



Preserving the Past for the Future

Newsletter

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WILLIAM BRITAIN

researched by Janet Robinson

In the churchyard of All Saints Church, about 30 yards inside the Lych-gate, on the left of the path, is a simple granite block. The wording on it reads 'In Loving Memory of William Britain, who died 24th November 1933.' So, who was William, and why should we remember him?

William Britain was born in Islington, on 14th November 1859. His father, William senior, started his career as an apprentice in a brass company. With a large family of nine children to feed he looked at more profitable ways to earn a living, and became interested in mechanical toys, starting a small manufacturing business at home. Most of the family became involved in the company and as it expanded three sons gradually took over, Alfred managed the business, William jnr. was the 'artist' who designed most of the early moulds, and Fred was the master salesman and secretary of the Board.



Grave Stone of William Britain

The big break came when William jnr. designed the first hollow cast lead toy soldier, The Life Guard, in 1893. The company then went from strength to strength, producing over 400 different sets which sold all over the world, and became very collectable. Production continued until 1966, when new safety regulations on the use of lead, and rising costs, led to a change of direction. Britain & Co started to introduce plastic toys, specialising in sets of farm and zoo animals, and toy tractors. The company stayed in the Britain family until 1984. Further information on the models is easily available on the internet.



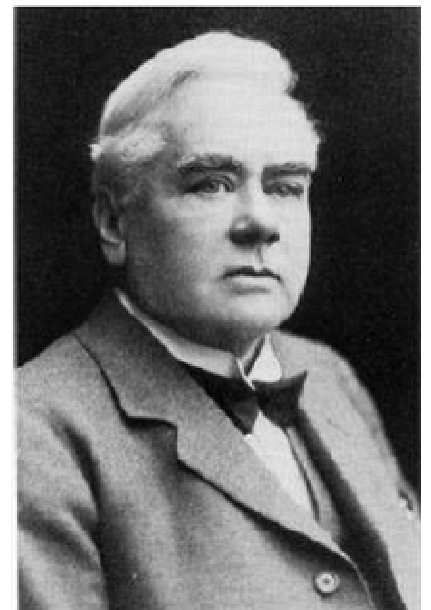
Toy Lead Soldier

I'll now return to William Britain jnr. and his family life. He married in 1889, and had several children with his wife, Lucy. Sadly, she died in 1913. William was in poor health, a diabetic, and confined to a wheelchair, so a nurse, Mary Kemp, was hired to care for him. In 1915 William married his nurse, he was 55 and she was 23, they went on to have three children together.

A few years after William retired, he and Mary moved to Birchington, and lived at 'Rosdelba' 3 Sea View Avenue. William died there in November 1933, and was buried in our churchyard. His widow continued to live here for a while longer.

In one of the obituaries, it stated that 'William Britain was one of the first men in this country to fly, and conducted experiments with heavier-than-air craft before the war'.

So, William may not have lived here for long, but was another interesting Birchington resident.



William Britain



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William (Bill) Albert Clarke was born in Birchington in 1906, growing up in the Epple Bay area. Many years later he wrote his memories of his childhood, and I have picked a few of them for this article.



Paddle Steamer arriving at Margate Iron Jetty

"Epple Bay then was just a narrow inlet. Most boys and girls could swim almost as soon as they could walk. We swam out until we could see the jetty at Margate, where paddle steamers from London and Southend would bring trippers. My grandmother would take us three children to Margate on the August Bank Holiday to watch the steamers come in. There were usually three; the Royal Sovereign, the Golden Eagle, and the Medway Queen. We thought that was a great treat.

Lots of boys and girls would make their way to the sea in bare feet. Some had plimsolls, others rope-soled canvas slippers, usually only fit to throw away at the end of the school holiday. The path (to Epple Bay) traversed an old brick-field, where we would get red dust on our legs and feet, then find a pool on the shore to produce make-believe blood.

During the First World War the German aeroplanes could only just about make it to London, flying over the south-east coast towns. Armoured cars would go through the village and a man with a megaphone would shout 'lights out'. The people in our village would collect in each other's houses and make tea, knowing the planes, called Gothas, would be going back the same way an hour or so later. I remember we would be short of tea at these times, and my mother would burn bread in the oven that would be scalded like tea. At least it made something hot to drink."



