

**May 2019**

Charity No. 1099250

ISSUE 68**A BIRCHINGTON HERO AND THE SUNKEN TREASURE***SS Gairsoppa*

In a recent edition of 'The Margate Handbook' a short article caught my eye as it concerned a heroic Birchington man. I did some further investigation and found an amazing story.

Captain Ayres and his family came to live in Epple Road, Birchington, shortly after WW1. He retired after many years in the Merchant Navy and during WW2 was a Birchington air-raid warden. This story is about his son, Richard Hamilton Ayres, born 1910. Richard attended our local Woodford House School until the age of 15. He decided to follow his father into the Merchant Navy and went to the training ship Worcester and two years later was posted to his first ship.

December 1940 found Richard as second mate on the British India Steam Navigation Co. ship Gairsoppa. The steamer was heavily laden with tea (enough for 65% of Britain's entire population at the time) and iron. In Calcutta it took on board 2,817 silver bars, weighing 110 tons, for the British Mint. With a load of almost 7,000 tons the ship struggled to reach its normal speed of ten knots.

The Gairsoppa steamed around Africa to Freetown, Sierra Leone, where in January 1941 it joined a convoy for the perilous voyage, across submarine infested waters, to Liverpool. Heavy storms caused the ship's captain to burn extra coal to keep up with the convoy and fearing he would not have enough fuel to reach Liverpool the Gairsoppa was forced to split off and head for Galway on Ireland's west coast.

Two days after setting off alone they were spotted by a German reconnaissance plane and in the darkness of the evening of the 16th February 1941 they were attacked by a submarine, while still 300 miles from the Irish coast. Sinking fast, the crew made for the three lifeboats.

The U-boat surfaced and sprayed the deck with machine-gun fire. Some of the bullets cut through the ropes of one of the lifeboats, sending it crashing into the sea. Dozens of men leapt overboard and swam towards it, including Richard Ayres. They saw the Gairsoppa sink within twenty minutes and there was no sign of the other two lifeboats.

31 men managed to climb into the lifeboat, 8 Europeans and 23 Indian seamen, known as Lascars. The only man skilled at sailing a small boat was Richard, who took command and set sail eastwards, steering with an oar, because the rudder had been lost. Their food supplies consisted of some drinking water, a few tins of condensed milk and dry biscuits so hard they could barely be swallowed. Each man was limited to half a pint of water each morning and another half pint an evening. Some of the crew began drinking sea water, which made them go mad and start fighting each other. Soon men began dying. Then on the eighth day water ran out. A couple of rain showers gave some relief, but in the cold air their hands and fingers became swollen with frostbite, making it impossible to grip the oars.

*Richard Hamilton Ayres*

Richard Ayres was determined to save the lives of the remaining men and sailed the lifeboat through the fierce gales with the help of the only two other men still strong enough to man the rudder. 13 days after the sinking, with only seven men still alive, land was sighted and they saw the Lizard lighthouse on the southernmost tip of Cornwall, 300 miles from where the Gairsoppa had sunk.

Luck was still against them, as when nearing the entrance to a rocky cove, a huge wave smashed into the small boat, capsizing it and in their weakened state four of the men were drowned. Another wave righted the boat and Richard managed to drag himself, Robert Hampshire an 18-year-old radio officer and Norman Thomas, 20, a gunner from Chatham, on board, only for another breaker to capsize them again. They clung to the keel, but as more waves crashed over them, they lost their grip. Hampshire was washed to his death, but Richard and Norman Thomas made it onto some nearby rocks. Then another icy wave knocked Thomas backwards, drowning him just yards from safety.

Luckily for Richard Ayres, three young London evacuees had been walking on the clifftop when they spotted the boat flip over. One ran across the fields to fetch help and the others raced to the beach to shout encouragement. A coastguard arrived who threw Richard a rope and pulled him ashore. The bodies of Hampshire, Thomas, and two Lascars were recovered and buried in a nearby cemetery.

Richard Ayres returned to sea just nine months later, reaching the rank of captain and retiring in 1964. He was awarded an MBE in recognition of his heroic efforts to keep fellow crew members alive and also received the Lloyds war medal for bravery at sea.

