



August 2015

Charity No. 1099250

ISSUE 53

THE SPANISH ARMADA & BIRCHINGTON



Sir Francis Drake

When I was first told that the people of Birchington were involved in the Spanish Armada, I just laughed. "Pull the other one!" I scoffed. But my informant was serious. Listening to the story, I discovered that we were not only involved, but were extra generous in our contributions.

The story goes back to about the mid 13th century when Birchington, together with Gore End, became Non-Corporate Members of the Cinque Port of Dover. The other members in our group were St John's (Margate, as we now know it) and St Peter's (now Broadstairs). Together we shared the burden of funding the equipment for kitting out one of the King's (or Queen's) ships at Dover. The fund was known as Composition Money, which was used to provide food, ropes and sails for one vessel.

When the call to arms came for fighting off the Spanish Armada in 1588, the Dover Deputy, our secular officer appointed by Dover to keep order in the village, organised the collection of the Composition money from each household who was worth more than a specified amount.

The Armada Sess is a list of parishioners of Birchington and the amounts they paid when a Sess or Rate was levied to raise money for the Dover ship to be fitted out to fight Spanish Armada in 1588. Birchington was a Non-Corporate Limb of the Cinque Port of Dover from about 1250 until the Borough of Margate decided to include Birchington in its borough in 1935 and severed our Dover connection.

Many of the names on the list of contributors can be found in both the parish registers and the Churchwardens' accounts of that era. We can also still see several of the properties that were occupied by the villagers in Birchington in 1588.

The 'Armada Sess' is a paper document with writing on both sides, and gives the names and amounts each man was duty bound to contribute, according to his wealth. The document is now stored in Canterbury Cathedral Archives.

The Sess opens with the following words -
"This sesse (or assessment) was made the 28 day of April 1588, by the consent of the parishioners of Birchington, for and concerning the £23 6s 8d to be paid to the Mayor and Jurratts of Dover, towards the setting out of their ship for viii weeks service as followeth, whereof our part is £5 16s 8d."

There follows the list of the names of just 40 men and the amounts each of them paid, varying from 3d to £1. The sum the sesse was eventually fixed to raise amounted to £6 8s 9d. However, when the book was finally closed, Birchington had actually raised £7 2s 6d.

In December 1587 England's Grand Fleet assembled at Queenborough, on the Isle of Sheppey, while Drake's smaller scouting force lay at Plymouth. There was also a light squadron at Dover, to which our payment contributed. This light squadron was to keep an eye on the forces of the Duke of Parma in the Netherlands and try and keep it on land. In May 1588 the Grand Fleet moved first into the Downs and then on to Plymouth to join Drake's scouting force, leaving the light squadron at Dover. On 30th May the Armada left Taquis, but was caught in storms in the Bay of Biscay. It finally left Corunna on 12th July and came in sight of the Lizard on the 19th July. Between 21st and 30th of July, a major battle was fought at sea in the English Channel. The Armada was defeated by superior English strategy at sea, a no-boarding policy, and the weather, and also by the fact that the Duke of Parma's forces were unable to make contact with the main Spanish fleet.

Jennie Burgess

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How did the Black Death affect the people of Birchington? Although its arrival here was nearly 800 years ago, the evidence for this can still be seen to this day. It is 'written' in stone and in a transcript of an early contract.



Death of a priest

When people first walk into All Saints Church in Birchington, many notice the huge multi-columned pillar at the west end of the South aisle, while the rest of the pillars are slender octagonal columns. When we look more closely at the large one, we can also see a group of projecting stones on the south side, just above the upper capital of the pillar. The reason comes in the form of a transcript of a document held by the Town Clerk of Margate in 1879 and was rediscovered in 1933.

It had been copied from the original, (in the possession of the Town Clerk of Margate in 1879), onto the fly-leaf at the back of Edward White's copy of *Lewis's 'ISLE OF THANET,'* 1736, by the late William John Mercer of Margate, both members of the Kent Archaeological Society. It is a dated document for a definite kind of architecture, and gives the neighbourhood from whence the stone was to be obtained.

The contract was drawn up in 1343 between John Steed, the Churchwarden of Birchington Church and William Goldwert, a stonemason and plasterer of Herne.

"This Indenture made the Monday next after the feast of St Hilary (Jan. 13) in the sixteenth year in the reign of King Henry the third (1343) after the conquest of England and in the third year of his reign over France. Witnesseth that it is agreed between John Steed, Guardian (Churchwarden) of the work of Birchington in Thanet of the one part & William Goldwert of the Parish of Herne, plasterer."

