



Preserving the Past for the Future

Newsletter

www.birchingtonheritage.org.uk

May 2010

Charity No. 1099250

ISSUE 32

Victory in Europe - 65 years ago

By Pete Bateman

Victory in Europe or VE day on 8th May 1945 was a day to celebrate. Birchington was no exception, the air was filled with the sounds of celebration, Since the outbreak of hostilities, church bells had been silenced, only to be used as a warning in case of invasion. Anyone with strength in their arms were taking turns at pulling the bell ropes. At Quex Park the farm workers and Land Army Girls were relieved of their duties to do the same in the Waterloo Tower. In fact, the editor's Mother was one of those Land Army Girls at Quex who helped ring the bells. Before the war, some farm workers were employed not only for their ability to work for Quex Park farm but also their ability or willingness to learn bell ringing, so by 1945, were quite out of practice. Could the overwhelming display of rejoicing have necessitated the recasting of the front four bells in 1951?

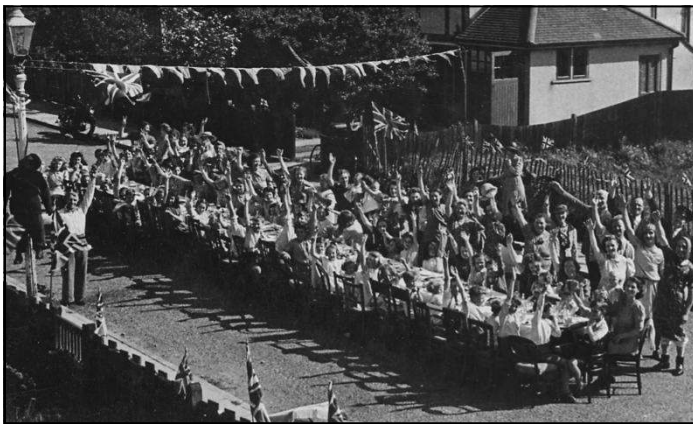
There followed a number of celebration street parties including ones held in York Terrace and Lincoln Gardens. With food either on ration or in short supply to arrange such a party illustrates the resourcefulness of the ladies of Birchington who had already become adept at "mend and make do". A Victory Parade was held, which began in the station progressed through Station Road and finished in The Square.



Street Party - York Terrace - 1945



Land Army Girls & Farm Workers who helped feed the nation by "Digging for Victory"



Street party held in Lincoln Gardens
A memento of the celebrations loaned by Neil Somerford



VE Parade May 1945
Kindly donated by Harry Castle
Harry also named many of the musicians in photograph

In this Issue: **Page 1** - VE Day 65 Years Ago
Page 2 - Dreamland - A Trip Down Memory Lane
Page 3 - CRISAB
Page 4 - Social Committee Report + Subscription Time + Notice Board AGM & Talk "WW" The Home Front"

About eighty people braved the weather on 26th November for Nick Evans's talk on Dreamland and the Lido. Nick published a fascinating book on Dreamland in 1983, but after that he has uncovered so many new pieces of information and photographs that he has just published an updated version. Nick has been under the spell of Dreamland most of his life, partly, as he explained to us, because his father, the late Bill Evans, was Dreamland's Press Officer from the 1970s. Many of the audience were delighted to recall their own experiences and to be reminded of just how much the amusement park had to offer, whilst some of our newer residents were fascinated by this glimpse into the past before the present decline of the site.



Dreamland - c. 1922

Dreamland had its origins in the Hall by the Sea which was opened as a dance hall in 1867. Here some two thousand people could dance to all the modern dances, but it was never very successful and in 1870 it was taken over by the Mayor of Margate, Thomas Dalby Reeve. His son, Arthur, married Harriet, daughter of the great Victorian showman, "Lord" George Sanger and their fathers agreed to run the Hall. Gardens were developed at the rear with a ruined abbey used as a bandstand, a lake and fountains and replicas of classic statues. Beside that there was a waxworks, swings, archery ranges and best of all a small zoo, whose cages have recently been excavated. After the First World War the Hall was sold to John Henry Iles and over the next fifteen years he spent £500,000. He restored the ball room and introduced cocktail lounges. In the 1920s the building housed Margate's first cinema. The scenic railway was introduced in 1921 and was an instant success as was the Caterpillar introduced the following year and lasting until the 1980s.

Two airship hangars were introduced, one for the Garden Café which held over a thousand people and the other for the amusement arcade, although this burnt down in 1930. Work also began in 1933 of the new Dreamland cinema complex and this tribute to modernity with its 80 foot fin style frontage opened in 1935.

