



August 2016

Charity No. 1099250

ISSUE 57

WARD SISTERS – A Puzzle

1908 – 1976

*Beatrice Ward c. 1970*

The 'full' account of the story of the Ward sisters is told in the Birchington Heritage Museum archives, but there are still many unanswered questions. When we recently discovered a newspaper cutting in Alfred Walker's old files about the inquest on their mother's death, we thought we might be able to answer some, if not all, of them. As so often happens in these searches, some of those questions were answered – but even more questions were generated.

The reason given by Beatrice, the elder of the sisters, for the delay between the date of their mother's death in April and the discovery of the body in July was that their mother did not want to be 'put in a box underground'. But by the time this event happened the sisters had been kept out of sight from the public for 30 years. Their mother had more or less brainwashed them into believing that there were no people of 'their class' in Birchington that they could mix with. As far as can be ascertained, Beatrice Ward had been born in London in about 1886, with her sister Gertrude arriving the following year.

It is stated in some early information about the family that the two girls were the illegitimate daughters of Florence Greatrex, who later took the surname of their father, John Michael Ward when they arrived in Birchington. In an article in the Daily Mail (1976), it stated that their father was a 'doctor on the South Coast'.

In 1895, the two girls and their mother, Florence, were found wandering on the streets of St Pancras in London. When they were originally found, the mother 'appeared to be in a very distressed state' and was unable to care properly for her young children, who were about 8 and 9 years old. They were all admitted to the St Pancras Workhouse on 25th April 1895 and discharged just over two weeks later on 13th May. Their father was alleged to have died on 25th March 1895, aged 48, which may be the reason that 'Mrs Ward' was so distressed at that time. She may have been hoping to marry the father of her two little girls eventually.

This information comes from a letter sent to Gertrude Ward via their solicitor, three months after their mother eventually died on 21st April 1938. Once the body was discovered, she had asked him to find out what he could about their background, because the sisters themselves knew so little. Their mother had not seen fit to inform them about their past for some reason.

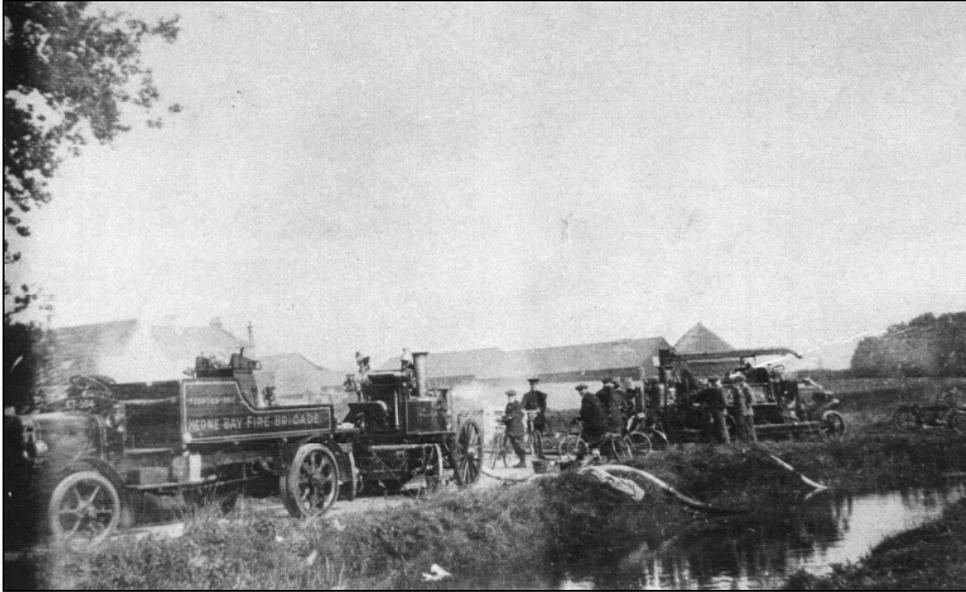
In an article in the Daily Mail, written soon after Beatrice's death in 1976, it was stated that the sisters were illegitimate and that the mother had registered the girls under their father's name of Ward, and called herself 'Mrs Ward' from then on. In searches made for us in 2010, no trace could be found of the births of either of the girls or even of their mother. It would appear that Mrs Ward was a "dominating" and 'well-connected' Victorian woman, who could never face her 'shame'. The article also stated that she brought the children to Birchington in 1899, when the date was more likely to be 1906-7. It goes on to say that she brought the girls to Birchington 'as babies'. This is definitely not correct, judging by their dates of birth given to them by the solicitor in 1938. They would have been 20 and 21 years old by then.

