

STATION & STATION HOUSE & its accompanying BRIDGE – BIRCHINGTON

The railway came to Birchington on the 5th October 1863. Its arrival made Herne Bay and Margate, and even further afield, easily available sources of employment for local people. Previously, the only local employment was on farms, in the few shops around the Square, with one or two along 'The Street', as Station Road was previously known, and a few trades like Knott's, the Coach Builders, the blacksmiths and a few carpenters.

Initially the line had only come from London to Ashford and then Canterbury in 1846, with an extension via Minster to Ramsgate soon after. The short line to link up with Margate was completed by the end of 1846. Birchington's nearest connection was to walk over to Minster. This link was still being used by troops in the 1914-18 War, as Ashton Pemble's Diary illustrates.

The railway had been taken as far as Faversham by 1858, followed by an extension to Whitstable in 1860 and Herne Bay in 1861. When the Margate and Ramsgate sections were opened in 1863, there were four 'up' trains each weekday and seven 'down' ones. The first 'up' train left Birchington at 7.38 am, going via Chatham to Victoria, arriving at 10.08 am, and then on to Ludgate Hill for 10.10 am. The first down train to Birchington arrived at 10.05 am.

It was the advent of the railway that made need for time keeping to be so precise. Up until then, different parts of the country ran on slightly different times and no one had any need to be bothered about precise punctuality. This was almost certainly the reason why 'The Clock Shop' was built just below the railway bridge, in 1891.

STATION HOUSE:

The Station House was built sometime between 1863 and 1865. Its architect has always been claimed as J.P. Seddon, who was very involved with the new developments at Westgate. It was his designs that were used in the construction of the Bungalow Hotel, on land abutting the northern limits of the Station ground. He was also responsible for the designs of the Tower Bungalows in Spencer Road, Birchington. The style and construction of Station House matches those he used in similar developments at Westgate.

RAILWAY BRIDGE:

This structure was built soon after the railway was opened, as the track now severed a main thoroughfare. It had been suggested that there was initially a level crossing at this point, as there was at the Albion Road junction, but the track is some feet below ground level at the station section. This would have made a level crossing for wheeled transport impossible. It would appear from the two sections of the old road, still visible on both sides of the east side of the bridge, that this was used initially for pedestrians for a short while.

The road, which is crossed by the railway at this point, was one of the three main routes down to the shore. Farmers collecting seaweed from the beaches to spread on their fields as a fertiliser used these all through the summer months. The bridge was designed to take one lane of traffic at a time, but was wide enough for the farm carts to cross easily, when they brought their loads of corn and hay home to Upper Gore End Farm. The land on the north side of the railway line between the Bungalow Hotel and Grenham Bay was all owned by St John's College Cambridge and came as part of the gift of Upper Gore End Farm, donated to them by Henry Robinson in 1642.

The bridge is still only a single-track structure and although there are a few people who would like to see it widened, the majority of the users are quite happy with it as it is. The bridge and Station House form a unified whole and to widen the crossing would be to alter the whole appearance of the area to no great purpose. Those who dislike the manoeuvring that sometimes has to be undertaken can always use the other two crossings, either on the Minnis Road or in Epple Road.

Not long after the bridge was built, requests by the newly-formed Birchington Parish Council (formed in 1898) were made to Kent County Council to have the road and bridge widened. Kent County Council said the bridge was the responsibility of the Railway Company to do this. So BPC wrote to the railway company, but they passed it back to Kent County Council. Apparently the road was Kent's responsibility, but the bridge was railway property! The request bounced backwards and forwards between these two authorities for several months, till it was finally dropped off the agenda.