

KING ETHELBERT SCHOOL

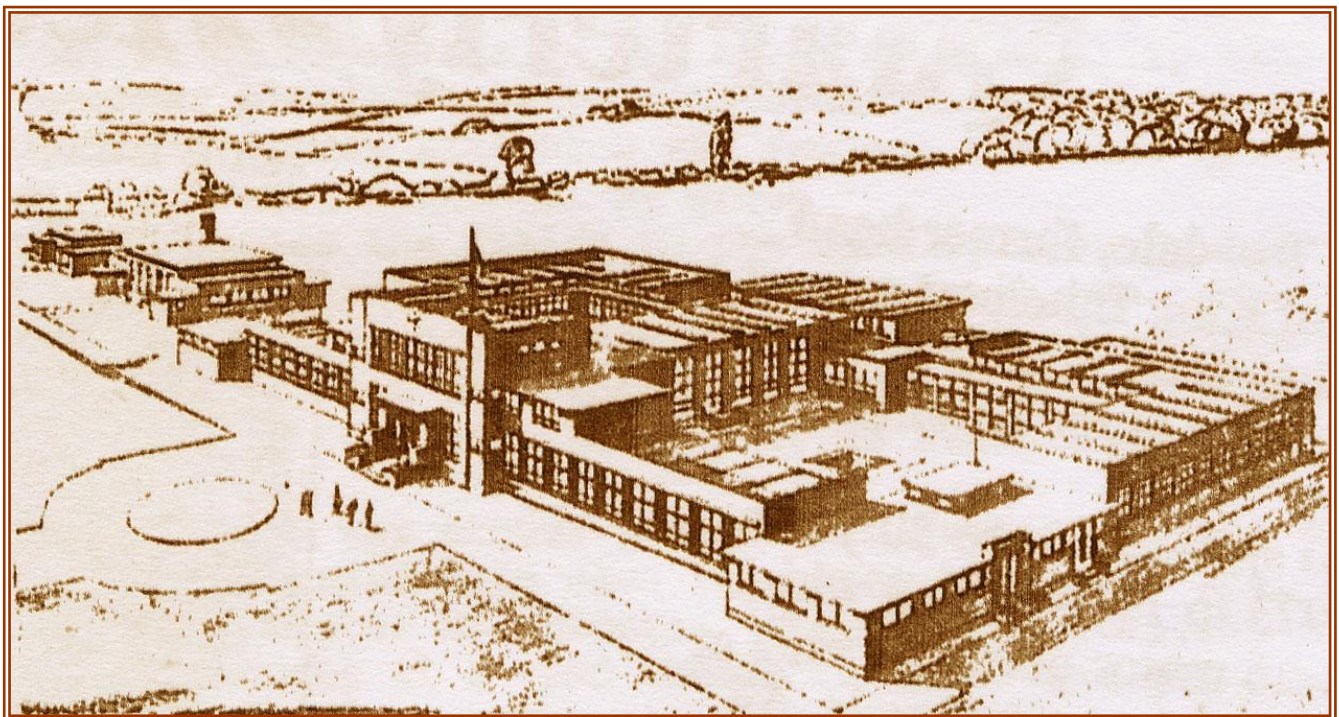
By Ben May – Professional Photographer

Back in the sixth century, Kent was ruled over by King Ethelbert and his Queen, Bertha, who converted him to Christianity at the behest of St Augustine.

Back in the 1930s, when it was decided to build a super new school in Canterbury Road on the borders of Birchington and Westgate, a site was chosen opposite a private girls' school called Queen Bertha's School, so it was a natural choice to name the new school **King Ethelbert**.

At the time, I was attending Pettman Central School in Margate, cycling the five miles each day in the summer from Cross Road, Birchington, and rushing up to the station to catch the train in bad weather, so I was pleased when I knew that I should only have to cycle half a mile from my home in Birchington to the new school. I was one of the first pupils and allocated to one of the 'Houses', all named after famous ships. The rivalry between houses was fierce, especially in sports – and my house was always the best – of course!

The new building was fine – all modern facilities had been incorporated into the design – but most importantly, it was the first co-educational school in the area, if not in the county. There were rooms for domestic science, woodwork, metalwork, a gymnasium with showers, an art room, a fine library, a clinic for health-care and a canteen with a very modern kitchen.