At some point during the next few months, there was a serious fire in their first property (probably rented), which forced them to leave it. Mrs Ward then bought 'Homefield' in Minnis Road, (now No: 8) and moved her daughters there. From that point onwards, until she died in 1938, she always kept the girls with her. There was a time when they each bought ladies' cycles from their neighbour, George Cousins, who had invented the ladies' cycle with the lower, curved cross-bar and in late evenings during the summer would ride together along the coast road for short distances. During the Inquest into their mother's death, a reporter remarked that there was "nothing unusual in their appearance apart from the unnatural pallor of a sunless life".

*Jennie Burgess***In this Issue:** *Page 1 - Ward Sisters - A Puzzle**Page 2 - Fire at Chislet 1925**Page 3 - Birchington's New Fire Engine c. 1924**Page 4 - Noticeboard:- Future Events + Volunteer Required + We are moving + New Booklets + Postscript*

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FIRE at CHISLET 1925



*Firemen
pumping
water from a
dyke - 1925*

One of the major fires our Birchington Firemen were asked to assist at was in Chislet, where the ancient Tith Barn at Chislet Court was destroyed.

This fire took place in the early hours in October, 1925. It completely destroyed the large barn, which was covered with an acre of old thatch. The fire spread rapidly, fanned by a high wind, and also destroyed a number of stacks in the farmyard as well as the stables, in which six horses perished.

Four fire brigades were summoned. The Herne Bay Brigade under Captain H. W. Wachter (who took charge); Sturry Brigade (who were first to get to work under Chief Officer Brooker); Birchington Brigade (under Chief Officer H. W. Walker); and Westgate Brigade (under Chief Officer Setterfield). The brigades were severely handicapped by the fact that the water supply was over half a mile distant and came from the dykes on the Marshes. The firemen had to lay out over 5000 feet of hose in order to bring the water they so desperately needed to get the fire under control.

A number of men who had been brought in as threshers were sleeping in the outbuildings near the barn. They were aroused in the nick of time, as the flames reached their sleeping quarters just as they started to rush to safety. They grabbed their clothes as they fled and subsequently dressed in a field nearby. The tenant of Chislet Court at that time was Mr. Harry Spanton, known in the parish as Claddy or John Bull. This second nickname can well be understood when we see Harry in one of the photos taken the next morning.

The cause of the fire was unknown but was strongly attributed to arson as there were stack fires on the same night at Swarling Manor, Petham and St. Nicholas-at-Wade. On the Saturday and Sunday following the fire, hundreds of people visited the site arriving by cycle, motor car and charabanc.

