

VICTORIAN BIRCHINGTON 'PRESERVED' by her HOBBY

Article written by Mabel White for the East Kent Times
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It is like turning the pages of a Victorian novel to all at 'Creta', in Ethelbert Road Minnis Bay. Living there is 96-year-old Miss Rosa Lawes, whose store of memories include Queen Victoria's reign and Minnis Bay when it consisted of two farms, coastguard cottages and a few houses.

Miss Lawes lives with her cousin, Miss Margaret Haig who is, she told me, an inveterate hoarder. She has an interesting collection of Victoriana. As she showed me into a room, I saw a dolls' tea party in progress for her goddaughter. The little table was set out with cups and saucers of delicate china and round the table were seated a number of dolls, including a rag doll and a wooden one which had belonged to Miss Haig's father.

Both Miss Lawes and Miss Haig are intensely interested in Birchington and the neighbourhood. When Miss Lawes was young and came to live with Miss Haig's family, she was an ardent photographer in the days when amateur photography was by no means common. She was always setting up her large camera on its stand, disappearing under a black cloth and taking family groups and anything of interest.

It is thanks to her hobby that there is a record of Birchington Bay, (as it was then called) before it was developed. Miss Haig, realising that many other people would be interested in them, has had slides made and shows the pictures on a screen, with a collection to help the funds for the renovation of the Congregational Church.

It is remarkable that the prints, which were developed and printed by Miss Lawes herself, are still so clear. The slides include one of the great storm of 1897 and the seafront before any development was started. Miss Haig told me that they had both been interested in the little church at the Bay, for it was Miss Haig's father, the late Mr Charles Robert Haig, who, seeing the need for a free church when development started in 1885, bought timber and built the first wooden church, which was undenominational.

In 1913 the deeds were handed over to the Congregational Church Union. The present brick building was erected in 1934. It was in 1885 that the Birchington Bay Estate was formed for developing the area, mainly under the auspices of Mr Rayden, who also built a large Exhibition Hall for a horticultural show, partly, no doubt, to publicise the Estate. Special trains were run from as far afield as Rochester, to enable people to visit the building.

The Great Storm

The hall remained, but the great storm caused such devastation in the developed area that after the damage was made good, nothing else was built for some years.

Miss Haig said hers was a typical Victorian family of the 80's. They took an interest in all the inhabitants, taking soup to those who were ill and giving bedding and baby clothes to mothers. It was a familiar sight to see the coastguards patrolling the cliffs, and they were greatly missed when they were disbanded in the early 1900s.

Among other things, I was shown a most unusual picture in one of the rooms. It was a family group, consisting of Miss Lawes' mother when a small girl with her sisters and brother. All the figures were in silhouette and a group of this kind is most rare. It is a delightful scene with the demure little girls in their pantaloons, holding baskets. Miss Lawes used to visit the aunts and uncle in the large private house in Canterbury, which is now the County Hotel. Her grandfather, Mr Henry Ward, was at that time proprietor of the Kentish Gazette. When he died his daughters carried on the newspaper.

Still Active

Miss Lawes, in spite of her age, is still erect and active about the house and takes a great interest in all that goes on around her. Miss Haig is a woman of many parts. She is an accomplished verse speaker and her special study is the dress of men and women through the ages and the social life of the times.

She and her friend Gertrude Trede, who is a violinist and an experienced player on many instruments, travel all over the country and sometimes abroad, giving lectures and recitals, seeking to convey the spirit of the past expressed in music, poetry and dress. She has also been a free-lance journalist, writing for the amateur stage and she designs and makes period costumes of all kinds. She was, at one time, stage manager to the Oasis Players, an all-women Shakespearian company

Miss Haig told me that in the autumn, she and Mrs Trede are off again on their travels.