BIRCHINGTON HERITAGE TRUST

Preserving the Past for the Future

Newsletter

www.birchingtonheritage.org.uk

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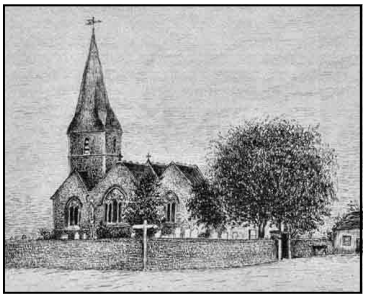
GIFT to the MUSEUM 'THE VILLAGE SIGN'

When a watercolour painting of Birchington was given to the Museum recently, the donor knew only that it had been painted for a competition. The subject was to be a local scene to include a village sign. If the artist's village did not have one, they were invited to design one. Unfortunately the artist did not sign or date the work, but whoever painted the picture possessed considerable skill with watercolours.

Water Colour painting of All Saints Church Birchington With imaginary Village sign

We can date the picture fairly accurately because the artist painted it not far from the ground in front of Church House, on the corner of Kent Gardens and Canterbury Road. At that date the churchyard was considerably smaller than it is now. A new lower section was added in the early 1900s, adding two more bays to the roadside wall, so we have dated the painting at about 1900.

Looking at the picture and knowing its approximate date, we can step back in time to a much quieter village, with the only sounds in the street being of horses' hooves and the creak of wooden wheels on the Canterbury Road which was known as Church Street. The road was surfaced with grit, which was renewed each year and periodically sprayed with hoses through the summer months to reduce the dust. There were only occasional sections of footpath on either side of the narrow lane and the cottages on the right still had largish front gardens.



All Saints Church c.1882

The properties at the top right of the picture include The Bank later to become Lloyd's Bank, Knott's Coach Builders later to become Jenner's Garage (now Alfred Court flats), The Queen's Head Hotel, 'Darby's' House and the front end of the stable attached to Buddle's forge, opposite the Church.

The main feature of the painting was, of course, the village sign, as imagined by the artist. The church was depicted as it appears on the 1414 map by Thomas of Elmham, which shows a stylised version, but without the trees. These are reserved for the church at Woodchurch on the map. The wooden seat constructed around the base of the sign was a most welcome idea and the old gentleman sitting reading his newspaper is enjoying the rest. He looks as if his has also brought his snack lunch, tucked into his right side, perhaps waiting until the church clock struck noon before he ate it.

We have had some high quality copies made of the painting using textured paper and 'Framing Plus' has framed a full sized one for sale. We are also selling unframed full size versions in the Museum, together with A4 prints.

We wonder if seating could be added to our new village sign in the Square – if it were moved a little distance away from the edge of the road. What do our readers think?

Jennie Burgess

Darby's House c.1910

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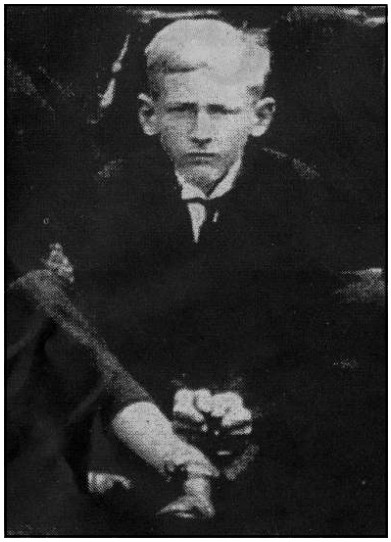
JIMMY BECK – YOUNG ARCHAEOLOGIST

As a schoolboy of 14, Jimmy Beck discovered a Late Bronze Age settlement at Minnis Bay in 1938. He also found Roman artefacts and a horde of metal objects buried in the sand between the high and low tide area, which became known as 'The Beck Horde'.



Jimmy Beck
Kings School 1938-9

His finds suddenly revealed a whole new era of life in Minnis Bay, Birchington from prehistoric through to Roman and Medieval times. He was very careful in his excavations and meticulously recorded his finds. He then shared the information about his finds with local and national authorities, including Quex Park and the British Museum, where his finds are now lodged. Hazel Basford wrote an article about Jimmy's discovery for the Isle of Thanet Gazette of the 5th April this year, in which she mentions that he was a pupil of King's School, Canterbury and that his parents had a holiday home in Birchington.

Axe & spear heads
A display dedicated to the memory of Jimmy Beck

Unfortunately, Jimmy died just over a year later in January 1940 aged only 15. Each time the subject of Jimmy and his premature death has been raised, people have asked me what he died of, but I was unable to answer that question.

