

BIRCHINGTON : 'THE VILLAGE OF 'HYGEIA' - 1980

By Bill and Marian Evans

Bracing breezes, grassy walks, friendly faces – Birchington thrives, yet remains the least changed of the five Thanet Towns.

'The Village of Hygeia' is hardly a slogan today's ad-men would promote, but in Victorian times Birchington-on-Sea rejoiced in the name. An 1881 guide book quotes 'The Village of Hygeia (goddess of health) simply offers an uncontaminated playground for large families and a secluded sanatorium of invalids.'

Having lived and thrived in the village for 20 years, we cannot dispute its friendliness, bracing breezes, grassy walks along chalky cliffs, tennis courts, bowling green, active social scene, independence and innumerable healthy octogenarians – with its roots firm in an old inheritance.

Richard Barham in *The Ingoldsby Legends* says:

'You may see, some half way
'Twixt the pier at Herne Bay
And Margate, the place where you're going to stay
A village call'd Birchington, famed for its 'Rolls,'
As a fishing-bank, just in its front, is for Soles.'

Having often wondered about the 'Rolls', who better to give the answer than local historian, church archivist and ex-headmaster, Mr. Alfred Walker – a resident since 1932. 'They were certainly not bread rolls, but an ancient legal roll dated early 1200s,' he says. Queen Ediva in Canterbury Cathedral's St. Martin's Chapel has painted in the background a village and church which, tradition says, is Birchington and was included in the manor Ediva gave to the Church in AD 961.'

Mr Walker has had in his charge the churchwarden's account books and records of All Saints Churchgoing back to 1538, when the church was responsible for civic as well as clerical matters ... looking after the poor, roads, trusts and early education – an unparalleled picture of four and a half centuries.

'To go back even further,' he continues, 'the site of a prehistoric bronze age village was found by a pupil of King's School, Canterbury, at Minnis Bay in 1939. It's now a third of a mile out to sea. Iron Age tools were found, placing it about 1,000 BC, and excavations uncovered treasures now in the British Museum, Maidstone Museum and Quex Park. Until the silting up of the Wantsum Channel, Gore End, the original name of Minnis Bay, - Minnis means Common Land – was an important port. We were, from the 1800s, a non-corporate limb of the Cinque Port of Dover and the Armada sess of 1588 shows the ratepayers of Birchington helping towards the fitting out of the Dover ships to fight the Spanish Armada.

'But until about 1800, the population was only about 200-300, increasing after that with more agricultural workers. The coming of the railways, making it less than two hours from London, opened up the coast, and today our population is around 10,000, with an annual influx of summer visitors and foreign students.

'The church was of course the centre of life though we didn't have our own Vicar until 1871, being in the ecclesiastical parish of Monkton. We were just a cluster of small houses around The Square, with a track to Gore End. The stocks were in The Square by the Powell Arms, as were the whipping post and maypole. We still have "dog acre" in Station Road, which was part of the remuneration of the Dog Whipper, whose job it was to whip noisy dogs from the church. It was also his job to whip vagrants who entered the parish, sending them on their way. He was given free

use of Dog Acre and eight shillings a year. All the payments are in church records, two whippers being listed as “Old Haywood” and “Old Posier.”

‘There has been a butcher’s shop in The Square for 400 years – today it’s owned by Councillor Wally Wanstall – though the mill known as Hudson’s Mill, is no more. It used to be in Canterbury Road, but it was moved a little way in 1772 because the flails frightened passing horses. The workhouse, built in 1794, was in Park Lane and the National School opened next door in 1848.

‘In the 19th century there were two big houses. Birchington Place, or Hall, was the seat of John Friend and later of Mr and Mrs Grey, and was demolished to make way for Spurgeon’s Homes, now closed, whose future is undecided. The other was Quex Park, now the home of Mr Christopher Powell-Cotton, with it’s unique wildlife collection and museum.’

The grounds have been the home of Quexpo for the last decade. An event which may be described as the largest ‘village fete’ in the country. It is a combined marathon three-day effort of many organisations over the late summer bank holiday weekend, attracting many thousands of people and raising money for the Village Centre.

