

A Walk Through Birchington

When newcomers enter Birchington from Canterbury, as they come up that last rise into the heart of the village, they immediately see the ancient Church on the left (enlarged in 1250), and the old inns clustered around the triangular Square. The Grant Memorial Fountain that now stands on the right was originally placed in the centre of the Square in 1909, but has been moved twice since then. Each of the five roads that have guided travellers into this space have stood here since the settlement first began in pre-Conquest times, though they were mere tracks in those early days. In All Saints churchyard, near the main south doors, is the grave of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the famous painter and poet who died in Birchington in 1882. There is also a memorial to him in a small public garden at the entrance to the Station.

The village remained under the care of its mother church of Monkton from pre-Domesday until 1871, but well before this date it had already grown much larger than its parent. In the 13th century, when brewers had to obtain licences to brew, Birchington men were granted 22 licences, while Monkton had only five. Before you get bothered about 'drunken orgies' here, remember that everyone in the country - including children - had to drink 'small' beer (a very mild brew) as the drinking water was seldom safe for human consumption.

The advent of the railway in 1863 spurred on a huge burst of development and the population of about 800 doubled in just over 30 years. The shops and inns around the Square had always done a thriving trade with passing traffic, but the coming of the railway and the rise in the popularity of the seaside encouraged an explosion of growth in the community. The station stands at the far end of the shopping street.

The history of the village is reflected in the mixture of styles of property, each era contributing a new phase to our landscape. On the way up to the church from the south is the first of our two 15th century properties, the other one being at Minnis Bay between the two parades of shops in Minnis Road. Around the Square are several red brick dwellings, some with Dutch gables, from the late 17th century, as well as some large, elegant ones from the 18th and 19th centuries. There is even a sprinkling of Art Deco 1930s houses to be found, mostly at Minnis Bay, though the shop at the entrance to Albion Road by the corner of the Square is also an example of this style.

Not far from the station, on the sea side of the railway, there is a small development, known locally as 'The Tower Bungalows', which are nationally famous. Built in the 1870s, they were the first bungalows to be built successfully in England after the Indian style, and many still retain their unusual design features, including decoration on the outside panels.

Although most people think of Birchington as a seaside community, we still have working farms butting up to the edge of the houses around Birchington and the countryside is only a reasonable walk away. We will hear more of our seaside in a minute.

The shops down Station Road (our 'High Street') are a wonderful mixture of small, individual and thriving businesses, offering a good variety of merchandise, along with the kind of friendly service that has long disappeared from many high streets in the larger towns. With two excellent supermarkets,

(the Co-op and Somerfield) the community is well served for its daily needs. There are still two bakers, two greengrocers, one butcher and a large assortment of places for eating, either on the premises or for taking away - 37 in all!

Our Post Office stands at the rear of one of our two Chemist shops and we have a new surgery only a short distance down Minnis Road. We can still boast four banks and a building society to service our financial needs, along with two firms of solicitors for our legal requirements. There is a petrol station on the Canterbury Road at the top of Brooksend Hill and we have a garage near the station for servicing our vehicles.

The three bays that form our coastline each have their own character and are used in different ways. Bathing and sailing are mostly focussed on Minnis Bay, where there is a good sandy beach and only a low cliff and sea wall, while Grenham and Epple Bays, both backed by interesting chalk cliffs, are now mainly used by water sports enthusiasts. There is a pleasant undercliff parade that walkers and cyclists share, as well as those who simply wish to sit and enjoy the clean air and wonderful seascape. This is accessed via a number of gaps in the cliff from Epple to Minnis Bay. With our clear views to the west, Minnis Bay is famed nationwide for its amazing sunsets, particularly at harvest time. There is plenty of space for parking both along the sea front and in the car park behind The Minnis Restaurant.

The visitor would also do well to venture down Park Lane, (on the corner of the Square opposite the churchyard) and visit Quex Park, where the nationally famous Powell-Cotton Museum and the old house of Quex stand. The museum houses a fascinating collection of African wildlife, displayed in dioramas that are so realistic, you expect the exhibits to turn and look at you. There is also a large collection of Chinese porcelain and a selection of Neolithic and Saxon finds from Minnis Bay.

For those with thoughts of settling here, we have two excellent State schools, one each for primary and secondary education, as well as a Voluntary Aided Comprehensive School on the edge of the village boundary. There are four other churches, apart from the Anglican one in the Square - The Methodist, Baptist and Cornerstone in the main part of the village, and the Roman Catholic on the road to Minnis Bay, with the United Reform Church in Minnis Bay itself. There is also a small Anglican Church at Minnis Bay and another tiny one in the daughter village of Acol, just south of Birchington.

Although Birchington is at the far western end of the Isle of Thanet, it is well served by both buses and trains and is within a mile of the main dual-carriageway off the island. There are two car parks just off the shopping centre in Station Road as well as on-street parking with meters.

If you want to find out more about the history of the village, you can visit the fascinating Birchington Heritage Museum, which contains a rich archive of almost every building and historic event that have coloured the lives of the residents for nearly 1000 years. The Museum is housed in Room 4 of the Village Centre, just behind the Library, at the end of Station Road and across the little green called Dog Acre. It is open Monday and Saturday mornings 9.30-12.00. We look forward to meeting and welcoming you to our lovely village of Birchington.

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