Recently, Cliff Cole helped me obtain Jimmy's death certificate and it appears he died of kidney failure. He address at his death was given as 'Ellingham', St Clements Road, Westgate, although his 'home' address for both himself and his father is given as 'The Glade', Harold Road, Birchington. 'Ellingham' was where his grandmother, Mrs N. Beck, lived. It is a large, airy house with views straight across to the sea at Westgate and was probably more suitable to nurse a very sick young lad through his final weeks.

Ellingham, St Clements Rd

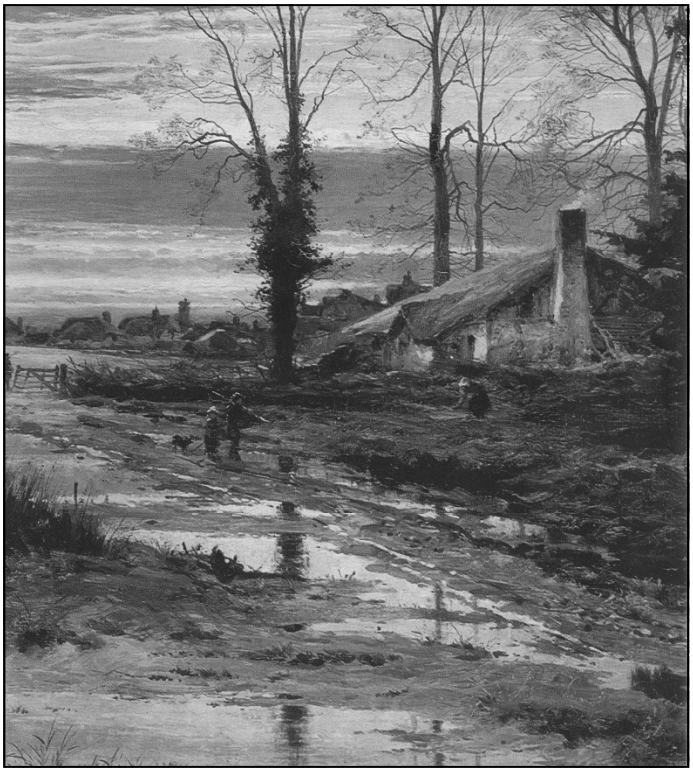
After his death, Antoinette Powell-Cotton and two local archaeologists, Roy Carr and Frederick Worsfold, continued to excavate in the same area and in 1947 discovered, among other things, a medieval well with pieces of pottery at its foot, along with wood from the lining and the well-head structure. It is sad to think that young Jimmy was not there to enjoy those new discoveries, to which his earlier work had pointed the way.

The Glade, Harold Rd

Jennie Burgess

Street Maintenance - Waywardens of Birchington

Before the Reformation the local roads (or rather, tracks) were maintained under the regime of the local people over whose lands they ran. This meant either the local monastery, the Squire or the King. Part of the payment of a man's rent was laid down as road maintenance. This meant that he had to give about 4 days a year to the Squire or monastery or the King's representative to collect stones and lay them on parish roads.



Roads in Winter - c. 1870

After the Reformation the roads were badly neglected for some time because the changes in land ownership were so vast that the new landlords were unable to organise the road maintenance for some while. This state of affairs continued until the nation's safety (through invasion or civil strife) made it imperative to repair the roads. At the start of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I an Act was passed making each parish responsible for managing and repairing all the roads and byways in the parish. To do this Waywardens were appointed, who were given powers to impose a tax (or assessment) on the villagers according to their means.

Birchington's Waywardens' accounts would have begun in the early 1600s, but those early ones have now been lost. For many years the only one we held began in 1805 and stopped in 1845. For some reason there are two copies of this volume. This was accompanied by a collection of bills and vouchers for the repair of the highways dated from 1819 to 1825. These consisted of 68 documents, many badly damaged and foxed and some that were torn.

Then in August 2009 a second Waywardens' account book turned up in the Birchington Heritage Museum. It was brought over from New Zealand by the descendant of the Neame family, who were Waywardens in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The book covers the years 1771 to 1805 so immediately precedes our original ones. By 1805 the book was filled to the very end, even covering the rear endpaper and cover. Because of this a new book was brought into use. It was probably this state of affairs that meant that the filled volume remained in the Neame family home (Evergreen Farmhouse, later renamed "The Smugglers"). When the family home was sold in about 1930 and then turned into a teahouse and garden, the last Neame living there took the book with him and it eventually ended up in New Zealand when he emigrated.

