

Prince Doria and Birchington

In the 1920s Prince Filippo Andrea Doria Pamphilj VI was a member of one of the wealthiest Italian families, owning the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj in Rome's Via del Corso. His mother, Lady Mary Talbot, was the daughter of the Duke of Newcastle. He met his wife Gesine Dykes when she was nursing him after a sailing accident in 1918.

Mary (as she was known to her family) was the daughter of an engineer from the Newcastle area. For some time she refused the Prince's marriage proposals, eventually relenting and converting to Catholicism before their marriage at Brompton Oratory in London in about 1920.

When Prince Filippo was at Cambridge he was introduced through friends to the delights of Birchington's bracing air and delightful hotels, staying at the Beresford Hotel (where Moray Avenue and St Magnus close now stand) which was highly sought after by the rich and famous of that era.

In 1923 the Prince purchased three plots in Harold Road from Wilfred Philip Hudson, a son of the last owner of the windmill in Birchington at the top of Mill Row. Hudson had built a chalet-type bungalow on one of the plots, calling it "Minnis Cot". In 1925 Kelly's Directory lists "Prince Doria" as the occupant of the house but by 1928 he is listed as living at "Minnis Cottage". This was the new, much larger house, which he had built well back on the plot next door. The siting of the house was in the normal Italian fashion, whereby you made the garden on the sunniest side of the house, regardless of whether it was at the front or the back of the property. By 1930 he had also built "Melfi" (named after one of his estates in Italy) on the last of the three pieces of land. It is similar in design, but placed much further forward on its plot.

There were also two other properties owned by the Prince during these years. One is called "Legopesole" in Grenham Bay Avenue; the other was known as "Dingley", which stands at the top end of the avenue in Sea View Road.

From about 1927 or '28 the couple brought their daughter Orietta (born in 1922) over to spend holidays in Birchington. They continued to do this until the late 1930s, spending a number of weeks at a time here, enjoying the sands and spending hours playing tennis on the superb courts that were located where Lyell Court now stands. Orietta did not think much of her father's delight in this tiny seaside town and his "little" houses. She was used to palaces with up to one thousand rooms! Princess Orietta was educated mainly in Italy but also attended Queen Bertha's School, a private school that used to stand on the ground now occupied by Queen Bertha's Avenue. She came over here partly to improve her English but also took Italian lessons.

Prince Filippo was very unconventional and liked the simple life for all his immense wealth. He much preferred to go about incognito in old casual clothes and enjoyed riding on buses and trams in both England and Italy.

Whilst here, the family were staunch supporters of the Catholic Church, which was still housed in its converted wagon shed in Minnis Road. Orietta was confirmed here on the 19th October 1931. On the 12th November 1933 Prince Filippo and Princess Gesine stood as sponsors for a number of children who were confirmed by Bishop William Brown that year. They made many friends during their stays here and Orietta still kept these friendships going right up to the end of her life in November 2000.

By 1935 Prince Doria was spending less time in England and consequently made his sister-in-law his Attorney in England with the power to sell Minnis Cottage. She already owned and lived in "Melfi" next door. The sale obviously did not go through, because Miss Dykes' brother John was listed as living in "Minnis Cottage" from 1933 until 1938. Eventually on 25th August 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, Prince Doria conveyed the plot on which "Minnis Cottage" stood to Miss Dykes.

In the last quarter of the 1900s John Dykes' daughter, Gesbeth Dykes, a cousin of Orietta's inherited her aunt's property called "Melfi" and came to live there until her death

Find out what happened to the Prince and his family in Mussolini's Italy in the next Newsletter - or visit Birchington Heritage Museum for more information.