In 2010 the British government awarded a contract to an American company, Odyssey Marine Exploration, to locate the wreck of the Gairsoppa and recover the silver. It was found off the Irish Coast at a depth of 2.9 miles. 80% of the value of the recovered cargo would be kept by the Odyssey company, and the remaining 20% to HM Treasury. Work took place over two seasons in 2012 and 2013 and on July 23rd 2013 it was reported that a total of 61 tons of silver bullion had been recovered from the wreckage, with an estimated value of £137 million.

In 2014 the Royal Mint issued 20,000 commemorative coins, struck using a portion of the silver recovered. These were engraved with the name of the ship Gairsoppa round the edge of the coin.



Ayres grave (on right) - J. 832 in All Saints Church yard

The two stones on the shared family grave are inscribed:-

"In loving memory of a devoted wife and mother, Mabel Ayres, died 14th December 1953, aged 74 years. "In the garden of remembrance are many beautiful flowers, their fragrance will bring back happy memories".

and

"In loving memory of father, Richard Augustus Mark Ayres, Master Mariner, who died 21st December 1964, aged 90".

So that is the story of our local Birchington hero, Richard Hamilton Ayres and the sunken treasure. There are more interesting stories connected with this which I haven't been able to fit into this article, plus pictures and videos of the wreck and salvage work, but I hope next year to be able to present an illustrated talk on the subject at one of our meetings.

Janet Robinson

My Favourite Museum Item A Request

During the past few editions of the BHT Newsletter, there have been a few short articles written by members of the trust, who have been inspired by an item or exhibit within the Museum.

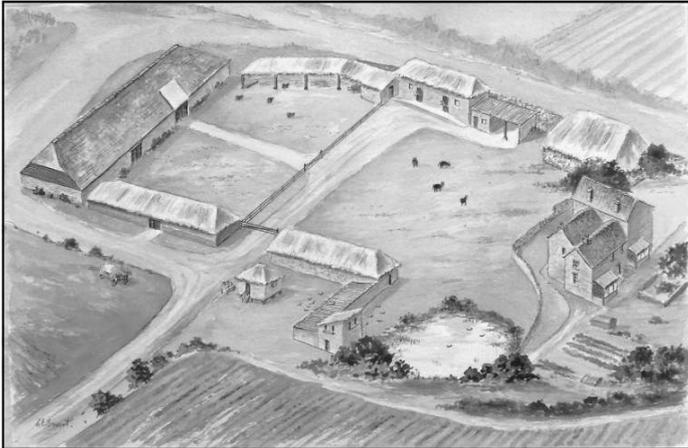
The "My favourite Museum Item" idea was first suggested by our Chairman some time ago and has been successfully followed up by a number of members.

If you have found something of interest within the our Museum and would like to share your observation with our readership, we would appreciate hearing from you, so that we can include your observations in a future publication.

Editor



Commemorative Coin and SS Gairsoppa Silhouette



Brooksend Farmhouse sketch

On this last Saturday (4th May 2019), I had a visit from four members of the Stone family, who have strong connections with Birchington, although none of them live here now. One of the group, Edward Chidester, had come over from America.

Orlando Stone, their grandfather, used to farm at Brooksend in the early 20th century. One of his sons, Philip, later became the tenant farmer of Upper Gore End Farm, by the railway bridge in Minnis Road. This farm is now owned by St John's College Cambridge.

The family story was that he considered himself a 'Gentleman farmer', who didn't see why he should get his hands dirty – so unfortunately the finances of the enterprise were not very healthy! He and his wife 'retired' to 8 Minnis Road (the house the Ward sisters had recently vacated after living there for 30 years).

The youngest Stone son, Philip Norman Orlando Stone, looked after his parents in their old age and inherited the house from them. In his latter years he lived in 'Highfield' in Alpha Road. While he was there I was asked to visit him, as he loved talking about the old days in Birchington. The article I put together from that time was much enjoyed by my Saturday visitors.



Brooksend Farmhouse c. 1906



Upper Gore End Farmhouse

The four Stone relatives who visited me on Saturday were fascinated by the three thick files of information about the two farms and the Ward sisters' old house. They spent several hours leafing through all the information in my house, as the Museum and Library were closed by the time they were able to reach me.

