

# BIRCHINGTON HERITAGE TRUST

Preserving the Past for the Future



## NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 14

NOVEMBER, 2005

**"We are not the owners, but mere custodians of what we have and hold," says Roger Gale**



Pictured on the left are Roger Gale, Jenny Burgess and Dot Raven at the official opening of the Birchington Heritage Trust Museum on Monday, 12th September in Room 4 at The Centre. Guests enjoyed refreshments and were able to look at two displays, one showing the history of Birchington and the other of demolished buildings. They also had the opportunity to look at the many files and artefacts held by the museum.

In his speech, Roger Gale thanked all those involved in setting up the museum. He stressed the need for such an enterprise in the village, remarking particularly on the need to take care of our historic environment. He continued, "History will not judge us kindly if we fail and we owe a debt of great gratitude to those who seek to preserve these records and to put them on public view."

Later, in his article, *Gale's View*, in the Isle of Thanet Gazette, he described the "pictures and artefacts, lovingly preserved and handed down over generations." He continued, "We all have a duty to hand on this heritage intact for the benefit of our children, grandchildren and those who follow them."

In interviews with Radio Kent who attended the opening, it was stated that the museum was costing the Trust £4,000 a year, so funding it is now a major concern.



Birchington Heritage Trust  
General Meeting

### Rossetti

and his Birchington Connections

An Illustrated Talk  
by  
Pat Orpwood



7.30 Friday  
November 25<sup>th</sup>  
Birchington Village  
Centre

All Welcome Non-members £1



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Guy Gibson's Birchington Crash and VADS talk - page 3; The Rossetti Bungalow—page 4



# November Newsletter

## Forbuoys Window

There has been plenty of interest in the new display on the older inns and hotels of Birchington. We hope to do one about our 21st century inns next year. In the meantime, our next display will be on Birchington in Winter with a Christmas element added in December. If anybody has good photographs (old or new) of the village in wintertime which Jennie could scan, please let her know on 842988 or at 6, Alpha Road.

BIRCHINGTON IN WINTER  
A SOCIAL EVENING  
IN THE VILLAGE CENTRE  
TALK BY JENNIE BURGESS  
AND AMERICAN SUPPER  
POSTERS AND PRICES LATER

## Bric a Brac Sale

The Social Committee have organized this for Saturday 29th October from 10am - 12.30 pm. Although you may not receive your newsletter in time for these details to be of use, there are posters advertising the event around the village. Any items for sale (no clothes or electrical goods, please) can be taken to the museum on Mondays 9.30 to 12.30. Alternatively, phone Dot on 842633 or Peter on 846713. Entry is 20p.

## The Lord Lieutenant Replies

Some time ago we sent Allan Willett, Kent's new Lord Lieutenant, who grew up at Brooksend Farm, a copy of Dangerous Coastline. We have now received a letter from Brigadier David Ralls, thanking us, saying how delighted he is to be in touch and assuring us of his continued interest.

## WINE AND WISDOM

7.30 FRIDAY, 27TH JANUARY  
VILLAGE CENTRE  
MORE DETAILS NEARER THE DATE

## MUSEUM VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers are still needed to help staff the museum, initially for Monday mornings 9.30 to 12.30, although we hope to open at other times once we are established.

## NOVEMBER EDITORIAL

Despite my uncertainties in the last newsletter, I am still editing it and enjoying fitting in all the items. This quarter's edition is a particularly exciting one with the reporting of the official opening of our museum. We always seem to find plenty to fill the pages in the end, but we are really grateful for ideas or articles from our members, as is the case with the Guy Gibson story. So do let us know if you have any tales of the past or if there is anything you would like us to explore and write about. On a personal note, I should like to say how delighted I was with the fantastic bouquet of flowers which Neville presented to me at the last general meeting. It was completely unexpected, although I suppose I should have guessed. Many thanks to Neville and Maureen.

# GUY GIBSON'S CRASH

with help from Ted Sturgess and Ron Oliver

The Trust has recently had a piece of information concerning the wartime hero, Guy Gibson. He was flying back to his base from Manston in the early part of 1943, after watching tests on the bouncing bombs at Reculver. Barnes Wallis invented these bombs which were used in the Dambuster raids on the Moehne, Eder and Sorpor dams in the Ruhr in May, 1943. Gibson was killed in July, 1944 after flying into a low hill in Holland after another raid on the Ruhr.

