

## **A SHORT TALK ON OLD BIRCHINGTON**

### **By Alfred T Walker**

This ancient Ville with its Saxon name, its triangular Square and its Church adjoining with the Tower at the wrong end, the Ville of Birchington, the old village settlement in the birch trees. It has a long and fascinating history going back many, many centuries which is as well or even better documented than most similar places in the S.E. England. In its history one can read of Saints, of Domneva and St. Mildred, legends, of the Brothers of Birchington, stories of ghosts, of fights between smugglers and Preventive Officers, and the true story of an audacious kidnapping and the holding to ransom of an important and aged personage of this place. The Fountain in the Square, the Church Clock, the bells in the Tower, the old Workhouse in Park Lane, Dog Acre, all have their stories.

Did you know that Birchington contributed to the fitting out of the ships to fight against the Spanish Armada in 1588, that we contributed towards the cost of rebuilding St. Pauls Cathedral after the Great Fire of London in 1666, that we sent a donation to aid the sufferers from the Great Plague of London, and that Birchington had one of the first and earliest Charity Schools in East Kent started as a result of the Anna Gertruy Crispe Legacy and now known as the Crispe Charity.

For many centuries right up to the time of the coming of the railway in 1862m Birchington was a small mainly agricultural village of no more than about 400 or 500 people, situated around what we today call the Square, originally a grass covered open space where the roads met and here were the May Pole, the Stocks and Whipping Post, and later the Cage where unruly persons were put. Like the other settlements of Thanet, St. John's, St. Peter's and St. Laurence, this village was situated about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile back from the sea, and like those other settlements it had a trackway running down to the sea, now known as the Minnis Road, where in very early times was another settlement, the port of Gore-end.

Although this Ville of Birchington with Gore-end was small, nevertheless over 700 years ago it became a Non-Corporate Limb of the Cinque Port of Dover, and came under the jurisdiction of that place. The Mayor and Juratts of Dover appointed a Deputy, usually one of the leading men of the village, and he with the Churchwardens administered Birchington, and were responsible to Dover, and all documents, rate assessments etc were taken to Dover for approval, signing and sealing. In fact some of our oldest documents are receipts for Composition Money, as it was called, paid by the Deputy to the Mayor and Juratts of Dover and they date back to the 1400s.

But Birchington's history dates back to many, many centuries before that time even. It was at Birchington, Minnis Bay, was found in 1938 by a schoolboy, one of the finest Bronze Age village sites found in this country, dating back to 1,000 years B.C., to the time some of the books of the Old Testament were being written. Many of the Bronze Age tools, implements, swords, and even jewellery are now in the British Museum and some are in the Powell-Cotton Museum at Quex. Of course the coast line then was very different from what it is today. Thanet was then really an island with the Wansum Channel separating us from the mainland of Kent, and to get from Birchington to Canterbury one had to cross this channel by the ferry at Sarre. The chalk cliffs extended much further out than now and there was an inlet of the sea at Gore-end or Minnis right up to where St. Thomas's Church now stands. It was this inlet that formed the port of Gore-end. Miss Antonia Powell-Cotton has and is doing considerable excavating at Minnis and the results of her work form an important part of the Powell-Cotton Museum. She has excavated Pre-Roman, Roman, Saxon, and Medieval remains showing that there was a settlement here right up to the Middle Ages.

Coming back to the little village around the Square and the surrounding land, from the year 961 A.D. this formed part of the Manor of Monkton. This Manor of Monkton, which took in nearly half of the Island of Thanet, was given by the Saxon Queen Ediva in

that year to the Monks of Christchurch, Canterbury, now Canterbury Cathedral, and there is in the Cathedral an ancient painting showing Queen Ediva, a Church with surrounding houses and ships. Tradition has it that this Church and houses are Birchington. Because of this Birchington remained attached to Monkton, and the Church at Birchington a chapelry of Monkton until 1871 when Birchington was made a separate ecclesiastical parish with its own vicar, and so although we have such an ancient Church the present vicar is only the 7<sup>th</sup> vicar of the Parish. Until 1871 the vicar of Monkton supplied a Curate to serve in Birchington Church.