[The complete transcript of the Contract and a fuller account of the story can be seen in the BHT Museum, Room 4, The Centre]

The work was begun in good faith soon after the signing of the contract. There also appears to have been plans to add a tower to the west end of new south aisle, which is why that massive pillar was built. However, with the arrival of the Black Death in Thanet in 1348, half the labour force vanished almost overnight and the money was no longer available. All the work on the enlargement of Birchington church was halted. It was probably not until about 1350-55 that there were enough able-bodied men to restart the work. By then the need for such a massive increase in the size of the church had disappeared. About half the inhabitants had perished in the 'visitation'. Those who were left decided that it would be wiser to add just two half aisles beneath one large roof.

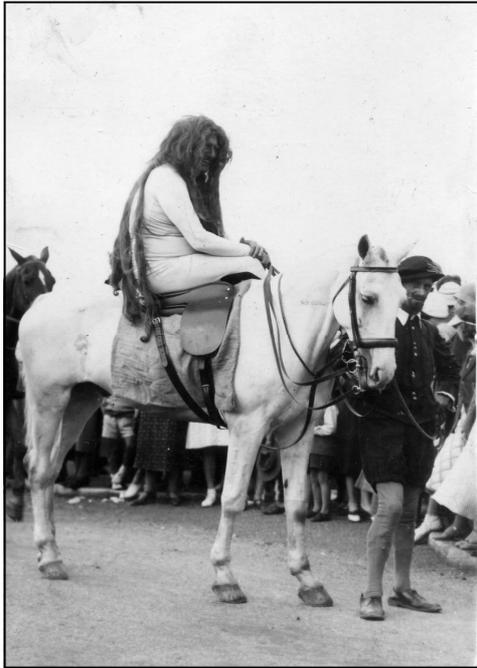


Large South West pillar & springers for tower arch

This is what we can still see today, so the shape and layout of All Saints Church is due to the arrival of the Black Death in Birchington in 1348. In the outside of the south wall of the church, we can see some of the stones that once came from the original nave walls. They are probably on the rest of the outer walls, but these were all refaced with flints by the Victorians in their 1863 Restoration.

From a local newspaper article

Birchington Chamber of Commerce celebrates its Golden Jubilee in 1976, having been formed in the year 1926. In those days the adult population of Birchington was less than 3000 souls and the number of traders probably a third of the present number; there were very few shops on the west side of Station Road, the main pedestrian shopping flow being on the east side.



Mr Scott as Lady Godiva c. 1932-3

The writer's knowledge of Birchington goes back 1930 and as far as is known the Chamber was formed on the winding up of the Birchington Improvement Company, who were responsible for beach chairs and a Putting Green, which was sited near the present Minnis Bay Café.

The Chamber devoted its attention to the attraction of seasonal visitors and issued its own Guide, a handsome booklet with attractive covers and numerous local photographs, and indeed publication continued until a few years ago, when the present hand-out folder was introduced.

In the early days its activities were, and indeed still are, in the interest of both traders and residents, and at one time both traders and residents combined and the title became the Birchington Chamber of Commerce and Residents Association. Later, when the residents section became stronger it was weaned off and became what is now known as The Birchington Residents Association.

Undoubtedly the highlights of the Chamber's history were the two Carnivals held in 1932 & '33. These were one day events yielding £800 each time in aid of Margate General Hospital. Mammoth processions terminating on the lawns at Grenham Bay, on which were erected large marquees, with set pieces of Brocks fireworks and a firework display in the late evening, to terminate the festival. Side shows were numerous, and a particular money spinner was Mr Dowling's (chocolate) Wheel of Fortune, which he insisted he operated himself.

Notable figures who were responsible for these two carnivals were the late Alderman E G Barrows (President) and George Farrar, the latter having hired from Clarksons at his own expense the 'Old English' Costumes, Crinolines etc. for the Committee members, and a stock for public hire. One of these carnivals was opened by the well known Margate Comedian of the day, Leslie Fuller, who approached Birchington Square from Margate enthroned on the top of an enormous floral float some twenty feet high. The crowds in the Square were so thick that traffic from Park Lane and Canterbury virtually stopped, and the police simply "gave up" for an hour. Yes, Birchington was certainly "en fete" in those days.

In the early days of the Chamber's existence, successive Presidents have had the privilege of entertaining celebrities among whom figured Merle Oberon, Tom Walls, the Carlisle Cousins, Neil Kenyon and others.

