



Birchington Heritage Trust

Reg. Charity No.1099250

LOCKDOWN NEWS SHEET

June 2020

Most BHT members will be aware that to help boost our funds we produce a calendar; the printing costs are paid by sponsors. Because we have been unable to open the museum to attract the funding, we had to put the project on the back burner. However some good news! One of our members has generously offered to pay the entire printing costs that will enable the 2021 edition to go ahead. This is important income for us as we have had to cancel fund raising events at 'The Centre', or receive membership subscriptions by cash or cheque since the lockdown.

In the last edition of the Lockdown News Sheet, I showed a newspaper snippet about a slight accident involving a tramcar bus. Following this I had a couple of inquiries from members about this service.

A tramcar service operated in Thanet from 1901 to 1937. The service however didn't reach Birchington. Westgate refused the company to lay its tracks, and did not want to encourage noisy holidaymakers from Margate. So the tramcar company filled the gap in the service to Birchington with their motor bus. The first motor buses date from 1913. They had solid tyres, so would not have been very comfortable. The pneumatic tyre came in the 1920s.

All the trams were open topped, the type operating in Thanet had a 3 foot six inch gauge between the rails only, so any attempt to put a roof on would have made it top heavy.

Here are photos of both single and double-decker buses that served Birchington.



Omnibus New Inn, Birchington.



BIRCHINGTON RIFLE RANGE

In 1925 the cliff top walk at Minnis Bay would have been very different to the one we enjoy today. The sea wall, lower prom and cycle path to Reculver had not been constructed, and the whole area was much bleaker. What was there however was the Birchington Rifle Range.

In the files in the museum is an interesting document, dated 1925, recording the new Bye-Laws and rules for regulating the use of the range. The area, to be used by the Kent Territorial Association, consisted of a strip of land, bordered by the sea on one side and the railway line on the other. It was about 1 ¾ miles long and 250 yards wide, it stretched from Minnis, past Plum Pudding Island, and nearly as far as the Coldharbour Sluice. There are many measurement and angle details in the rules, which, if you are interested you can read when the museum is open again. Each end of the strip was to be marked with a pair of poles. The inland poles would be topped by wooden triangles pointing downwards, and the seaward poles would have triangles pointing upwards.

When the range was in use, each of the two inland poles would be topped by a red flag. The poles themselves were to be painted black and white, to make them as conspicuous as possible. The firing was restricted to the months of April to July (inclusive) and September, and twenty-four hours' notice of any firing was to be issued to the Coastguard Stations at Reculver, Herne Bay and Margate, the Police Station at Birchington, and the grazing tenant of the land. The signal that the land and sea areas were closed was the hoisting of the red flags half an hour before the commencement of firing, and they were to remain in place until firing had ceased.



Even with these precautions in place there were accidents. A newspaper report tells that on Sunday 29th May 1927 two gentlemen, who were staying at a Jewish convalescent home in St. Nicholas, were wounded, one in the knee and the other in the groin, when men from the 4th Territorial Battalion, the Buffs, were practising with a Lewis gun at Birchington Rifle Range. The article states that in spite of the red flag which was flying and a warning shouted to them by a

sentry, they walked into the danger zone. They were taken to Margate Cottage Hospital. There was a court of inquiry into the incident in June 1927, but I have been unable to find a record of the outcome.

In June 1928 there was a newspaper statement from the Territorial Association, "*Efforts to secure the renewal of the lease of Birchington Rifle Range from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners have failed. One of the most useful ranges in the County will, therefore, pass from the Association's hands.*"

The final report I have found for the range is a year later, in June 1929. "*The Association have again granted permission to certain Cadet and Boy Scout organisations to encamp on the Birchington Rifle Range during August. This is the last time the Association will be able to grant this concession, as their lease expires in October, and cannot be renewed.*"

Not having access, at the moment, to the files in the museum I have no further information on the use of the range over the years, except that it was used again as a rifle range in WW2.

The following anecdote was told to me by Jennie Burgess, I have her permission to reproduce it here.

"I will share with you a funny episode at the firing range soon after we arrived in Birchington. Mother and I were strolling along the cliff top at Minnis and came level with the 'humps' – and Mum asked what they were for. Spouting forth, I said confidently, 'They're burial mounds from hundreds of years ago.' We walked on a few paces when a chap caught up with us and tapping me on the shoulder he said very quietly into my ear – 'Sorry, but they are the firing ranges used for practice in WW2.' I whispered 'Thanks for that – we are new here!' He waved, with a smile and walked on! I then relayed his information to Mum, who couldn't stop laughing for some minutes! 'That'll teach you, Miss Know-All.' It taught me a very good lesson."

(Article researched and compiled by Janet Robinson)

