

HISTORY OF BIRCHINGTON

The earliest discovery of past civilization in Birchington was in 1853, when a hoard of about 600 tin-money coins was discovered at Quex, dating back to the days of the **Ancient Britons**. A **Bronze Age** axe was unearthed at Epple Bay and in 1938 a Bronze Age sword was found at Minnis Bay. At that time Thanet was still an island with considerable woodland areas and the only access to it was by boat.

The **Romans** must have visited the area, as it was very visible from their fort at Reculver, across the Wantsum Channel. There are tiny fragments of Roman tiles in parts of the south wall of All Saints Church, and there is clear evidence of their time elsewhere in Thanet.

When the Romans had to leave Britain in the 5th century, **Saxons** invaded and then settled here during the next two hundred years. A Saxon burial site was discovered in the Epple area when the railway was built in 1863. Coins from this era have been found at the end of the 19th century and Saxon burial urns were found at Minnis. Christianity was spreading through the island by the 600s and the community here was part of the Manor of Monkton. In 961, Birchington was part of a gift to the monks of Christ Church Canterbury by Queen Ediva.

At the time of the **Norman Conquest**, Birchington was still part of the Manor of Monkton and appears to have already had its tiny church, quite possibly of stone. By c.1250, the monks at Monkton decided to rebuild the chancel and then added a tower and chapel on the south side. The owner of the house we now call "Quex" had his own north chapel added. The little community was slowly growing round the Square and so in 1343, it was decided to rebuild the nave and add a large south aisle. The Black Death in 1347 forced a change plan, so two small half aisles were built instead.

Medieval Birchington was a tight-knit community based around the church and the triangular green at the crossroads in what we now call the Square. There were also a number of dwellings down the hill south of the church, connected with the farms that stood there. Among them were Church Hill Farm, Street Farm and South End Farm and buildings from the last two farms are still standing. The trackway that led to Gore End had two farms, Upper Gore End and Lower Gore End, as well as the cottage later known as Gore End Cottage. The last two buildings are, again, still in situ. The old mansion at Quex was demolished in 1809 and another ten medieval houses have been demolished during the 20th century.

From 1600-1750, there was a large amount of rebuilding took place particularly around the Square, with the introduction of cheaper, locally made bricks. Many of them show Dutch influence and were built over the foundations of the older properties, with the original cellars providing the evidence for this. With the turmoil of the Reformation behind us, some areas of the village began to prosper, but there were some very poor harvests and expensive wars, causing taxes to rise dramatically.

In the latter end of **the 18th century**, the poor became so poor that the Churchwardens bought in barley and then sold it on to the worst cases at a lower rate, with the difference being made up from the rates, collected from the more well-to-do. Smuggling began to feature more prominently in the family budget, as one of the few means of staving off starvation and remaining independent. The threat of the Poor House was ever with them

and to be labeled a 'pauper' carried a terrible stigma. The gap between the 'Haves' and the 'Have-nots' was getting wider with each generation.

Shortly before Queen Victoria came to the throne, the Union Work House was built in the centre of Thanet to serve the whole of the Island. Conditions were appalling and yet the only 'crime' its occupants had committed was to be poor. It was no wonder that smuggling became 'big business'. One of the old houses in the village has a 'Booty' Hole in its cellar and a smuggler's 'hide', accessed via the fireplace of the front bedroom. The church registers even give the occupation of several people as 'Smuggler', in the same way as they did for 'Carpenter' and 'Bricklayer'.

When William Cobbett rode through the village in 1828, he was horrified at how dirty and poorly dressed the cottagers were. It was not surprising that the farm labourers took to wrecking the new farm machinery that deprived them of even the few jobs they did have. At the same time, the grand portico-entranced houses just east of the Square were being built. From 1840 onwards, the newly rich, who benefited from the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, invested in building terraces of small houses to let to the labourers. 'Flint Cottages' in Epple Road and 'Alma Cottages' in Station Road are just two examples of these.

As soon as the railway was built in 1863, the whole appearance of the village began to alter. The wealthy bought up huge tracts of farmland and sold it in small plots, especially in Minnis Bay and south of the church. The introduction of 'bungalows' north of the railway line by Taylor and Seddon started a nationwide fashion. Large houses began to appear down Station Road, with a few shops mainly at the eastern end. During the 20th century, every spare plot of land was developed and eventually all the large schools and hotels were demolished and replaced with housing. For all this change, the essence of that little community around the Square is still very apparent today.