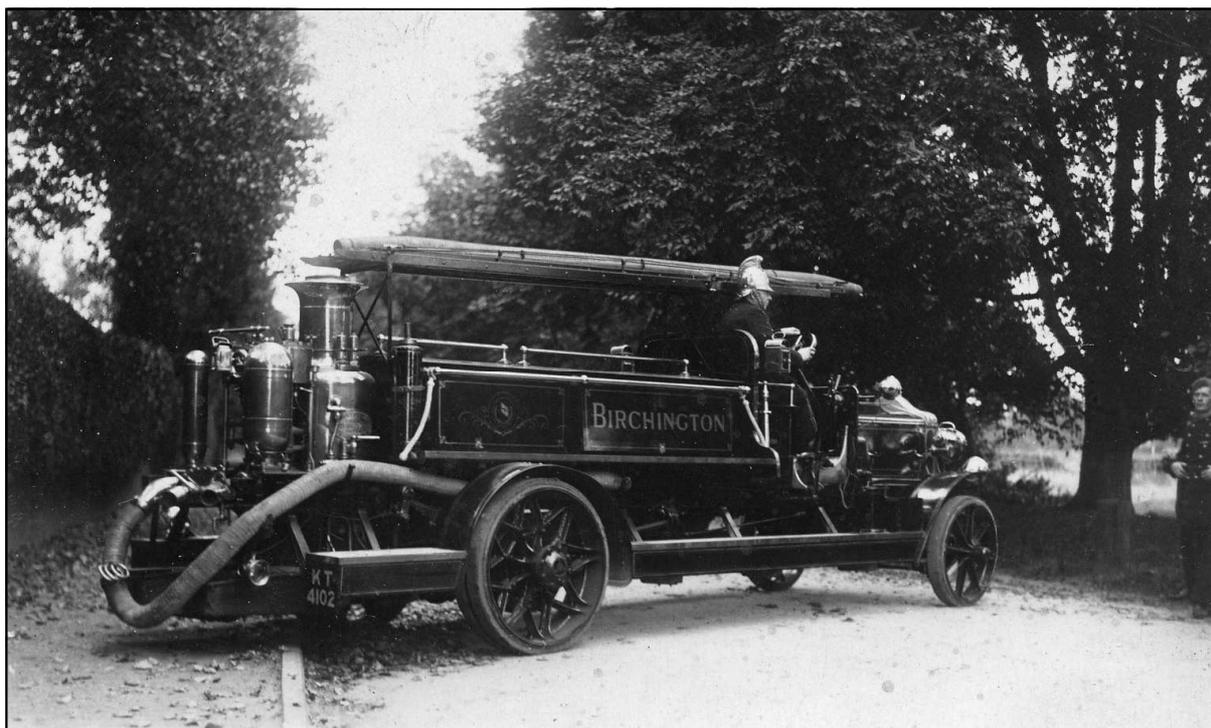
When I went out to the farm in about 2006, to try and find the site of that fire, an elderly farm-hand asked if he could help me. I showed him one of the photos and he pointed out that we were in almost exactly the place where the photographer had stood. "I was standing behind him when he took it," he added.

Birchington Firemen were called out on numerous occasions to assist at local farm fires, but there were also some in our own village at which they used their skills to minimize the damage that fire can cause. With so many people still using candles and oil lamps, the number of house fires, as well as farm fires, was far greater in those days.



Group of Firemen including Mr. John Spanton (John Bull)

(Some of the information in this article comes from 'Chislet Chronicles' by Rob Williams)



Birchington's Fire Brigade own built Fire Fighting Machine c. 1924

Birchington residents have every good reason to be proud of their Volunteer Brigade, captained by Mr. W. H. Walker, with Mr H. R. Staniland as second officer, Mr. J. Fright as superintendent, Mr. E Tumber as foreman, Mr. G. Williams as first engineer and Mr. W. Cock as second engineer, together with eight efficient firemen. Much time is demanded for drills, inspection of hydrants and the inspection of appliances at the local Homes and Institutions. Yet in spite of the many calls upon the members' time, they anticipate undertaking ambulance work, in conjunction with fire service. An invitation has recently been made for this by the Surgeon of the South-Eastern District and the Brigade Members hope to prove themselves as efficient in this department as in their sister service. Assistance and encouragement will be afforded by the local St. John Ambulance members.

Of special interest is the Brigade's steamer, originally a motor chassis made by the McCurd Lorry Co. which was used as a motor omnibus, and was purchased, dismantled and converted into a motor tender by the members of the Birchington Brigade. Later a horse-drawn steamer was purchased from Gillingham Council, the wheels taken off the steamer and fitted to the rear of the motor tender. Next the wheeled escape at the station was dismantled and fitted to the rear of the motor steamer, as shown.

