

ALMS HOUSES – Their history, as told in 1933-4.

Some months ago, the older residents of Birchington were loath to see the overhanging trees on Canterbury Road swallowed up in the relentless exigencies of modern transport¹. Now another ancient link with the parish is to disappear, by the demolition of the four almshouses adjoining Park Lane, which, with their heavily thatched roofs and brick walls, contain pages of history that the oldest records cannot trace.

The alms houses, which consist of one building divided into four single apartments, were condemned as unfit for habitation by the local authorities in 1925, but it was decided not to demolish them while they were occupied by the same people. Three of the four occupiers have since died and Mrs Sayer, the last of them, aged 90 years, who had lived there for the past thirty years, is leaving at the end of this month, to reside with her daughter at Margate. The work of demolition will then proceed.

Considerable speculation exists as to the actual date of the building of the houses and although one or two dates have been suggested, the history behind them still remains very vague. A plate on one of the doors bears the date of 1310 in chalk, and although some people maintain that they have existed since that time, their structure suggests that they are less than two hundred years old. They are not built round a wooden frame, which marked the architecture of the 14th century, but in a straightforward and comparatively modern style, typical of the early 19th century. In view of this, it would seem that an extract from Barrett's "*History of the Ville of Birchington*", which the Vicar, the Rev. A. O. Hayes, has discovered in the course of his investigation, is the most and, in fact the only, authentic reference to the houses. The extract is as follows:-

*"1810. At a meeting of both parishes it was decided to pull down the row of Poor Houses by the churchyard and rebuild them elsewhere. The Overseers to find flints and bricks to rebuild the churchyard wall and the churchwardens to find mortar and labour."*²

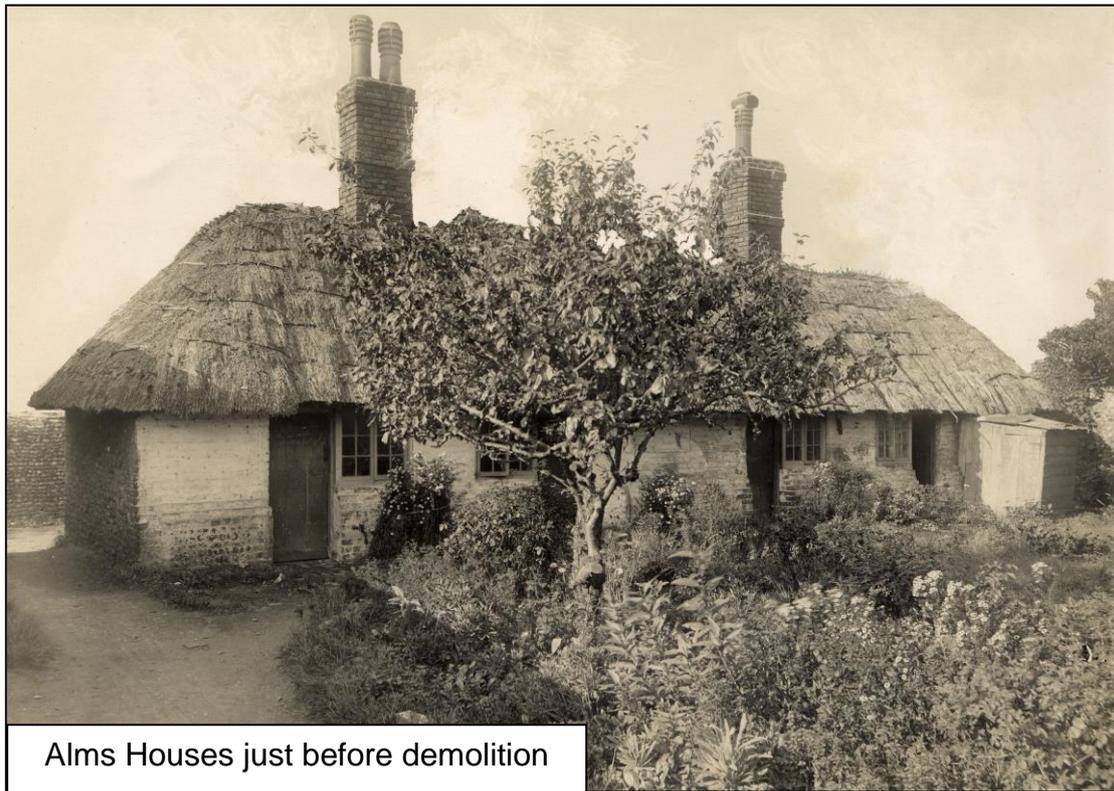
Apparently the 'two parishes' referred to were Birchington and Monkton (or perhaps Woodchurch), since at that time Birchington (and Woodchurch) were not separate ecclesiastical parishes. This reference shows that the original houses were not built at their present site, but it is impossible to ascertain how long the old ones remained adjoining the churchyard wall, before it was decided to remove them.

Another paragraph in the "History" states that in 1811, "A lease was granted to Mr John Friend, Overseer, for 99 years, of thirty perches of church land, where cottages were lately built for the poor. Dated May 9th 1811"

¹ Margate Borough Council decreed that Church Street, Birchington (now part of Canterbury Rd) should be widened in order to quicken the flow of traffic tow Margate. In doing the work in 1933, they filled in our village pond and pulled down Pond Cottage and South End Cottage (both dating back to about 1560-1600). Local people did not want these alterations, but their wishes were ignored.

² From this statement, it would appear that the poor houses were attached to the churchyard wall, in the same way that the single storey bar (once the old stables) of the Powell Alms are today.

There is no indication to show whether the land referred to was the site from which the houses were removed or the land on which the houses stand at present. All that can be gathered from the two paragraphs is that they (the older houses) were erected some time before 1810, and removed to their present site between 1810 and 1811. Extensive enquiries have been made in other directions, but no further references to the Poor houses have been found and examination of the earliest parish records, which date back to the year 1531 (the Churchwardens' Account books – which are not our oldest documents) and the oldest guides to the town shed no light on their history.



Alms Houses just before demolition

The houses are vested in the Vicar and churchwardens and are assessed for rating purposes at £3 per year. Arrangements for the work of demolishing them and the subsequent disposal of the land are to be considered shortly by the P.C.C. The Vicar is of the opinion that the need for Alms Houses is greater today than in years gone by, but he doubts whether it would be worthwhile or advisable to re-erect them on the present site, which is now surrounded by other buildings.