

THE GRANT MEMORIAL FOUNTAIN, BIRCHINGTON

An accurate history of the fountain is necessarily bedeviled by a lack of conclusive records, but the following brief account reflects certain photographic evidence and accumulated knowledge available at the time of writing in November 2006.

The central area of The Square in Birchington originally consisted of a green where for years children would play around the maypole and where horse-brakes would bring country people to shop. The first proposal for a fountain at the Square was made in 1886 as a means to commemorate The Queen's Golden Jubilee, but this idea was rejected after healthy debate. A further proposal was made by a Major Morrison Bell's brother in memory of his brother but this too was abandoned following a lively meeting, and was in any case turned down by the Rural District Council as constituting a danger to vehicular traffic, at which point Mr Bell withdrew his offer. In 1909 Alderman Grant offered a fountain in memory of his wife and on that occasion the offer was eagerly accepted with the fountain being dedicated that same year. The fountain's lantern was lit by a gas mantle and water connected to the horse troughs. At that time, the Parish Committee agreed a speed limit of 8 mph in The Square.

The fountain was moved to a position near The Powell Arms in about 1914-1915 when a new light fitting was installed and gas (and presumably water) reconnected. It was then moved over near to the Queen's Head in about 1925. During World War II (and for this period the light was clearly not used) the fountain was encased in a concrete pill box. By 1947 the fountain had definitely lost its lantern (and therefore its light), which was replaced by a spike that survived until the year 2000. It has therefore long had to do without light or water, and efforts to replace the services have been forestalled over the years by concerns over health and safety with public water fountains, and to the refusal to countenance illumination in the area other than the official highway street lights. Any additional lighting was also felt to be a potential and a dangerous distraction to oncoming motorists. By this date it had also lost one of its horse troughs.

Efforts to protect and maintain the fountain and its remaining horse trough have continued over the years with the Birchington Residents' Association taking the lead with support and assistance from the Parish Council. Plans to renovate and to restore the fountain to its original condition were adopted by the Residents' Association as a millennium 2000 project, with a view to obtaining "Listed Building" status after the work was completed. Whilst public health issues continued to prevent any restoration of a water supply (or, for other reasons previously mentioned, to provide electricity), action was taken at the Association's expense to install a lantern as closely resembling the original as possible and with the invaluable help of the late Alf Bedwell to repair and restore the oak pillars and missing shingles. At the same time the Parish Council had been considering other enhancements at The Square and, led by the late Councilor Peter Francis, undertook to move the remaining horse trough closer to the fountain in order that railings could be installed around the whole edifice to prevent vandalism and protect the horticultural displays within. All of this work was completed within the period 2000/2001, and the grant of "Listed Building" status was sought and obtained soon thereafter.