So much of the history of Birchington is centred round the Church. The oldest part of the Church is the three chapels which were built we believe over 700 years ago, about 1250, and when this original Church was built the Tower was in the correct position, at the west end. When the Nave was added in the early 1300s the Tower was then at the wrong end of the enlarged Church. Probably a new Tower was commenced at the South west end of the Church, the massive pillar there indicates that that was the intention but it was never completed. The Church has the only ancient shingled spire in Thanet and for many years formed a sea mark for ships sailing up and down the Estuary, and Trinity House used to contribute towards its repair.

A very interesting part of the Church is the Quex Chapel which contains some of Birchington's finest treasures. This was once the Lady or Mary Chapel. It is a private chapel belonging to the owners of the Quex Park Estate and it was included in conveyance when the Estate was sold in 1700, and was advertised as part of the estate when it was sold in 1774. The owners of the estate own the freehold and are responsible for its maintenance.

In this chapel are buried in the vaults beneath many previous owners and their families and here you will find interesting, unique and remarkable monuments in stone, brass, alabaster and marble, to the Quex family, the Crispes, the Bullers, the Powells and the Powell-Cottons. So much of the history of Birchington is bound up with the story of Quex. Many of the owners were important people, not only in Birchington but in Thanet, Kent and the country. Many held important and influential positions.

The original house was known as Parkers and was occupied by the Parker family in the very early days. This mansion is shown on the earliest known map of Thanet drawn by a monk of St. Augustine's Abbey, in Canterbury in 1414, and it is marked as Parkers. The Quex family came into possession of the estate probably sometime in the early 1400s, and it is from this family that the estate got its name. There are two fine memorial brasses in the Quex Chapel to John and Richard Quex dating from 1449 to 1459. Early in the 1500s the Crispe family came into possession and held it until the early 1700s. Most of the monuments in the chapel are to members of this family – fine memorial brasses, a stone altar tomb to the great Sir Henry Crispe and his first wife, the Lady Catherine Scott, the unique six bust mural monument to Sir John Crispe and his son Sir Henry Crispe, and their two wives, the only mural monument in England with six busts and sculptured by Joshua Marshall, Master Mason to Charles II, the splendid alabaster monument to Bonjour Crispe and his wife, Lady Marie Culepeper, the Crispe who was kidnapped from Quex during the time of Oliver Cromwell in 1657. Here you will see the fine marble monument to Anna Gertruy Crispe, the last Crispe owner of Quex, and the founder of the Crispe Charity and the first Charity School in Birchington and in Thanet. It was Anna Gertruy Crispe who sold the estate in 1700. The subsequent owners were Buller, Wiat, Fox, Powell, Roberts, Powell and Powell-Cotton. The present owner, Mr. Christopher Powell-Cotton is descended from John Powell who bought the estate in 1774.

The present mansion was built by John Powell Powell, who was known as Squire Powell. He pulled the old mansion down and built the present mansion between 1807 and 1813. He was a great lover of ships and bells and built the Observatory from where he could watch the ships sailing up and down the Estuary, and the Waterloo Tower or

Bell Tower, in 1820 to house his peal of bells. The Bell Tower was named the Waterloo Tower in honour of the Duke of Wellington and the Battle of Waterloo. When he was made High Sheriff of Kent in 1832 the name of the oldest and most important inns in Birchington, The New Inn, was change to that of The Powell Arms, in his honour.

The mansion contains many interesting historical and valuable items, as well as valuable antique furniture, glass and china. The State Chair, said to have been used by William III when he stayed at Quex waiting for a favourable wind to take him to Holland from Margate, is still there as is also the old Kent Ragstone Fireplace from the original mansion. There are a number of relics of Napoleon.

The Powell Cotton Museum was started by Major Powell Cotton, the father of Mr. Christopher Powell Cotton, in 1896. It has been added to several times since that date. This museum is well known by scientists from all over the world as it has a fine study series of skins, skulls, skeletons etc in the galleries behind the large cases. An important feature of the museum now is the fine archaeological collection from the Birchington district excavated by Miss Antonia Powell Cotton. Archaeological finds of Pre-history, Belgic, Roman, Saxon and Medieval times.

