

Beresford site - 1967

Two years of rumour and conjecture have ended with the future of the plans of the plum six-acre Beresford Hotel site at Birchington finally being settled.

As the demolition of the former 5-star hotel – the informal mecca for generations of stage, screen, art, literature and television celebrities – reaches its final stages, contracts have been exchanged for sale by the hotel owners to the Kelp group of companies – a Canterbury organisation – for about £75,000.

The deal ends a glamorous chapter in ancient village annals and a new era begins with the blueprints for the 53 detached and semi-detached houses, which will be built to form a unique cliff-top garden estate community within the original walls of the hotel estate, and approached by only one entrance.

Birchington's charm became fashionable in the world of art over a century ago, when the distinguished poet-painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti bought¹ a seaside residence and before the turn of the century (actually in 1900), Admiral Lord Charles William de la Poer Beresford, 4th Marquis of Waterford, created a stately seaside home on the cliff top [out of two earlier bungalows built by Seddon's friend and colleague John Taylor in 1878].

The distinguished sailor-statesman – he was for many years A.D.C. to Queen Victoria and entertained the famous for many years [from 1900 until c. 1910] at his seaside home. He died without an heir. [He began converting it into a hotel in 1910 and it was ready for use by c. 1914-15, during WW1, when it was loaned to Red Cross for an Officers' hospital. It finally opened as a hotel in 1920.]

Recent guests before the hotel closed last year included the Prime Minister, Mr Harold Wilson, Petula Clark and the Beatles.

"It will be a delightful development because all the trees on the site will be preserved", said Cliftonville estate agent, Robert Crittenden. "Birchington will have something unusual in this exclusive development. Planning permission was obtained for 50 houses and a public house. But the public house has now been eliminated from the rest, and three extra houses will be erected instead."

Firms associated with the development deal were Herring, Son & Daw of London, Robert Crittenden & Partners, Cliftonville and Frank Wood & Co of Canterbury.

¹ In reality, Rossetti only 'stayed in' the property for 9 weeks (from 4th Feb to 9th April 1882. It was loaned to him rent-free by his good friend John Seddon, its architect and owner at that date. Seddon had already designed the Tower Bungalows in nearby Spenser Road, and the property he lent to Rossetti was of a very similar design, though the tower was less dramatic. Rossetti was very ill and had recently had a stroke and was suffering from the effects of excessive use of laudanum and alcohol when his friends persuaded him to come to Birchington, already famous for its bracing air. Unfortunately he died in the bungalow in Shakespeare Road on Easter Sunday 1882. From then onwards, the property was immediately renamed 'Rossetti Bungalow' and the road on the east side was also named after him.