The park closed in September, 1939 but the cinema and ballroom remained open until 1940. The entire site was requisitioned by the Government for returning Dunkirk evacuees with the restaurants, ballroom (now a dormitory) and huge parking space proving very useful. The park re-opened in 1946 with many new rides including dodgems, the galloping horse roundabout and motor boats. Post war England loved it, but once again fire struck: half of the scenic railway was destroyed in 1949 (it was re-built using wood from the re-built Lowestoft Pier) whilst the new arcade burnt down in 1950. John Henry Iles lived in Birchington with his wife during his retirement and died in 1951 and his service took place at All Saints, Birchington. After his wife's death in 1953, their ashes were combined and buried in All Saints churchyard, near the commemorative seat by the Lych gate.

By the 1960s, tastes were changing: Mods and Rockers arrived and foreign holidays became fashionable. New rides and attractions were brought into the park, Bingo was introduced in the Sunshine Theatre and famous bands, including the Rolling Stones, played at the ballroom. But audiences were slipping and in 1968 the site changed hands. The 1970s saw a number of rides, including the miniature railway, dismantled and sold to be replaced with more modern ones. The huge cinema was losing money and was spilt into two smaller ones in 1973.

In 1981 Dreamland was bought by Bembom brothers who changed the name and introduced an admission charge with free rides. But in 1995 it was sold to Jimmy Godden. Again new features were introduced and Dreamland was popular, but it was a false dawn and problems were numerous. At the beginning of the new millennium it was all coming apart and in 2006 Thanet District Council decided part of the site could be redeveloped. Then in 2008 the scenic railway caught fire again.

Nick is still optimistic that there is a future for Dreamland and we wait to see. He presented some wonderful images of Dreamland in the past and brought back many happy memories. Afterwards we were encouraged to browse through some of his material and it was a real delight to peruse his superb collection of Dreamland posters. It was a most informative and enjoyable evening and quite a few of us purchased his book.

If you weren't living in Birchington during the sixties these initials probably don't mean much to you - unless you saw the recent window display by the Residents' Association.

We all know how the number of cars on the road has increased many-fold over the past fifty years, so it is hard now for those who did not see it to imagine the sheer volume of traffic that came into Margate on summer Saturdays and Sundays during the fifties. Of course most of it was coaches - I suspect that unlike cars, there were more coaches (or 'char-a-bancs') on the road then than there are now - and on Sundays these were joined by a lot of red London double-deck buses. There were also, of course, a steadily increasing number of cars. The road into Margate had two stretches of dual carriageway - almost the only examples in Kent at that time - one from St Nicholas to Brooksend and a very short one past King Ethelbert School, both built in the 1930's. Between these fine roads stood Birchington Square, a major obstacle to Margate-bound traffic, which on a sunny bank holiday produced queues stretching for miles.

Margate Borough Council could only see the situation getting worse, so as the highways authority had to act. The original scheme proposed two roads. One, longer term and more expensive, was a road from Brooksend around the south of Acol (or maybe demolishing Acol? - I haven't seen the plans), roughly following Shottendane Road and going into Cliftonville. Margate housing estates built in the late fifties, opposite what is now the QEQM Hospital, and behind Laleham Road into Dane Valley, were left with dual-carriageway-wide strips of farmland through them.

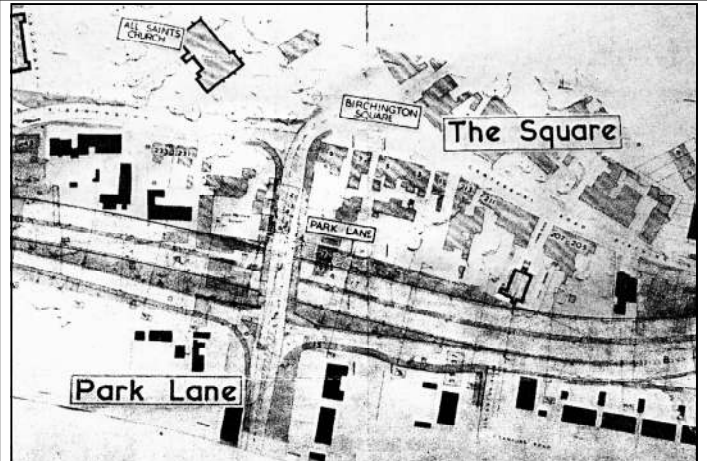
The more immediate **plan** was to convert the whole of the existing Canterbury Road to a dual carriageway. This involved demolishing a few houses in Westgate, but a lot more in Birchington where the road was narrower and more in the centre of things. The road would have gone through the Square in an underpass, but would still have caused huge damage and split the village in two.

CRISAB - 'Canterbury Road Improvement Scheme at Birchington' - was a group set up jointly by the Chamber of Commerce and the Residents' Association in Birchington to fight the proposal.