Gotha: German WW1, Heavy Bomber

Bill describes walking along Canterbury Road from the top of Epple Road towards The Square, passing Birchington Hall, the home of Mrs Grey.



Children Climbing on the washed up Whale at Grenham Bay

"Mrs Grey always had donkeys in the field when I was a small lad. A high wall ran at the side of the house where there were stone tablets with the names of the donkeys she had kept. My uncle Fred told me of how they buried one donkey with its hoofs near the surface, and one night he took a saw and cut the hoofs off. They were polished and made into inkwells, which I have seen in the family over the years."

In the year 1914 there was a great whale washed ashore at Grenham Bay, said to be the largest ever found on the coastline of Britain. I went round to it on the rocks from Epple Bay, it was only a few feet from the chalk cliffs. Some boys had their photos taken standing on the top, which must have been ten or twelve feet off the sand. The jaws were full of blood and its tail part was badly wounded. It was said that it had caught a mine, which in that year had not yet been cleared from the sea. Most people only visited it once, so

horrible was the stench. Finally, it was cut up by professionals and put on the fields beyond Park Lane School, while the jaw bones are to be seen in the garden of the Sea View Hotel, forming an archway."

Bill Clarke also wrote of his walk to school in Park Lane, and the buildings and shops he passed, and some of the local people he knew, and I hope to use these for a short talk at one of our future meetings. His full memoirs are in the files at our museum.

Janet Robinson



Local schoolchildren from the Park Lane School dressed up in costumes from around the Empire and through the ages. Careful study of the background shows that they are seated and standing in one of the galleries at the Powell-Cotton Museum at Quex House in Birchington, in front of one of the famous dioramas of African wildlife.

In the years before W W 2, Empire Day was always celebrated with the children in schools in England, who were then given the rest of the day as a holiday. In Birchington some of the celebrations were held in our Square, others in All Saints Church or else in the Senior School hall. The one up at Quex was a particularly grand affair – hence the photograph to mark the occasion.

When we look closely at the floor in front of the children, we can see there are a number of unusual objects, including an elephant's tusk and a woven basket, 'borrowed' from the dioramas to add extra interest to the pageant.

Jennie Burgess

TRADESMAN AND DRIVER FINED FOR CRUELTY TO HORSE

From The Thanet Advertiser 23rd September 1899

At the Cinque Ports Petty Sessions, Margate, on Monday, William Henry Emptage, of Hughenden Road, Birchington, was summoned for working a horse in an unfit state at Birchington, on September 1st, and Henry Tapsell, (a baker) of Station Road, Birchington, was summoned for causing the horse to be so worked.

Police-constable Jenner said that on the 1st September, at 1p.m. he saw Emptage drive a grey horse attached to a four-wheeled bread van in Station Road. He noticed the horse was going lame, and witness caught up the van at Station Bridge and then noticed a bandage on the fore-off fetlock.

He asked the driver what was the matter with the leg, and he said it had had a fall and cut its leg. He removed the bandage at witness's request, and revealed the flesh cut to the bone. The foot was much swollen and very heated.

Witness asked the owner why he was working the horse in such a state, and he replied that Mr Tapsell had sent it out thinking a little exercise would do it good.

Witness then asked him to take the horse out, and the driver did so, and took it back to the stable. It then walked lame. He had had complaints that Mr Tapsell was working a lame horse. He should say it would give the horse considerable pain to work it in such a state.

Inspector Fair, R.S.P.C.A. corroborated the evidence of the previous witness as to the condition of the horse, which he considered was utterly unfit for any sort of work. He regarded it as a very bad case.

Emptage said he thought it would do the horse more good to do the round, only a mile in extent, than standing in a stable. It had no more than four cwt to draw.

Tapsell said Emptage had told him of the horse's fall, and he told him it would do no harm to do the round. He admitted that it was a bad cut and was sorry if he had acted wrong.

A fine of 10 shillings and 12 shillings costs was imposed in each case.