On April 11<sup>th</sup> Guy and a colleague called Bob Hay took off in a single engine Magister aircraft to fly from Manston back to Scampton, their main base airfield. When they were about 300 feet above Margate the engine stopped. As Guy later wrote, "When an engine stops in a four-engine aircraft you don't have to worry too much - but when it happens in a single-engine aircraft, then the long finger of gravity points toward Mother Earth - and so we began coming down!"

The problem was that all the open land in Thanet at this time was filled with anti-aircraft landing devices, to prevent unwanted enemy landings. But these played havoc with our own crippled aircraft as well, when they desperately looked for a safe landing site. Eventually Guy's plane drifted towards Birchington and crashed in the field at the top of Brooksend Hill, just beyond the last houses on the south side of the road. As luck would have it, 13 year-old Ted Sturgess, who lived at the far end of King Edward

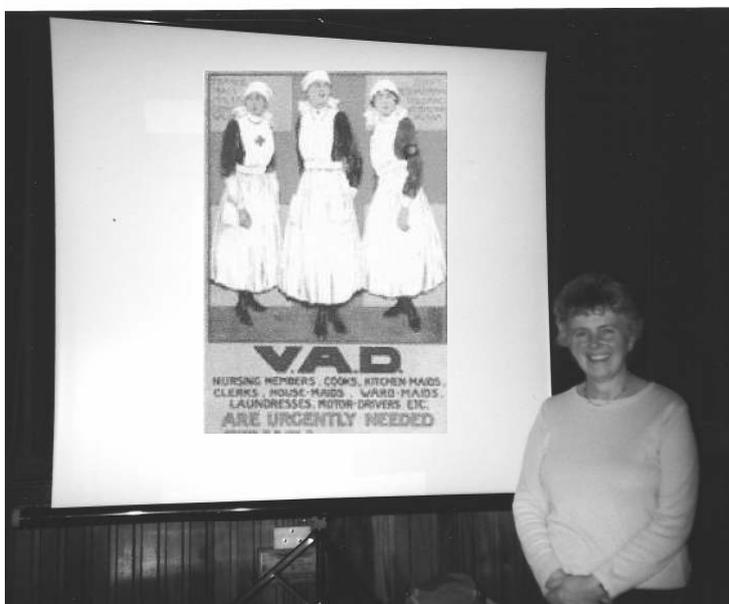
Road and his friend, Harry Castle, saw the plane's troubled descent and ran as fast as they could across the field behind Ted's home to reach the plane just as the two men were gingerly climbing out of the wreckage. Seeing that the men were "shaken but not stirred", they realised that their help was not needed.

The RAF rescue unit from Manston arrived shortly afterwards, but the wreckage of the 'Maggie' was not recovered till a few days later. Neither of the boys realised the significance of the pilot and his crash until many years later. They had seen some of the dummy runs with the Lancasters and the 'bouncing bombs' along the coast, but again were in complete ignorance as to their purpose.

It was not until very recently that Ted and Harry's part in the episode came to light. When Ted passed on this story to Ron Oliver, he immediately got in touch with the Trust and put us in touch with Ted, who now lives at Minster, and Harry Castle who lives in Scotland.



Wing Commander Guy Gibson, V.C.,  
D.S.O. and Bar, D.F.C. and Bar



## The VADs at Quex

Hazel Basford, pictured left, at the last general meeting on September 30th, gave a fascinating illustrated talk on the VAD nurses at Quex Park during World War One.

After some confusion, the first wounded arrived in the early hours of 15th October, 1914. Major Powell Cotton and his wife, Hannah, worked unstintingly throughout the war with more than 1600 patients treated and only three deaths. Many of the patients were Belgian and one of them, Oscar Van Audenhove, wishing to help as he recovered, painted the museum's Angolan diorama, which can still be seen in the museum.

# From our Files

## The Rossetti Bungalow

The Rossetti Bungalow was built by John Seddon, a well-known London architect. He had originally been involved with John Taylor who had built the first bungalows at Westgate and who had bought land along the coast at Birchington in 1870. (see Newsletter Number 2). After Taylor died, Seddon finished the tower bungalows along the cliff and had plans to extend the site around the original bungalows. The Birchington-on-Sea railway station was constructed in 1878 and Seddon had in mind attracting wealthy visitors to his new bungalows.

