

“GAINSBOROUGH HOUSE” at “HIGHFIELD”

“Highfield” first appeared in Alpha Road in Kelly’s Directory for 1897-1898. It was built on the plot immediately to the west of the level crossing at the end of Albion Road and backing onto the railway. It was not shown in the 1884-5 version so was possibly built about 1890-94. When it first appeared, the occupant was the Rev. Arthur Thomas Bannister M A. His name appeared again in 1898-9, but by 1906-7, we find Frank Honeyball was living there. He was a staunch member of the Parish Church of All Saints.

“Highfield” was not listed in the 1911-12 Kelly’s, but by 1915-16 we find Col. N S Lewin as its occupant. In 1920, Mrs Bradshaw and her daughter were living there and continued together until 1933, when only Miss C M Bradshaw’s name appeared. Presumably her mother had died (between 1930 and 1933). Miss Bradshaw was still there at the outbreak of W.W. 2, but immediately after the war, the house had become “Highfield Guest House” and was being run by Mr and Mrs W. O. Franklin (Ossie Franklin’s parents?) and continued under their care until about 1952.

By 1953 the house had been renamed **“Gainsborough House School”** and was in the hands of Major and Mrs L. C. Morton M. A., the Principals. At this stage it was also labeled 53 Alpha Road, as the grounds went right up the level crossing. By 1957, the part of the plot nearest to the crossing had been sold to George Sewell, the Margate Borough Planning Officer and he built a new Chalet-bungalow type of property on it, designated 53 Alpha Road, so “Gainsborough House School” then became 51 Alpha Road. The school continued to flourish until about 1958, but by 1959 it was no longer listed and the building was omitted from the list of properties. The couple also ran another school in Cliftonville (name unknown at present).

Vida Bates worked there for a short time around 1954-5 but only part time. She had come home to “Stella Maris” in Semaphore Road to help look after her father. She remembers that most of the children were American, although there were English twin boys in her particular group of twelve. She taught them to recite poetry, mostly the poems of Walter de la Mare. She particularly recalls teaching them “Ferry me across the water, do, Boatman, do.” The children wore a uniform and most of the American children were very pale.

"...from spending too much time indoors." she commented. There was one child with lovely rosy cheeks, but it turned out that this child went horse riding etc.

Mrs Morton always appeared to be "The Boss" in the running of the school. Vida was almost certain that it was she who held the M.A. Degree and looking at their entry in Kelly's, the letters come after her name and not her husband's. She had the older girls and there was one other teacher. She seemed to recall there was one young "trained" teacher. Lorna Burley, from just down the road at Beaconsfield, used to play for hymns in assembly and teach singing. The children were often taken out at night with their parents, who were Bridge players.

As far as Vida can recall, there were no games taught in Birchington, but they may have been taken over to the other branch of the School in Cliftonville for this. There were 30-40 children in the Birchington section. The husband Major Morton had the bigger boys and used the rooms upstairs for their lessons. Some of the children had lunch at the school.

Major and Mrs Morton hired Church House for any Parents' occasions and charged the parents for these sessions. At one such do, Vida's class recited one of the poems from the "Just So Stories" by Walter de la Mare.

As the school had been set up to make use of the American presence in Thanet, it made them particularly vulnerable to their continued occupation at Manston. When the Americans were eventually recalled to the United States, this spelt the end of the school.

Mike Overall went to the school as a small boy and clearly remember standing in front of the Stars and Stripes every morning saying the "Oath of Allegiance" with hand on heart.

In 1961 the house had reverted to its original name and was called "Highfield Rest Home for the Elderly. (See under "Highfield")