

BIRCHINGTON 1903-4

From a large Guide Book for Birchington and Westgate

A wide choice of epithets is at the service of those who may wish, by and by, to designate Birchington, though doubtless the rule of alliteration will consecrate it "beautiful" in preference to the more appropriate style and title of "charming." There is a peacefulness about the (triangular) Square that fascinates – that would draw to Birchington the denizens of cities if the sea were leagues away; whilst the church, nestling in the corner of the Square, has an attractiveness absolutely independent of those features which go to make up the modern pleasure resort. To this topic ecclesiastical we shall presently recur. For the moment note that while oftentimes the building with spire or tower exhausts the interest in a village, here, on the contrary, is an infinity of charm, the church being merely one of the lions.

From the sands, at low water, are to be obtained coast views of rare beauty; deeply cut fissures in the chalk tell of Neptune's ceaseless play; now and then we encounter a massive branch of cliff rock wormed from the parent coast, a perfect island at high water – somebody's freehold, no doubt, but its agricultural use gone forever, and occupancy denied to all unless it be the birds. And the ornithologist will not be distressed here for lack of material for observation. For the artist, Epple Bay, the easterly portion of Birchington, affords a fine field for a touch or two of the brush, though to the most refined of artistic eyes the artificial embankments may mar the beauty of the scene. These broad level surfaces not being a continuous whole, fail to exhibit that beauty of utility which would appertain to them if they constituted an uninterrupted promenade. The Bay is not without a promenade, but there is an undeveloped appearance of things in this quarter.

At Minnis Bay, the westerly end of Birchington, and a mile from the town, there is a long stretch of finished promenade expanding into an area of space flanked by high cliff and furnished with a series of seated recesses – snuggeries they may well be termed. Here, if anywhere, is the spot where the bandsmen – of the good time coming – should make their rendezvous. On the sands below – good sands here as at Epple Bay for bathing, prophetic vision will easily see the minstrel and the photographer with their paraphernalia of harp and camera. Close at hand in a hollow is the Pavilion, and away to the west a mile or so are the rifle butts.

We have reached the Bay from the shore, and now to regain access to the town we traverse the Minnis and Station Roads, passing in the former an extensive coastguard station. Birchington, by the way, can now boast a Marconi station¹. In Station Road will be noticed the Public Hall, opened April 2nd, 1902, of which Captain Matthews is Hon. Secretary, and Mr. Matthews, of "Ingoldsby" – for Birchington is mentioned in the Legends – Advisory Director. It is built to allow of the proper expression of vocal and instrumental tones, and has a seating capacity equal to present needs. There is provision for club or other premises, including, so we hope at least, a reading-room, now that the Institute in the Square has closed its doors.

¹ This may refer to the 'Telephone Office' that is listed in Kelly's Directory about this date - at 'Ivy House' in 'Church Street' (Canterbury Rd) opposite the churchyard. We also find Semaphore Rd listed, but not until 1915-16. However, there is never any indication of where this facility was located in the Semaphore Rd area – if it ever existed at all. In c. 2010 we were asked exactly where the Semaphore Station was in the Semaphore Rd area, but nothing turned up in our researches, unfortunately.

The visit to the church should be now leisurely undertaken. Mr. J. P. Barrett, in his "History of the Ville of Birchington," tells us that among the villes of Thanet, Birchington "alone has no connection with the church." This does not mean that the inhabitants are all Dissenters; it merely signifies that Birchington formerly constituted a chapelry of Monkton. The present vicar, the Rev. Henry Arthur Serres, M.A., T.C.D., who is vicar of Birchington and Acol, informs us that the almost unique lancet window over the screen of the St. Mary Chapel was the bedroom window of the Monkton priest when ministering here.² The position of the steeple is unique; it is placed at the east end of the building. The tower has a peal of eight bells. The chancel, the chapel of St. Nicholas – the vestry, the chapel of St. Margaret, and the Quex Chapel, the chapel of St. Mary, are the older portions of the building, dating from the 12th century, although the nave was there from about 1100, but the aisles were added in the 13th C. The registers go back as far as to 1531 and the Solemn League and Covenant which demands that Birchington men will uphold Parliament against King Charles the First, is preserved here.