Peter Bateman

Our present 'lock-down' with the Coronavirus is a similar situation to the arrival of the Black Death in Great Britain in 1348. Although its arrival here was nearly 800 years ago, the evidence for this is still to be seen to this day. It is not to be found in the written records held by the church. It is 'written' in stone and supported in a transcript of a contract dated 1343.

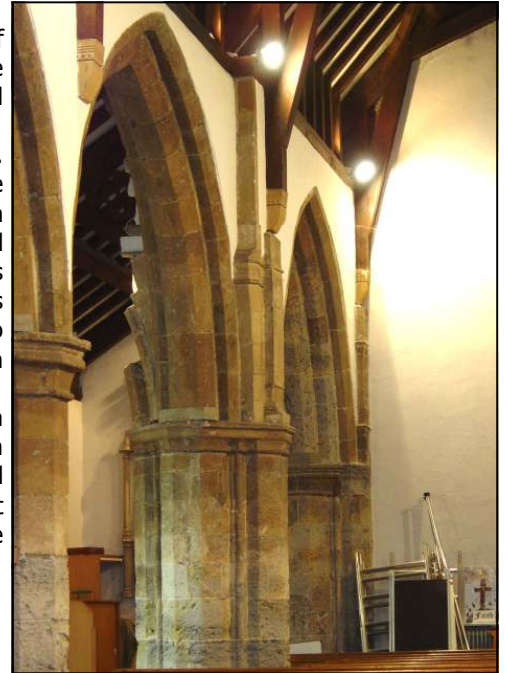
When people first walk into All Saints Church in Birchington, many of them make comment on the huge multi-columned pillar at the west end of the south aisle. All the others are slender octagonal columns. When we look more closely at the large pillar, we can also see a group of springers on the south side, projecting from just above the upper collar. A number of different suggestions were made for this pillar in the past, but the answer can be found in a Diocesan newsletter, in the form of a transcript of a document acquired by the Town Clerk of Margate in 1879 and was rediscovered in 1933.

It was copied from the original onto the fly-leaf at the back of Edward White's copy of Lewis's ISLE OF THANET, 1736, by the late William John Mercer of Margate, both members of the Kent Archaeological Society.

The document is dated and states a specific kind of architecture. The contract was drawn up in 1343 between John Steed, the churchwarden of Birchington Church and William Goldwert, a stonemason and plasterer of Herne. There also appears to have been a tower planned at the west end of a new south aisle, which is why that massive pillar was built. However, with the arrival of the Black Death in Thanet just 3 years later, the labour force vanished almost overnight and the money was no longer available. All the work on the enlargement of Birchington church was halted.

It was probably not until about 1350-55 that there were enough able-bodied men to restart the work. By then, the need for such a massive increase in the size of the church had disappeared. John Steed and the Vicar of Monkton, who looked after Birchington Church at that date, decided that it would be wiser only to add to half aisles beneath one large roof.

This is what we can still see today, so the shape and layout of All Saints Church is due to the arrival of the Black Death in Birchington. The people of Birchington – as with every other community in Britain, were coping with an unknown enemy.



Large pillar and springers

Chairman's Message

This is the first printed Newsletter since February 2020. Members who have provided their email address have received 13 monthly digital editions of the 'Lockdown News Sheet'. Printed copies of these will be available to view once the museum re-opens. (They are already on the website).

We plan to open the museum once all restrictions are removed. The government has indicated that this will be the 21st. June.

To begin with we intend to open just one morning a week, our target date is Saturday 26th June.

We hope all members are keeping safe, and hope to see you all soon.

P.S. You are reminded that subscriptions were due on 1st May 2021.

John Robinson (Chairman)

DEMOLITION OF GRENHAM HOUSE SCHOOL

The museum has been gifted six colour prints showing the demolition of Grenham House School. The school closed around 1983 and was demolished several years later. The Homebirch retirement complex and the Huntinggate estate now stand on this site.

The prints are 16" x 12" in size so are too big to be shown on display on our walls. They were given by Alistair Polhill who was a pupil at the school from 14th September 1971 to 25th October 1973. Smaller size copies of the prints can be seen in the museum in the Grenham House file.

Alistair would be happy to hear from anyone who attended the school around the time he was a pupil there. Contact the museum for details.



Alistair Polhill Presenting Photographs to BHT Museum