Not all Birchington’s past residents were reputable. Mr Walker, recalling smuggling was rife, produces a Kentish Gazette of May 22, 1806 reporting ‘119 half-ankers of contraband spirits seized between St. Nicholas and Birchington.’ Jimmy Landy, supposedly last of the local smugglers, used to bring ‘runs’ into the shingles at Minnis and sell his goods in the Powell Arms. The Coastguards or “Gobies” didn’t catch him but he served six months in a French prison. He died in Perfects Cottage in 1906 and is buried in the churchyard under the name of Huntley.’ In the 1830’s a woman of the village, Elizabeth Studdam, was transported to Van Diemen’s Land for smashing up machinery in agricultural riots.

‘An early local industry was cycle manufacture and in 1894 one of the earliest ladies’ models was advertised by a village manufacturer: “The Seabreeze Ladies’ Bicycles are built on independent lines of their own and are not a mere servile copy of any other make.” Sadly the inventor didn’t take out a patent.’

Minnis Bay, which today offers a licensed café as its sole amenity, and is carefully guarded from commercial development, once boasted an exhibition hall with tropical and overseas sections, but it was flooded in 1897m. There was also a light railway running from the bay to Manston, but it was demolished in the twenties. St. Thomas’s Church, daughter of All Saints,’ might claim to be the only church in the county where a Moslem took part in the laying of the foundation stone. Nawob Malik Sir Umar Hyot, an ADC to George V, lived in Shakespeare Road and, as Master of the Masonic Lodge, IPM of Brothers of Birchington, led the procession at the 1932 ceremony.

Into this century the village – always so-called by the ‘locals’ despite being part of Thanet Council’s district – prided itself on being quiet, select and contentedly relying on nature’s tree-lined roads and open coast – though the chalk sea-stacks which used to be seen off-shore have now been washed away. Erasmus Wilsoon, eminent Victorian surgeon, advocated Birchington’s health-giving atmosphere, which inspired the opening of several private schools, the remaining one being Chatham House, built in 1910.

An enterprising development by John Taylor and J.P. Seddon – best known for his Gothic Revival buildings – built some of the first bungalows in the country in 1882, the word ‘bungalow’ coming from the Bengalese. Since World War 11, whole estates of modern bungalows have been added.

It was to one of the Victorian dwellings that the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti came for two months in 1882 but even the bracing air could not save the pre-Raphaelite genius, bemused with drugs and reams. He is buried in the churchyard under a gravestone designed by his friend Ford Madox Brown. The bungalow, called 'Cliffside' and owned by novelist Hall Caine, was re-named Rossetti and became the home of millionaire F. Osborne O'Hagan whose daughter lived there till 1952, when it was sold for £4,500 and later demolished.

In the 1920s and 1930s Birchington lived up to its artistic reputation and many theatre people made their summer homes there. Ivor Novello, W. Macqueen Pope, Frederick Lonsdale, Gladys Cooper, the Du Mauriers were a few who were familiar with the village and loved its unspoilt beauty. Post-war saw the demolition of many houses in Station Road to make way for shops, and many, including Woolworths, have come and gone. But there's something of everything for everybody with a large number of private traders.

Angela and David Cobb moved to Birchington in 1969, having sold the family brewery in Margate which was nearly 300 years old. Mrs. Cobb was one of the first lady Deputy Lieutenants of Kent and, until 1979, was a member of Kent County Council for 17 years. She says of the 'village': 'It's changed the least out of five Thanet Towns. It's a good community with a lively spirit where weekenders fit in with friendly locals. It is also a thriving place without rows of derelict houses or shops and all the people work very hard for the village. The Village Centre is a great asset – it's brought everybody into a focal point.'

The Centre was opened in 1974 after many years' work by a committee, from an idea mooted in Coronation year, 1953. Built behind the modern library, much of the village social life is played out there. Two drama groups of a high standard, adult education classes, flower shows, exhibitions, discos, numerous societies for a large elderly population, as well as weddings and dances, use its modern facilities.

Only a small percentage of today's villagers were born in Birchington, it being a favourite place of retirement. But with enough young people to keep it lively, it still offers a backwater of friendly contentment with 'time to stand and stare' that Hygeia would have commended.