As I have already said the original village consisted of the houses around the Square and the Church, along the Street as it was then known from the old pond in Canterbury Road, to about where Birchington Hall stood and Epple Corner, a short way down what is now known as Station Road, and a little way along Albion Road and Park Lane. In several of the houses around the Square can be traced the Flemish style gables showing they were built in about the mid 1600s. This style can be seen in the Smugglers, Laburnum House, Grove House and The New Inn. It was in early and mid Victorian times that the village grew and houses extended down Station Road and along Park Lane. In Park Lane were built the Workhouse in 1794 and next to it in 1845, The National School, replacing the old Charity School run by the Trustees of the Crispe Charity.

With the coming of the railway, although at first only a second class line, Birchington began to grow and develop, especially north of the railway line where some of the first bungalows were built. Then a number of well known people came here to live especially artists and poets. Rossetti, the poet and painter, came here to endeavour to regain his health but died here and was buried in our Churchyard. His mother and his sister, Christina, erected a lovely stained glass window in his memory in the Church and hundreds of people visit the Church every year to see his grave and memorial window. Sir George Frampton, when a young man staying in Birchington did the frescoes on the houses in Shakespeare Road. In later life he sculptured the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens. Solomon J. Solomon the well-known artist also lived here.

Rossetti's grave and memorial stone is not the only interesting stone in the Churchyard. The oldest stone dates back to 1696. There are memorial stones to Preventive Officers and stones to the memory of old Birchingtonians who have served this village in their day and age so well. There is one to Gilbert Stringer who gave evidence to a Parliamentary Committee on the Charity School at Birchington in the early 1800s. There is another to Richard Busbridge, Parish Clerk for 30 years. On his stone is the verse –

“Our life hangs by a single thread,  
Which soon is cut and we are dead,  
Then reader, boast not of thy might,  
Alive at noon - and dead at night.”

The original Churchyard is as old as the Church. Well over 5000 people are buried there as of today [1967], together with another 100 in the floor of the church nave.

So much of what we know of old Birchington comes from the many priceless documents which our Church possesses, all relating to this place. These are valuable to the historian, the genealogist, the antiquary and to the ordinary folk of this place. The Parish Registers of Baptisms Marriages and Burials, date from the time of Henry VIII, from 1538, and some of the oldest in Thanet.

The Churchwardens Account Books date from 1531. These are complete except for a few years during the troublesome times of the Civil War and Oliver Cromwell. From these we learn about the Church stock of sheep and cows, its shops and houses, the Dog-whipper, the stocks, the Maypole, payments for the keeping down of vermin, the cost of the repairs to the Church through the ages, wages etc.

The Poor Books tell us how Birchington cared for its poor, the widows, the orphans, and the sick before the days of National Insurance. From these we can read the prices of foodstuffs, coal, clothing, and the amount of relief they were given. From these we also learn about the Workhouse, what the inmates did and what they were given to eat.

We have such documents as the rare 'Vow and Covenant' of 1642 with the signatures or marks of all the men of the place, and the valuable Solemn League and Covenant, again with the signatures or marks of the men of Birchington. Only a few parishes have such rare documents. They were ordered to be destroyed at the Restoration in 1660 but somehow Birchington did not do as Whitehall said. The Churchwardens probably couldn't find them among the huge number of papers in the old chest.

We had the Tithe Map until and the documents to go with it [this has now been taken by Canterbury Cathedral archives for their collection\*\*] and documents relating to our dealings with the Cinque Port of Dover.

There is so much I could tell you, of the Butts where the men practiced shooting, the woman who was transported to Van Diemens Land, now known as Tasmania, for smashing a plough during the agricultural riots of the 1830s, of cow pox and inoculation in early times, of pushing the dead to the Churchyard in a wheel barrow, of unemployed men working on the roads, such as they were filling up the holes with stones gathered from the fields, of fights with smugglers, the contents of ordinary homes in the 1600s from the lists of goods sold when paupers died etc.

But my time is up. I hope I have interested you and whetted your appetite to find out more about this place we live in.

[\*\* We hold a very good coloured photocopy of the 1840 Tithe Map in the Birchington Heritage Museum. 2017]