King Ethelbert School, prior to the new building programme of 2005-10

The staff had been chosen from many schools in the area and several were well-known to most of us. Among them was the Headmaster, Mr J. C. Cork, Headmistress, Miss Brown, G. S. (Piggy) Owen (physics), Miss Carter the art mistress, Mr Heathfield, my form master, Miss Fenton, Mr Booker, Mr Kennard (gardening), Mr Reid and Mr Bruce Marshall, who took us for English.

It being a new building, it had several areas which, although clean and new, lacked personal touches, so it was decided that the senior classes would turn a 'house into a home'! We were set several projects and spent all our spare time – in addition to handicraft lessons – making such things as 'Keep off the grass' signs, cast in aluminium, building cycle sheds, marking out football pitches, laying out gardens and growing flowers etc for use in the school from the greenhouse. We also kept chickens, although I have no idea who fed them at the weekends. One thing which my friend Ray Pettman and I did was to go fishing on the Minnis Bay marshes and bring back several roach and rudd to stock the ponds in the Quad.

Mr Owen, the Physics master, wanted demonstration models for his lab. And Cecil Harvey and I were asked to make a working model of a lift-pump. That's the kind you find on a village green. Another pair made a Force-pump, which has a very different action and demonstrated the principles involved. We took ourselves off on Saturday mornings looking for old bicycle frames, and anything else that would be useful in our work. Good use was made of the metal-work and wood-work rooms, and we were soon pumping water all over the place!

These practical sessions taught us a lot, as well as making the school function more fully. Miss Brown took a special interest in the canteen and organised a table rota system, whereby each of the eight who shared a table for lunch, took it in turn to wait at table, after arriving early to set the knives and forks etc. in the prescribed manner, as taught by Miss Brown. I well remember the first day at school. I was detailed to be one of the two waiting on the staff table. Proudly (and nervously) I carried the platter and placed the whole leg of lamb in front of Mr Cork, the Headmaster at the head of the table and watched as he expertly carved it. I was so intent on my job that by the time all the staff and pupils had eaten, there was nothing left for my lunch and I had to be content with the leavings from the staff table!



*King Ethelbert school
badge*

These activities welded the staff and pupils into a happy and busy school, the most noticeable effect of girls on boys and vice-versa was the improvement in hair brushing, shoe polishing, door opening etc. and we

soon accepted each other. 'Equal opportunities' had not then been thought of and the boys kept to the woodwork and football etc. while the girls did the sewing and cooking. Today's teaching is, of course, much more liberal – and a good thing too. We had concerts in the hall. My speciality was, I remember, playing the mouth-organ with my hands behind my back! Friday afternoon was Project time and groups studied various things. My group walked across the fields to Quex Park and made dairy farming our project for a term. We hounded the farm hands for the cows' names, took meticulous records of milk yields, feed consumption etc and I think at the end of the term, told the farmer that he would soon be out of business!

The war clouds were gathering over Europe and soon classes were down in number to just a few in each. Our gardening master, Mr Kennard, known affectionately as 'Cloddy', thought it a good wheeze to teach the six of us Cribbage. He brought along several packs of playing cards and we were soon experts. Well, at least our mental arithmetic improved. A few months later we were told that we were to be evacuated to a safer place, and so turned up at Margate railway station with name-tags attached, gas-masks bobbing on our backs, and waved farewell to damp-eyed Mums – and were off to unknown parts. I am still, after all these years, at a loss to know who decided the our school should be sent to Chasetown, a small mining town, just a few miles north of Birmingham, in the middle of industrial England. True, the Battle of Britain was about to begin in the South East and the bombing of the Midlands had not yet begun in earnest, but it seemed a strange choice. Many pupils found a 'second home' and one or two I know found life-long partners and one or two, I believe still live there.

In my case it was a bit different. I had a special friend and also a younger brother, neither of whom I wanted to be parted from. It took a long time to find someone to take the three of us, but we managed it in the end and were quite happy there until my parents decided it was safe for us to return to Kent and my association with 'The King of Kent' was at an end.

I am grateful to the school – it taught me well and I still remember lessons learned sixty years ago. The practical work, which seems to be so lacking in these computer driven days, was especially useful and stood me in good stead in my coming RAF days – and since.

I would be pleased to hear from any of the former original pupils. I still see one or two of them in Canterbury and around this part of Kent. Best of luck to the School. You should bring back the 'Houses', with their stimulating rivalry.