

THE RAILWAY COMES TO BIRCHINGTON

Railway's arrival meant full steam ahead for village growth

As the first train steamed into Birchington on 5 October 1863, the village's few hundred residents could only have guessed at the changes the railway would signal in the years to follow.

For some time previously, the Kent Coast Railway had been gradually working its way eastwards to Birchington for the final link between Herne Bay and Thanet. Villagers could now travel, or send their goods, direct to London – in around two and a half hours – or go the opposite way to Ramsgate Harbour, via Margate.

Trains had been arriving in those two towns, as well as Broadstairs, since the 1840s but now Birchington was well and truly on the map. Anybody wanting to alight at the little fishing village of Westgate would have to wait until 1871 for its station to open.

The 150th anniversary of the first trains arriving in Birchington is to be celebrated with a model railway exhibition at The Centre in Alpha Road, on Saturday 12 October between 10am and 4pm. A dozen model layouts and trade support have been lined up for the show.

Victorian travellers were soon finding their way out of the smoke and murk of London to reach Birchington where the air was cleaner and the sea bracing. The hoi polloi, though, were not welcome and encouraged to stay on the train until Margate. Birchington, arguably the most select part of Thanet at the time, was having none of that and catered for a more genteel clientele, willing to spend quiet holidays, or even settle, in the village.

Within 10 years, the population had grown sufficiently for the church authorities to determine Birchington should become a parish in its own right. Until 1872 it had been part of the parish of Monkton.

An expanding Birchington-on-Sea, as it had become known from 1878, called for more homes and roads to be built. In 1882 architects John P Seddon and John Taylor acquired land above the cliffs to create Britain's first 'bungalow estate'.

The term had been borrowed from the Bengali word bungalla, describing a primitive single storey hut with thatched roof and verandah, used by British officers and their families stationed in India. The word bungalow doesn't appear to have been used until the Birchington development came into being and so they can be regarded as the country's first.

Today, the bungalow estate can be found off Spencer Road where six of the original 12 properties still stand. Their design is far removed from how we recognise a modern bungalow, some having been built with nine bedrooms or a two storey tower providing accommodation for one's servants!

John Seddon also built the Bungalow Hotel close to the station to capitalise on the trade the railway brought. Standing for just over 100 years until demolished in the 1980s, it was the only completely single storey hotel in the country. Bierce Court retirement flats now occupy the site.

Lungsful of fresh air, a tranquil setting, and the encouragement of John Seddon, his friend, would have been factors for Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a founder of the pre-Raphaelite artists' movement, to leave London and spend the last weeks of his life in a wooden bungalow in Birchington in 1882 where he died on 9 April.

It was the easy access to London, combined with keen property prices, which would help create a new, and highly lucrative, phenomenon for the railways – ‘the commuter’.

For decades, city gents bearing briefcases and rolled up umbrellas were a familiar sight on the up platform of Birchington station waiting for ‘fast’ trains to Cannon Street or Charing Cross. No doubt they would be determined to keep their seats when children returned to local boarding schools or weekenders headed for their seaside retreats.

The railway around Birchington appears to have come through two world wars largely unscathed – enemy aircraft preferring to use the shiny rails as a way of guiding them to London on bombing missions. Occasionally, trains were fired on by the Luftwaffe as they headed across the open marshland between Reculver and Minnis Bay.

In January 1953, severe east coast storms and flooding completely washed away the line at Reculver. While the track was replaced during the next three months, Birchington station provided a terminus for trains diverted around Canterbury, Ramsgate and Margate.

At this time, people were encouraged by government to move out of London with heavily subsidised season tickets being offered as an incentive. Birchington proved a popular destination despite lengthy journeys to the capital on ageing trains.

By now, steam power was fast falling from favour and the entire line to London was opened to electric trains in 1959 after a £25 million investment by British Railways. New, faster rolling stock saw journey times improve – Victoria could be reached from Birchington in just under 100 minutes for the first time - and passengers could travel in greater comfort. This would be the same slam-door rolling stock which stayed in use for nearly 40 years, to be replaced by the current trains on the line.

Happily, Dr Richard Beeching’s axe did not fall upon Birchington 50 years ago yet there were some dark rumours around closures along the east Kent line in the early 1980s which could have seen the station’s demise. By this time, the station had lost its signal box on the down platform while a freight siding by the London track had been lifted. At one time, this accommodated a couple of redundant Pullman cars converted into camping holiday coaches until they were set on fire by hooligans in the late 1960s.

Sadly, it would be another arson attack which saw the demise of the original, ornate wooden down side waiting room building in 1978. Children waiting for morning school trains would huddle here in numbers to avoid the worst of the weather. Replacement plastic shelters never offered the same cover.

Over the years, Birchington, unlike nearby Westgate, has always retained a half hourly service six days a week. Perhaps being the first or last stop in and out of Thanet has been an important feature – yet woe betide rail managers who had to face a vociferous commuter group if any cuts were being considered!

There’s no doubt the railway has shaped Birchington into becoming the place it is today. Without it, residents would never have been able to enjoy their age-old argument over whether the place is really a town or a village!