The area being developed was known by Seddon as Westcliff and the bungalow is often referred to as Westcliff(e). In those days only fields separated it from the cliffs and sea. It was started by Seddon in 1877 and was in similar colonial style to the Westcliffe (Bungalow) Hotel built by Seddon around the same time. It was revolutionary in design, being built using prefabricated timber with an asphalt roof. As with the tower bungalows, it was large and well-appointed. It was set in three quarters of an acre and consisted of six bedrooms, a lounge, library, dining room and study along with the usual domestic offices.

Rossetti had known John Seddon since the 1840s. Seddon's brother, Tom, who died in 1856, had been an early follower of the Pre-Raphaelite movement and a painter friend of Rossetti. John Seddon remained in contact with Rossetti and commissioned works from him including the triptych for Llandaff Cathedral in Wales, which Seddon was restoring. Seddon visited Rossetti in Cheyne Walk in January 1882, after Rossetti's stroke in December, 1881, and offered him the use of the bungalow. Hall Caine, the young novelist who was staying with Rossetti and looking after him at the time, finally persuaded Rossetti to make the trip and they arrived on February 4th 1882. Rossetti brought with him his nurse, Mrs Abrey along with Hall Caine and Caine's twelve year old sister. Rossetti said he could see neither beauty nor comfort in the place, fussed about his room and was only mollified after setting up his easel in a room with northern light. Doctors would not allow his mother to come down in the winter and he had to wait until March 2nd for her and his sister, the poet Christina Rossetti, to arrive.



Drawing by J. Stevens of interior of the Rossetti Bungalow

Rossetti missed all his London company and Caine wrote to his friends begging them to come down and visit Rossetti. Many of his artist friends were busy on commissions, but his solicitor, Watts-Dunton visited, Ford Maddox-Brown popped down for a few days and did some drawings of Rossetti for one of his paintings whilst other visitors included Rossetti's young writer friend, William Sharp; his London physician, Doctor Marshall; the dealer, Charles Howell, who amused him; his patron, Frederick Leyland and finally the friend he most wanted to see, Frederick Shields. His brother, William, had not realised Rossetti was so ill and did not come until April 1st. He returned a week later and stayed with



The Rossetti Bungalow circa 1910

Rossetti until his death on Easter Sunday, April 9th. Friends and patrons came down to the funeral in Birchington and then all left the bungalow, which was renamed Rossetti Bungalow shortly afterwards.

After the death of Rossetti, the bungalow was sold to the Irish millionaire, H. Osborne O'Hagan. He was described by The East Kent Times as "a legendary figure in the City" who was "behind colossal financial deals for more than half a century - from 1869 to 1924. His interests included breweries, tobacco, tramways, meat, mining and cement." Apparently he spent part of his time in Birchington, where his yacht could be seen at anchor off the coast. He died in 1930, but his daughter, Miss Agnes O'Hagan continued to live in the bungalow, which was full of antiques, until she died in 1952.

The bungalow was then put up for auction with local estate agents. In their prospectus for it, they suggested that it "lends itself for conversion into a small cottage and bungalow if desired." The auction was conducted by Birchington's Dave Dallas who accepted a bid of £4,500 for the property from a Mr W.A. Hardy of Westgate. It was, in fact, divided into three bungalows. Following an article about its proposed demolition in 1966, a letter from a Mr A.H. Tregear of Westbrook claimed that his family were the last occupiers of one of these, having lived there from 1958 to 1961. He described the largest bungalow as having three bedrooms, the walls of which were covered in tapestries, a very large lounge with a huge redbrick fireplace and library. The second also had three bedrooms, and a large lounge with a beautiful mosaic fireplace whilst the third, which he lived in had been the servants' quarters. Almost the whole was constructed of picturesque oak panelling and beading with parquet flooring. Mr Tregear also noted a large framed certificate in the main hall denoting that the bungalow had been used as a Red Cross Hospital in the 1914-18 war and that an air raid shelter had been constructed under the grounds to take 100 stretchers. Then, in the 1950s, numbers 1 and 2 were occupied by the C.O. and his aide from the USAF base at Manston.

All the fine workmanship and artistic associations were not enough, however, to save Rossetti Bungalow and in 1966, Margate Borough Council, despite fierce opposition from Birchington residents, agreed that it could be pulled down and the site re-developed with seven new houses. All that is left is a small blue plaque on the wall of 2, Shakespeare Road denoting Rossetti's residence and death.

**The material for this article comes from the files held in the Birchington Heritage Trust Museum. For more information and to view other pictures, visit the museum, Mondays 9.30 to 12.30. Also don't forget the illustrated talk on Rossetti by Pat Orpwood at our next general meeting on Friday, November 25th.**