

Birchington 1800 – 2000

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.