The whole of the work, from dismantling of the motor omnibus to the finished machine was carried out by members of the Brigade in their leisure time. It represents a great effort, not only to perform the work (and incidentally, to enlarge the fire station) and to garage the motor, but to obtain the necessary funds, by means of street collections, dances, whist drives, concerts etc. The Brigade is a voluntary one and obtains no assistance out of the rates and is kept up (other than the above efforts) by local subscriptions, for which the Brigade is indebted. The motor steamer is worth every ounce of effort put fourth in its construction. It is most reliable, efficient fire-fighting machine, capable of throwing 500 gallons of water a minute. In addition the Brigade has no less than 2,000 feet of good hose and recently the men have been supplied with new uniforms (some of the old ones have been used for twenty years); all of which has been made possible by the help of the generous public, who deserve and really have, a Fire Brigade and appliances second to none, certainly amongst Voluntary Brigades.

The upkeep, is of course, a costly item, for renewals and insurances, etc. ; but it is gratifying to know that the whole of the Brigade appliances are now paid for.

As Longfellow writes:-

"Build for today, then strong and sure,
With a firm and ample base;
And, ascending and secure,
Shall tomorrow find its place."

Source: Isle of Thanet Gazette c. 1924

Noticeboard

BHT DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Thursday 22nd September 2016

A Talk by

Jennie Burgess & Terry Wilson

"Grave Matters"

Thursday 27th October 2016

Ann & Doug Holmes present

A Wine & Wisdom Evening

Thursday 24th November 2016

A talk by John Robinson

"1970's Revisited"

Thursday 1st December 2016

Colin Bridge &

The Chalumeaux Quartet

A Musical Christmas Evening

Quarterly meetings 7.00 for 7.30pm at
The Centre, Birchington.
The Bar will be available

VOLUNTEER REQUIRED

We need a volunteer to produce our BHT 2018 calendar.

Following many years of hard work producing our calendar, Janet and John feel that it is time for someone else to take on the project.

We appreciate all the hard work and time they have devoted to the project. The profits obtained from the sales of the calendars have been a valued source of income to the BHT Trust.

Anyone interested in taking on the project please contact the museum for further details.

WE ARE MOVING

Birchington Heritage Trust are hopefully moving to the Burley Gallery at the front of Birchington Library.

There are some matters that have still to be resolved, but in principle it looks as if this move will happen. It will mean that at long last we will be on the ground floor, so we can provide easier access to the public.

We will keep the Membership informed as developments progress.

NEW BOOKLETS

Illustrated coloured booklets have been produced at £2.50 each which relate to Artists and their association with Birchington. There is also a booklet on The Shoreline and another is being produced on the Railway.

Solomon J Solomon RA (1860-1927) - renowned portraitist and acclaimed painter of dramatic scenes from mythology. He was Instrumental in producing camouflage techniques in WW1. Had a holiday home and studio in Birchington.

Sir George Frampton RA (1860-1928) - sculptor famously known for the statue of 'Peter Pan' in Kensington Gardens, London. Produced decorative panels on bungalows in Birchington

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1829-1882) - a founder member of the Pre-Raphaelites he was a prolific artist known worldwide. Also wrote over 300 poems many linked to his paintings. He is buried in All Saints Churchyard.

David Burley (1902-1990) - a graphic artist for Southern Railway he produced many station and carriage posters. A local resident he was instrumental in the Village Centre being built.

The Shoreline - photos of sea defences and the bays together with sealife, birds and the wrecks that occurred on Minnis Bay.

Janet Denyer

Birchington's Alphabet

BIERCE COURT - the Bierce Court flats in Lyell Road were built in 1987 on the site of the Bungalow Hotel. This hotel was the first of the three major hotels built in the village, and the last to be demolished and developed into flats or houses.

BIRCH HILL ESTATE - This estate was built in the 1980s on the site of the Spurgeons Children's Homes. In developing the site the planners kept the lovely mature trees which have stood there for so many years. Charlesworth Drive is named after the Revd. V J Charlesworth the first headmaster of Stockwell Boys Orphanage (the first Spurgeons orphanage for boys), and Barrington Crescent after the girls orphanage in Barrington Road, Brixton.

BRILLS - Brills hardware store opened in the 1970s when they moved into the premises vacated by the International Stores when they moved further down Station Road. Brills had started their business in Minster and for a while the two shops ran simultaneously. Eventually the one in Minster was sold and the one in the Square was expanded using the plot on the right of the building.

Janet Robinson