

A LOCAL HISTORY EXHIBITION

BYGONE BIRCHINGTON

by Hazel Halse

Although there has been a settlement at Birchington for many centuries, most of the village's development has taken place in the last 100-150 years. The coming of the railway and the growth in popularity of the seaside holiday led to an increase in the population, which rose from 885 to 3756 between 1851 and 1931, and to a corresponding rise in the number of shops and other commercial establishments.

The predominantly agricultural village of the early nineteenth century had grown up around the Parish Church and The Square, with very little traffic and few shops. According to Kelly's Directory of Kent in **1852**, these included:-

| | | |
|------------|-----|---------------|
| grocers | x 2 | post office |
| bakers | x 2 | carpenter |
| shoemakers | x 2 | tailor |
| butchers | x 2 | beer retailer |
| bricklayer | | blacksmith |

There was also a National School with a master and mistress and two public houses :- The Powell Arms
The New Inn (now Saxby's)

The opening of Birchington Station on the Chatham - Ramsgate line in 1863 led to the development of Station Road as a shopping area. By 1878 the number of tradesmen listed in Kelly's Directory had more than quadrupled and the village was described as being "lighted with gas". Meanwhile, Birchington was gaining a considerable reputation as a fashionable seaside resort. The quiet and genteel character was contrasted with Margate which, in aristocratic eyes, was becoming "contaminated by vulgar working-class day-trippers from London". Birchington became known for its pleasant bungalows, an unusual development among the more familiar seaside villas. In 1909 it was described as being "healthier, quieter and more select than any of the overcrowded, noisy seaside resorts".

The hitherto rather bleak, deserted stretch of coastline, with its chalk stacks and a bay which still flooded at high tide, was gradually being "tamed". A substantial promenade was built, as the benefit to be gained from walking in the sea air was a major attraction of the seaside holiday. Hotels, guest houses and restaurants quickly appeared. Kelly's Directory of Thanet in 1901 described Birchington as "becoming one of the fashionable places along the north cliff" and in 1908, it stated that "the Bungalows on the seafront are in great demand during the summer months and building operations are in steady progress".

These same "building operations" have continued throughout the present century and a 1901 assertion that "there is building everywhere on the bay now and bricks and mortar are rapidly taking the place of cornfields" became true of many other parts of the village. This exhibition illustrates the way in which the main thoroughfares of Birchington - Canterbury Road, Station Road and The Square - have changed over the past 100 years. It also looks at the coastal developments of Minnis Bay and Epple Bay.

We hope very much that you will enjoy this glimpse of Birchington's past and would like to express special thanks to Christopher Powell-Cotton, Vera Holton, Alan M. Kay and Alfred T. Walker, both for their interest in this project and for the loan of so much of the material on display.

[1970s or early 1980s]