Presidents in the early days were not necessarily chosen from the ranks of traders, and one outstanding non-trader president was Mr A. H. Scott JP of "Wild Air" on the Beresford Cliffs, an enormous gentleman who entered the sea before breakfast every morning, winter and summer, and rode horseback in the 1933 Carnival procession dressed as Lady Godiva, complete with long flowing tresses and wearing a pink body-stocking, much to the delight of all present. Being "a lady", he naturally rode side-saddle!

**George Teasdale
1934 - 2015**



It with great sadness that one of our Trustees, George Teasdale, has lost his battle with a long term illness on 9th August 2015. He will be greatly missed by all who knew him.

Many residents, former pupils and parents will remember him as Headmaster of King Ethelbert's School between 1973 and 1993, he was always ready to see the best in every pupil.

Living in Birchington, he took an active interest in the village's activities, including the Boxing Club.

As a Rotarian, he lived by the principle of "Service above Self".

Numerous tributes of appreciation have already been written on Facebook honouring his life and works.

We extend our sympathies and thoughts to both his wife and family at this sad time.

BHT DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

August 2015

Birchington Quiz (paper Copies)

By Faye & Luke

Thursday 24th September 2015

Social event

To be confirmed

Thursday 29th October 2015

A Talk by Pat Orpward & John Hart

"Gallipoli"

Thursday 26th November 2015

A Talk by Dr. Frank Andrews

Richborough Port

Thursday 3rd December 2015

Social: A Musical Evening

With Colin Bridges and

Chalumeaux Clarinet Quartet

Quarterly meetings 7.00 for 7.30pm at

The Centre, Birchington.

The Bar will be available

BHT TALKS & ACTIVITIES

Talk by Steven Ware – 28 May 2015

Steven Ware, the Senior Watchkeeper and Quartermaster of Whitstable National Coastwatch Institution, gave a very interesting talk on the history of the Coastguards from the 1800s. The Institution, a charity, was formed when the Coastguard Stations closed. They provide coastal assistance and are always looking for volunteers to Spot, Plot and Report any emergency.

BHT Annual General Meeting 11th June 2015

It was pleasing to see 42 Members signed in to the BHT AGM and the Chairman thanked the Executive Committee for the smooth running of the Trust. The Chairman also thanked the Membership for their continued support.

The Membership for the year totalled 261. We have introduced Membership Renewal by Standing Order, which will save reminder notices being sent out to those who opt for this way of payment. The Statement of Accounts was presented and although income was slightly down and expenditure up from the last financial year, we did have a small surplus. The Audited Accounts were therefore Proposed and Seconded.

The Election of Officers for the forthcoming year was also Proposed and Seconded by the Membership.

BHT Talks and Activities (Continued)

Following on from the AGM:

'Eye Spy' Illustrated Quiz by John Robinson

This quiz involved audience participation and we were shown local photographs from unusual angles which we had to identify. It certainly got us all thinking. Such as, do you know what is on the other side of the Diamond Jubilee Beacon sign in Epple Bay? Our thanks go to Janet and John Robinson, who are both BHT Committee Members, for the time and effort they spent researching and presenting what was a very different view of Birchington.

Quex Three Towers - 16th June 2015

Susan Johnson of Quex Park gave a personally conducted tour of the 'Three Towers' to a limited number of Members. The view from the Round Tower was amazing and was where signals could be sent to shipping. The Clock Tower, above the stables, houses the 'Chariot' which was used on the Estate and in town. The Waterloo Tower, which is a notable landmark, houses a peal of 12 Bells and also contains the family mausoleum.

'Law & Order' by Jennie Burgess 23rd July 2015

Jennie Burgess, our Archivist, gave a brilliant talk covering the many facets of law and punishment from the whipping post and stocks, to the 'The Cage' next to the Powell Arms used as an overnight holding place in the 1850s for miscreants before being sent to Dover for trial. We heard about the sad outcome of the Farming Riots in 1830 when local men were sentenced and transported to Australia for 7 years when they were only trying to protect their livelihoods. Jennie also told amusing stories relating to incidents and our local PCs from the 1950s, whose names were remembered by some of the audience. A very entertaining evening and further enhanced with the addition of a 'Bring & Share Supper' enjoyed by all.

Janet Denyer

Birchington Postscript

AGRICULTURAL RIOTS - In 1830 agricultural labourers rioted over low wages and high unemployment, partly caused by the introduction of the new threshing machines. In November 1830 there were fires at farms in Birchington and threshing machines were smashed at Alland Grange Farm. Richard Oliphant, a butcher from Birchington was one of those involved. He was tried, found guilty of feloniously breaking a threshing machine belonging to Mr. Rowe a farmer in Margate and sentenced to seven years transportation to Van Diemens Land, now known as Tasmania.