The Margate Borough Council, as we know, went ahead and built the dual carriageway through Westgate, but the extension through Birchington was stalled. In 1969 a new 'improved' plan, for a 'Birchington By-pass' was given the go-ahead by the Ministry of Transport and published. This road would have followed the Canterbury Road to Spurgeons (where Charlesworth Drive is now) then veered left across Spurgeons land to cross Park Road behind the houses in Canterbury Road. It passed just behind the Methodist Church then dived under Park Lane where the old band hut and Anvil Close are now. The (rather poor copy - sorry) plan for this part is shown below.

The road was then to continue to rejoin the Canterbury Road where Ferndale Court is now, follow down past Court Mount then go to the right along beside Mill Row, where the side nearest the Canterbury Road would have been demolished, then behind the bungalows and across the fields to Brooksend.

"Birchington not to be Cut in Two" said the Isle of Thanet Gazette announcing the plan. CRISAB begged to differ.



A campaign to raise enough money to fight a case at a public enquiry was started - it was thought £1500 would be required. The most successful event was a 'Persian Market' of unwanted items, held for a week in 1970 in the old cinema, which raised £940 (a prodigious sum when beer was 2/6 a pint and the 'Isle of Thanet Gazette' that reported it cost 6d). In all over £1300 were raised. CRISAB also proposed an alternative route skirting the southern edge of built-up Birchington, using some Quex Park land.

In 1972 Margate Corporation announced that the ground rules had changed at the Ministry of Transport, and from now on 'impact on the environment' was to be considered to be at least as important as 'technical merit' in deciding whether a scheme should go ahead. With this in mind, Margate's favoured priority now was the first part of the Shottendane route, turning north behind Westgate across farmland and joining the existing new dual carriageway at a new roundabout at Lockwood's Yard, a builders yard which was a little way beyond the Walmer Castle pub and had open ground behind it. To quote the Council meeting minutes, "This would avoid the issue of the possible effects of the Council's scheme on the environment of Birchington, although it was not doubted that in some ways the Council's scheme would actually improve it". However, the route through Birchington was undoubtedly technically better, and would be required in addition to the Shottendane route within a few years to cope with the increase in traffic. CRISAB's alternative proposal of the Quex Park route land was dismissed on the magnificently illogical grounds that it would be redundant when the other two routes were complete!

In 1974 Margate Borough Council ceased to exist, handing over to Thanet District Council, though responsibility for main roads was taken over by the Kent County Council. Little has been heard of these plans since.

Over the intervening 36 years the threat of compulsory purchase was eventually lifted from the houses on the route, and Anvil Close and Ferndale Court have been built. The strips left through the estates in Margate, and Lockwood's Yard in Westgate, have been built over. CRISAB kept the fighting fund for many years, earning useful if not inflation-matching interest, 'just in case' the scheme reared its head again. Eventually the money was passed to the Parish Council for use on the CCTV scheme.

Today (except perhaps when the Gas or Water Companies intervene) there are never jams at the Square which even remotely compare with those in the 1950's. CRISAB did their bit in saving Birchington, but the decline in the popularity of Margate as a place to stay or visit has probably been more influential.



Left -
One of the
posters used to
recruit women
into the
Women's Land
Army



Above -
Women's Land
Army Badge

It's SUBSCRIPTION TIME again!

Our membership year runs from May to April, so (unless you first joined the Trust earlier in 2010, or you have already paid) your subs are now due.

It's still only £5 per person. Please either:

- Pay at a meeting, or at the museum
- Pay any committee member
- Send to Membership Secretary,
23, St Mildred's Avenue, Birchington. CT7 9LD

No need to fill in a form – just give name(s) and either your membership number if you know it, or your postcode.

A REQUEST

IF YOU HAPPEN TO HAVE ANY WARTIME PHOTOGRAPHS OF BIRCHINGTON INCLUDING VE DAY CELEBRATIONS, JENNIE WOULD LOVE TO SEE THEM, IF POSSIBLE TO SCAN SO HELPING WITH OUR COLLECTION

Social Committee Report

From "West End to Broadway"

A new evening of entertainment was enjoyed by members and friends of the BHT on 16th April 2010.

Members of the Ramsgate Operatic Society entertained us with songs from the stage and films. Don and his group donate money which they raise to the RSPCA Woodchurch.

With only an audience of 38 people, BHT and funds of the RSPCA each received £90.50.

Our thanks to you and all your support.

Dot Raven



Birchington Heritage Trust
Charity No: 1099250

A.G.M.
Thursday May 27th
7.30 pm
followed by

'World War II – The Homefront'

presented by Bob Bradley



Birchington Village Centre
All Welcome

Bingo with Bring and Share Supper

Friday 25th June 2010

Starting 7-30pm

at

The Centre, Alpha Road

Come along and enjoy a relaxed evening of fun

Tickets £4 including 2 bingo books.

Tickets on sale beginning of June

At Museum, or from:-

Jennie - 842988 or Dot - 842633