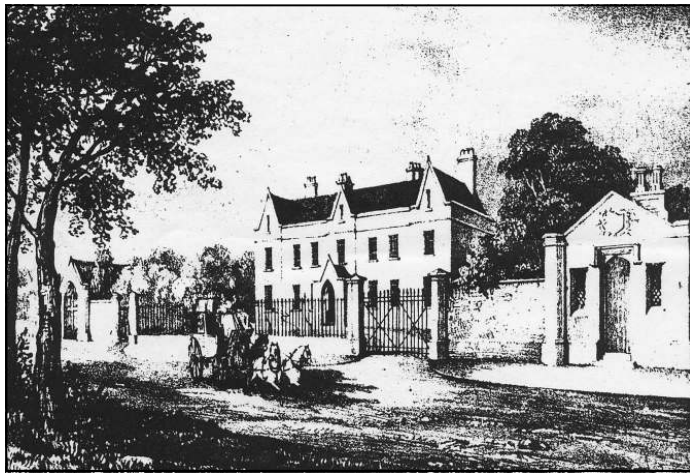
All this while, the house appears to have remained in its imposing but fairly compact state which we see by



The 'Old House', c.1800

the end of the 1700s. Various members of the Friend family inherited it during this century. At one stage, the Friend family paid nearly half the rates levied in the parish - £616 out of £1,299. Between 1740 and 1792 the estate was enlarged to about 148 acres and by this time is clearly called "Birchington Place". On the 1840 Tithe Map, the house was in the occupation and ownership of John Friend Esq, sometimes known as John 'Birchington' Friend, to differentiate him from his relatives, John 'Brooksend' Friend and John 'Taddy' Friend.

Somewhere between 1800 and 1832, narrow wings were added to each side of the front of the property and the attic floor was given three pointed window gables instead of two dormers in the roof. The rest of the large windows were all kept, with the only other addition being in the new pointed porch, covering the original front door and a stucco rendering finish to the whole building, hiding the warm red brick of the old house. The Friend family continued to live there until about 1852, when the house and farm were put up for sale.



Birchington Place c.1832

Thomas Gray bought the property and farm in the late 1860s or early 1870s, and renamed it 'Birchington Hall'. The house became the focus of many local celebrations and much charitable hospitality. Thomas Gray and his wife Susan played a prominent part in village and Church life, holding teas and Christmas celebrations in the house and grounds for the oldest and youngest members of the community. During the summertime, they had summer fetes and children's sports and teas in the grounds. These events are frequently referred to in the School Log Books and the Parish Magazines of the time. After Thomas Gray died in about 1900, his wife was cared for by her niece. When Susan Gray died in about 1915, the niece put the house and farm up for sale.

During 1917 Spurgeon's Boys' Orphanage in Stockwell celebrated its Golden Jubilee with a large Fund Raising campaign, and the Trustees of the charity decided to buy Birchington Hall and forty acres of its farmland in 1919. The children came down to Birchington Hall from Stockwell for their holidays, or for recuperation from illnesses.

After the Second War Spurgeons decided to sell the Stockwell site and build new permanent accommodation for the children in the grounds of Birchington Hall. The old Hall itself was used as a Baby Home from about 1954 and continued as such until a new purpose-built home was opened in 1966. The old house continued to be used for a short while after this, mainly for storage, but was eventually abandoned. Sadly, when it was decided to pull down the white stucco covered building in about 1970-1, the event went almost unnoticed.

Spurgeons itself closed in 1978, and the site was sold to the developers Stirling Homes and emerged as the Birch Hill Estate by the mid 1980s. Many of the roads on the site commemorate significant people with Spurgeon connections. The final area, covering the ground where the old Hall stood, was not developed until 2000 and has three quiet closes on it, with many of the old trees being retained.



The Hall in 1966

Membership & Subscriptions

Reminder - Subscriptions are due from 1st May, and still only £5 per person. If you are already a member there is no need to fill in another form (unless your address, phone or e-mail has changed) - just give the money to Bob Hinge, or to any committee member or at the Museum.

If you are a taxpayer who hasn't filled in a Gift Aid form please do so - it gives us extra money with no expense to you. If you have already filled in this form there is no need to do so again.

Picture Gallery – can you help?

If any of you who have visited www.birchingtonheritage.org.uk recently you will probably have noticed, the number of pictures in our online gallery continues to increase – very near 1000 now. You will also notice that some subjects appear in a lot of pictures – Minnis Bay seafront, The Square, the Village pond – but others appear much less often. We hope to find some pictures of these rarer subjects. Examples of subjects not well covered include:

- The lighthouse like tower behind Alpha Road – this was visible across the field which is now Crispe Park
- Alpha Road Stores
- The ABSOPURE ice cream factory (now Grange boxing club)
- The packing plant in Minnis Road (Steenhuis, later Kentveg & Saphir)
- The old Church Hall in Kent Gardens (a surprising omission)

If you have any pictures showing Birchington as it now isn't, especially of things like those above, we would very much like to borrow them for a short while to scan for our archive. Please contact Jennie Burgess or Bob Hinge if you have anything that you think might be useful.

BHT DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

- Thurs 28th May** **AGM followed by Illustrated Talk The History of The Anglo-Saxon Church By Rev Phillip Hobday**
- Fri 26th June** **Talk by Jennie Burgess Buried Treasure (The Church Yard)**
- Fri 16th October** **Race Night**
- Fri 3rd December** **Concert by David Ruddock & Friends**

All Start 7.30 pm at the Village Centre

The Queen's Head

Tradition has it that the building was originally known as the 'Acorn', but sadly, the documentary evidence for this has now been lost by Dover, our licensing



Birchington 1848

authority from earliest times. On the map of Upper Gore End Farm of 1679, a house on this site is shown with an unreadable inn sign, but by the time the Tithe Map was drawn up in 1840 this large old property, which we see above, had been divided into three dwellings. There is no sign of it functioning as a pub in the 1851 census, but by 1861 William Hayward is listed as its landlord.

By the time the first photos were taken of the south side of the Square in 1900, the building looked as it does below and as we see it today. It would appear that the medieval building was pulled down when the three-storey public house was developed. The cellars show evidence of being much older and very probably date to the old building, at least in part. The ground plan covered by the present building exactly matches that covered by the old Wealden house that preceded it. The form of flint that now covers the rear of the building is very similar to that used on the restoration of All Saints Church just across the Square in 1863, i.e. mainly unknapped and therefore much cheaper and quicker to work.

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Advert from 1903

The plan to convert the present pub into three private dwellings in 2005 is following what must have occurred sometime between 1679 and 1840. The recent sensitive alterations are keeping the same façade at both the front and rear of the building, which is so reassuring to the old time residents of Birchington. The barn at the back probably dates back to the Wealden house period, and would have housed the visitors' horses below and the ostlers on the upper floor.

Jennie Burgess – Parish Archivist 2005