Mr. F. C. Butcher, A.R.C.O., is the recently appointed organist and choirmaster. Mr. Butcher comes to Birchington with an honourable record of success in organising and teaching at St. Columbus College, Rathfarnham, and Canterbury, where for four years he held the position of assistant organist.

The windows of the edifice should be noted; over the west door the three representing Faith, Hope and Charity, in memory of Thomas Gray, his wife, and his daughter; the six in memory of Henry Horace Powell Cotton, in the screen which secludes the private chapel of Quex Park, and which represent Faith, Charity, Hope, Fortitude, Humility and Justice. Within the private chapel, as a fine work of art, the bust of Anna Gertruy Crispe will be noted, surmounting a lengthy inscription, wherein we find a bequest "for wearing apparel to appear at church, to keep at school with Dame or Master, twelve boys and girls, and to give to each on leaving the school a Bible." Of "Hen. Crispe, Esq. here buried," we read: "In Him was shewn that Polite Literature and ev'n a Poetical genius best form the man of business." There is a slab to "Christopher Clapham, Esq., son of Sir Christopher Clapham, of Clapham, in Yorkshire." Quex we find variously spelt - Queakes, Queax, Queaks, Queks. Near the door, in the church, will be seen a chain and padlocked Bible, 1640, in old black letter type. The old brasses have been affixed to the floor and walls.

The chief items of interest, within and without the church, are, without question, the Rossetti window and tomb. In themselves they are both of striking beauty; in their associations tenderly treasured by many pilgrims, who recollect the man, admire his works and cherish the traditions of the school. The monogram and the motto, "Francas non flectas," will be noticed near the summits of the windows, the inscription at the foot of the glass reading thus: "To the Glory of God and in memory of my dear son, Gabriel Chas. Dante Rossetti, born in London, May 12th, 1828; died at Birchington, Easter Day, 1882."

The wording on the tomb is as follows: "Here sleeps Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti, among painters a painter, among poets as a poet. Born in London of parentage mainly Italian, 12th May, 1828; died at Birchington, 9th April, 1882" (and, carved on the back of the stone), "This cruciform monument, bespoken by Dante

² This has been proved a misunderstanding of the stonework in the Quex Chapel. It was never used to house an upper room. If the Vicar of Monkton came over to All Saints to serve the congregation at any time, there was accommodation provided in a local house or cottage, which stood near the Square. We find mention of this accommodation in the Churchwardens' accounts.

Rossetti's mother, was designed by his lifelong friend, Ford Madox Brown, executed by J. and H. Patteson, and erected by his brother William and sister Christina Rossetti."

The epitaph hunter will stay in the churchyard to copy that part of an inscription to one Baker, which sets forth that he was "late a Respectable planter of Antegua"; for this is a merit seldom deemed needful for specification.

Crossing the Square and sallying eastward we pass Birchington Hall on the right, and on the left a picturesque "look-out" tower. Steering round this by the road we regain the Epple Bay district and start westward on the cliff top. A walk of ten minutes or so brings us to the region of the Bungalows. These diminutive but laterally expansive dwellings, scattered in profusion on the cliff and to the rear of the cliff, are collectively a picture; individually, pictures each and all. The sojourner, unless callously indifferent to the delights of a home, must experience thrills of envy as he surveys these dainty dwellings which line his way till he reaches the gate of Bungalow Land, the Railway Station bridge. As he approaches this, he espies from the Beach Avenue – a short thoroughfare lined with sycamores and leading direct to the shore – the Bungalow Hotel, a bungalow which is his bungalow for the time being and for as long as he likes to make it his domicile, summer or winter, autumn or spring.

Here, truly, the visitor is in an artistic land. Near at hand is the bungalow where Rossetti stayed and where he died. Here are Shakespeare Road, Spenser Road, Wilkie Road, and Leslie Road. The names of the famous in science are perpetuated also – in Lyell, Darwin, Herschel and Nasmyth Roads, with a metaphysical reminder in Berkeley Road, all merrily mingled. A live lord lives hereabout, another has a residence, a retired bishop also, two noted canons, an eminent actress, and the widow of a P.R.A.