It was not until his son was clearing out his father's home after his death that the volume was discovered. The family knew of their connection with Birchington and in the early 2000s some members of the family came to visit their old home village. but no one thought to return the old Waywardens' book. It was not until Naomi Walker (granddaughter of the old man) was planning a trip to the UK in 2009 that she thought to seek a way of returning the book to its rightful"home". She contacted the Archivist via the Birchington Heritage web site and asked if we would like to have the book back and, if not, to whom should she hand it? The Archivist wrote back by return to say we would be thrilled to have it back as it fitted exactly into the sequence we still held.

Considering its age, it is in remarkably good condition. The book measures 21cmx 33.5cm and is 1.75cm thick. Its pages are made of sturdy paper with an interesting slightly ridged surface, measuring 20cm x 32.5cm. There are 60 pages (120 double sides) and the inside of the back cover has been written on as well. There are a few blank pages, probably when a new Warden took over the job. The information consists of the names of the people who paid their assessments and also lists of those who supplied the stones and the labour for repairing the highways.

The system of maintaining the highways is described in detail in "The Parish Chest" by W.E.Tate, pp. 242-250. It was not until the General Highway Act of 1835 that the matter was partly taken out of the parish's hands and managed by the government. There was still local input into the system, but the overriding responsibility lay with the County and National authorities.

Roads in Winter

All of Birchington's roads were in this state during the winter months in the 1870s to 1880s. By 1900 the Canterbury Road was much better cared for, but still not tarred. Even as late as 1924, residents down the Minnis Road ware complaining to the Parish Council about the state of their road, with its large potholes and muddy ruts.

Watering the Roads

July 1897 Watering the roads in Birchington was a regular activity each summer, before the roads were tarred. The clouds of dust which arose each time a cart or vehicle went past caused great distress to pedestrians, and also shopkeepers and their customers, when their shop doors were open.

Heather Letley

Fred Castle

Well known village character Fred Castle was a local carter seen around Birchington with his carthorse Flower. One resident recalls him collecting seaweed from the seashore for people and not always cleaning out his cart very well before his next job. When Fred came to move the family to their new home they discovered odd pieces of seaweed and its lingering smell. He was the last person in the village to earn his living this way - there had been at least six such carriers around at the beginning of the twentieth century, some working only in and around the village, while others plied their trade as far a field as Canterbury. During his latter years Fred and Flower raised hundreds of pounds for charity at local fetes and carnivals.

Fred died in 1968 at the age of 65 and to ensure that he had more than a pauper's funeral arrangements were made by "The Squares", whose chairman was Wally Wanstall of PWD Butchers in the Square. Donations from local residents ensured that the funeral was a truly "village affair".

Fulfilling Fred's last wish that Flower the 11-year-old horse would accompany his cortege on its journey to the church. The horse was his chief mourner at the funeral on the 17th April.

Flower went to a new home at Maidstone with a new master.

Fred Castle & Flower during All Saints Church fete at Grenham House School Grounds c. 1960

Heather Letley

BHT Museum Matters

SITE for WINDOW DISPLAYS?

Most of you will have realised by now that we have lost our display site in Martin's Newsagent's window. If you hear of anywhere else that would allow us to put on a display – even for short periods – please let us know. We have been asked by quite a number of you if we can find a new venue, but so far all our enquiries have drawn a blank.

We are also still hoping to find a ground floor site for the Museum within the village – so if you hear of any possible accommodation, please let us know this, too!

EMAIL ADDRESSES

If you don't receive the up-dates on the BHT events via email, please get in touch with Janet and John Robinson, so that they can include you in the mailing list. Their email address is: -

robinsons@the2jays.f2s.com

VOLUNTEER HERITAGE MUSEUM STEWARDS

If any one would like to be included on the Heritage Museum Stewards' rota list, please contact Maureen Davis on 843028.

SUBSCRIPTION REMINDER

Our Membership renewals begin in May

£7.50 for single person

£12.50 for a couple at the same address

In return you receive quarterly newsletters and talks and access to our museum.

BHT DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Thursday 23rd May 2013

AGM & TALK

by Major Reg Elson

"My Life"

7.00 pm for 7.30 pm

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Thursday 6th June 2013

Fund Raising Talk by Neville Hudson

60 Years of Change in Birchington

7.00 pm for 7.30 pm

See posters for ticket price

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Friday 21 st June 2013

DANCE

See notice Board for Details

A selection of music for all tastes

7.30 pm to 10.00pm

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At The Birchington Village Centre

Non-members Welcome