

The Story of a SEASIDE CHURCH

The foundation of the Bay Church, later the Congregational Church (and now the United Reform Church) - at Birchington is surely unique - the act of a single individual, almost, it would seem, on the impulse of the moment.

In the summer of 1885 Charles Robert Haig, a city wine merchant, born in Dublin and educated in France and Germany, brought his family to Minnis Bay for the good of their health. This rather bleak tract of Thanet coast was being developed at the time as a "Resort" by the Birchington Bay Estate Company, of which the moving spirit was London stockbroker Arthur Rayden. Up in the village of Birchington, a mile away, the Institute (Birchington's first Village Centre) was planning a "Loan Exhibition, Fancy fair and Horticultural Show" in aid of their funds. Mr Rayden, with an eye no doubt on publicity for his Estate, offered to erect in the Bay, at his own expense, "a large substantial building" to house the stalls and exhibits. In a short time a rather barn-like structure arose in the grassy hollow (the Dip) near the sea.

Mr Haig, for his part, looking at the Coast Guard Station, the black-weather-boarded cottages and the terraces of tall, balconied houses put up for the summer visitors, suddenly conceived the idea of building a church with the timber he saw left over from the Exhibition Building, and the local labour available on its completion. So one summer day in London, meeting a friend, the Rev. Samuel Wilkinson of the Mission to the Jews, said to him, "If you will come down to Birchington one Sunday, I will put up a church for you to preach in."

About a fortnight later a little wooden church with a grey slate roof stood on the plot of ground beside the Coast Guard Station and Mr Wilkinson was taking the service inside.

From then on, Mr Haig took most of the services himself, morning, afternoon (for the children) and evening, except when his friends, lay or otherwise, came down to preach. The congregation grew and remained a Free Church at this time. The farm workers and the men who worked on the brick fields, along with the Coast Guards all brought their families. **In the summer, visitors came and there were services on the sands.** In the winter there were prayer meetings and choir practices, and sometimes Magic Lantern Talks. And every year there was the Christmas Tree in the Exhibition Building, with and games, and then presents for everyone. Upkeep was simple - the Coast Guards kept the place ship-shape and holy-

stoned the floor on Saturdays. There were no collections, only a money box fixed on the wall by the door.

Memories differ as to whether the text painted outside was, "We preach Christ crucified" or "All one in Christ Jesus", but either would have been equally appropriate.

At the turn of the century the founder (Charles Haig, and his family left Birchington for Chelmsford, but the work was carried on, almost entirely by laymen, for many years. In 1913 the Church joined the congregational Union, and in the same year, a few months before his death, Mr Haig handed over the trusteeship of the building to that body.

For another 20 years the Bay Church weathered the North East gales, the First World War and all the post-war difficulties. Then in 1934, a year and a few months short of the Golden Jubilee, the old wooden building was taken down, and as a result of the bequest of Mr Arthur Erlebach (the Church Secretary from 1908 - 1928) the gifts of friends and the hard work of the members, it was replaced by a modern brick Church, with a beautifully designed interior, a Sunday school Hall and a delightful garden all around it.

The Second World War and its aftermath brought new problems and numbers dwindled, especially after the death in 1954 of the Rev. John Boon. He had spared time from running his garage in Whitstable to serve the Church with energy and devotion for eighteen years.

Maintenance now is more complicated than it was in the 1880s and 1890s. £200 was raised last year for essential work on the roof. The interior, after thirty years wear and tear, needs repair and redecoration, which will mean another £500. But the congregation, under the Rev. D. Arthur King, now resident in the Manse, which was recently given by the Erlebach family, is once more slowly growing. Although still quite small, it is addressing itself hopefully to its considerable task.

Written in the late 1960s by M. Queenie Haig