The four family members marked the pages they wanted copies of (about 20, I think) – so that is my next task.



8, Minnis Road

The story of the Ward sisters (Beatrice and Gertrude) makes fascinating reading and can be found in our archives in the Museum.

Jennie Burgess

Noticeboard

BHT Dates For your Diary

Events for 2019

30 May	AGM & Short Talks
27 June	Talk 'Blue Sky Drifter' Jennie Burgess Talk 'Quexpo' Neville Hudson
25 July	Cockney Night with Nigel Archer
26 September	Talk 'Schoolgirl's War (WW2)' Mary Smith
24 October	Talk 'Magic Lantern Show' Dr Jocelyn Marsh
28 November	Musical Evening with Colin Bridge

**7.00 for 7.30pm at
The Centre, Birchington.
The Bar will be available**

Birchington's Alphabet

ISMALIA COTTAGES - 274 to 284 Canterbury Road were already standing by 1897. They were named after a small town on the banks of the Bitter Lakes, which formed part of the Suez Canal in Egypt. The terrace was built of 'burr' bricks (or burnt bricks) which were the bricks nearest the furnace in the kilns during the firing. It is possible that the houses were built for the owner of Quex Park, as he named many of his properties after places he had visited on his explorations of Africa and beyond.

IVY HOUSE - This house stood in Canterbury Road, opposite the Church, on the corner of Gas Alley. The property was built in about 1896 and there was a shop in the front room. By 1902 a National Telephone Company base was installed here and was used well in to early 1920s when the telephone office was moved to the new post office in The Square. The purpose built telephone exchange in Albion Road was erected in the early 1930s.

JENNERS GARAGE - The garage was established in Birchington Square in 1919 when Tom Jenner purchased Birchington Engineering Works. The first petrol pumps were hand operated and all repairs were done on the premises. They became agent for Chevrolet cars and then Vauxhall Bedford. After the second world war they were agents for the Austin Motor Company. They also ran a taxi service. The building was demolished in about 2003 and replaced with Alfred Court.
Janet Robinson

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP A Reminder

BHT Annual Membership is due on 1 May, £7.50 per person or £12.50 for a couple, this includes:-

4 Newsletters and 4 Talks per year.

Payment can be made by Direct Debit or by cheque/cash.

Forms are available from the Museum.

RECENT EVENTS

On the 28 March, we had our first talks of the year at which we had a tremendous attendance of 106, of which 40 were non-members and who hopefully will soon become so and our thanks go to everyone for supporting BHT.

We started with a talk on the '**History of Epple Bay**' which had been researched and put together by Janet Robinson (presented by John). We heard about The Coast Guard Station and Cottages which were built in the 1880s to combat smuggling which was rife in the area. These buildings are still there and are now private houses. It was also interesting to hear how the bricks for the promenade were made, using local clay, pressed into moulds then baked in a long clamp and laid out in the sun. Each one had PC pressed into the 'frog' as this was Mr Powell Cotton's brickworks and we have an example of such a brick in the BHT Museum. Also touched upon, were proposals to build a pier in Epple Bay, but these did not come to fruition. How bare-knuckle fighting took place in 1810 on the beach with crowds viewing from the cliff top. That the original beacon was erected as an aid to shipping and the current one is now only lit on special occasions.

Mike Kite then gave a talk on the '**History of Priory Mews**' and how the stable yard area behind the then 'New Inn' in The Square (later the 'Pewter Pot') is now a small housing development. The New Inn was a coaching inn located strategically in The Square where the horses could be watered and changed if a long journey had ensued. Over the years various trades have been carried out in this area including a printing works and a car repair shop. The present development uses the original hay barn and stables which have been converted into dwellings and some of the original boundary walls have also been retained. Today the entrance is fronted by 'Hair on the Square' and 'Strawberry Fields' coffee shop, which was the original access for the coaches and horses.

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**Quiz Night** on 25 April, by Ann & Doug Holmes, brought out all the quizzers to test their skills against one another. A variety of subjects were covered with supposedly easy questions, that is if you know the answers! We all enjoyed the evening and our thanks to Doug for testing our knowledge and enabling funds to be raised for BHT.

*Janet Denyer*