

BIRCHINGTON WITH ACOL – CINQUE PORT CONNECTIONS

Notes in square brackets [...] have been added by the Parish Archivist Jennie Burgess

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The mighty Confederation of the Cinque Ports in the Middle Ages consisted of then five main ports of Hastings, Sandwich, Dover, Romney and Hythe, each of which had several corporate and non-Corporate members. The members of the port of Dover were Margate (St John's), Birchington and Goresend. Of the last two, Goresend survives only as a name, being one time a place of note, situated at the north-west of the Isle of Thanet.

Birchington village as it is now known, a little to the east of Goresend, has survived the Middle Ages in some style. This ancient parish, where the church dedicated to All Saints dominates the village, has changed very little over the centuries, despite the mid-summer saturation of traffic in the Village Square. There were settlements in the Birchington area as long ago as the Bronze and Iron Ages. Just before the Second World War a series of pits were found on the beach at nearby Minnis Bay. During excavation a wealth of knives, worked flints and axe heads were recovered from the pits, proving that there was probably a settlement here from the earliest times until the Roman invasion. Romano-British items too have been found around Birchington.

The Anglo-Saxons certainly settled here, probably building the first Birchington church. The name Birchington derives its name from a hilly farmstead, where birch trees grew and the village was known as Birchilton (1240), Berchillton (1264), and Bychington (1610). The outlying hamlet of Acol, which generally came under the jurisdiction of Birchington (certainly from 1560 onwards), takes its name from an oak thicket perhaps (Acholt or Acolte).

Although a mere Non-Corporate Member of the Cinque Port of Dover, Birchington seems to have responded generously to the Cinque Ports call in time of need, as when in 1588 the men of the village were asked to provide £15 - 16 – 8 towards the cost of a sea-going ship to fight the Armada, subscriptions in little Birchington eventually raised over £7. That is not to say that the village was always a wealthy one. Famine struck both Birchington and Acol in 1621 and lasted for two years. During this time, corn was fetched for the Poor and 'Pease' for the people of Birchington. Famine also struck in 1603, 1604, 1615-19 and in 1625 a traveler from Canterbury brought the 'pestilence' to the village.

Through the centuries the church of All Saints has overlooked the fortunes and misfortunes of the village. The present building dates from the 13th century and replaced a much older building. Although Birchington itself is not mentioned in the Domesday Book, there was probably a small chapel near the village settlement.

The present church appears on Thanet's earliest map of c. 1414, near the long lost church of All Saints, Shuart, close to St Nicholas-at-Wade and now demolished.

Woodchurch, which like Birchington was subordinate to the manor of Monkton and which served the hamlet of Millburgh, Acol close by, was closed, All Saints, Shuart was, it seems, constructed to serve a community at Gore-end [this is highly unlikely, as it was away across marshy ground, only accessible much of the year from the St Nicholas direction]. But its real purpose is unknown and it suffered an early decline. In the years after archaeologists have uncovered the foundations of the Church at Shuart, proving it to be a large building, some of the stones from All Saints at Shuart almost certainly went to the construction of the Church at Birchington. ¹ [See important note below]

A map of 1414 shows the name of 'Parkeres', early owners of Quex Park, who were wealthy landowners in Thanet and who may have financed the building of the new All Saints. [There had been a church here since late Saxon or early Norman times. The Chancel was rebuilt in c. 1250, when the 'Quex' Chapel was added and the south chapel and tower as we see it today.] Birchington Church contains the remains and memorials of these famous Birchington families. The Parkere's, the Quek's, who gave their name to the extensive Quex Estate, and the Crispe's, who, for many years, were the virtual 'Lords of Birchington'. One famous Crispe, a wealthy Puritan called Sir Henry, was seized at Quex in 1657 by a renegade Royalist named Captain Golding. He was held captive in Bruges until a ransom of £3,000 was paid. The story of his capture is quite dramatic. Forty armed men plundered Sir Henry's estate and they took him (he was nearly 80) by coach and sea to Flanders. After his release and return to England, Sir Henry was affectionately known as 'Bon Jour Crispe', as these were the only French words the old man had learnt during his captivity, and he used them freely about the village, greeting one and all.

The Quex estate was often visited by William III and Queen Mary II, who both liked staying in the area, in particular viewing the prospect of lowland Kent from Mount Pleasant near Minster. William often stayed at Quex, or as some say, Acol, before embarking for his native Holland. A mansion that dominated the hill above Acol was pulled down in the early 19th century. By this time the hamlet and neighbouring Birchington had degenerated into poverty once more. In 1823 William Cobbett, the radical writer and critic, visited the Isle of Thanet and breakfasted at a little hamlet (Acol?), but could get no corn for his horse and no bacon for himself. "The labourers' houses are beggarly in the extreme, the people poor looking But particularly dirty."

¹ This statement was first made on a map of 1688 as a **conjecture**, the writer having noticed the old stones in the outside south wall and the tower. He was unaware of the date when the Shuart Church ceased to be used any more (1470s) and the date of the alterations to All Saints Church that enlarged the original nave to include two half aisles (1350). Had he know these two facts, his theory would have been exploded immediately. As it was, subsequent historians simply copied his theory, but instead of saying 'perhaps', they stated it as a fact, thus continuing a totally impossible 'truth' for over 300 years!

'Poor' and 'dirty' Birchington may have been, but the parish books give us an insight into the times, telling us that at least the churchyard was kept clean. In 1622 "Old Hayward" was appointed the first [?] dog-whipper of All saints and "for whipping the dogges out of church for one whole yeare", he was paid 8 shillings. Vagrancy was frowned upon in Birchington and in 1633, James Stone, the Deputy for Birchington, took into custody "for vagrancy a silly man who was cracke in his brains", Robert Woods by name. His punishment goes unrecorded.

As the years rolled by, Birchington slowly expanded, but a map of the village of 1688 shows the same main road layout as that existing at the present, with highways from the village square to St John's (Margate), to Quex, to Acol and to St Nicholas. The Maypole and pond shown on the map have, however, gone. The pond was the last to go. In 1830 in the village, the first Wesleyan Chapel was opened and in 1871 All saints gained its first vicar, when the parish became independent from Monkton. The two daughter churches are St Mildred's at Acol (1876) and St Thomas at Minnis Bay (1932).

Birchington's famous have not been restricted to the local gentry. A native of the village – Stephen de Birchyngton, wrote a history of the archbishops of Canterbury from Augustine to William of Wittleseye around 1368-9. Stephen was a monk at Canterbury. The most famous gravestone in Birchington churchyard is that of the British (of Italian origin) Italian poet and painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who, after artistic inspiration and personal tragedy, died amongst friends and relatives in the village on 9th April 1882. Of the smaller parishes of Kent, Birchington has one of the larger and best-kept collections of Church and village records, certainly among the largest in Kent. Among the twenty-six volumes of Registers of Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, in one book covering the period 1564-1600, which mentions 189 Marriages, 598 Baptisms and 478 Funerals, at a guess, this would increase the population of Birchington from about 390 in 1564 to over 500 by 1600.