



BIRCHINGTON HERITAGE TRUST

Preserving the past for the future

Newsletter

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Welcome to the Winter Edition of the Trust's Newsletter.

NOTICEBOARD

Forthcoming Events:

Thursday 27 February 2025 – “Oh Yes It Is!” – the story of Pantomime with Linda McCann.

Thursday 24 April 2025 – Quiz Night with Doug and Ann Holmes.

All the Trust's events are held at The Centre, Alpha Road, Birchington starting at 7.30pm. The bar is open unless otherwise stated.

Saturday 17 May 2025 - The Trust will take part in Birchington's "*Leisure Show*" which returns to The Centre after a very successful event last year. Look out for further information in the local press and the Parish Council's Community Ad magazine.

Do you have a few hours a month to spare? We are looking for someone to take on the role of *Event Co-ordinator* for the Trust. If you are interested in supporting the Trust in this way please contact me for an informal discussion.

Subscriptions – a reminder that any non-member who applies to join the Trust before 1 May this year will have their membership extended to 30 April 2026. For existing members please don't forget to renew your annual subscription on 1 May 2025. Rates are unchanged. We rely on subscriptions to help run the museum and we look forward to your continued support.

2025 Calendar – we still have some calendars available to buy from the museum. Now reduced from £6 to just £2 each. They feature beautiful paintings by local artists Dr Wolsey Sloan and Charlie Smart.

In this edition we feature historic information about pest and vermin control, plus a fascinating story about the former "Wax House" in All Saint's churchyard. The Birchington "alphabet" continues and links to a famous Barrister who lived in Birchington at the turn of the 20th Century until his death in 1923.

I hope you find this edition interesting. If you would like to contribute an article please get in touch.

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From the Archives

Vermin and its Destruction

The Trust's archives contain a wealth of information giving a fascinating glimpse into our past. I recently unearthed the following piece about "vermin"; the dictionary definition for this is: "*mammals and birds injurious to game or crops etc.; noxious or parasitic worms or insects; vile persons*".

Legislation to control vermin dates back to Tudor times. In 1533 an Act of Parliament was passed which required every parish to provide itself with a net for the destruction of "rooks, crows and choughs". Payment was set at twopence for every 12 birds destroyed. Payment was made to incentivise citizens to help control these "pests".

The Act was renewed in 1566. Wardens were to assess holders of land or tithe for the destruction of "vermin". A fund was required for paying a penny for every three heads of old "rooks, crows, choughs and pyes" (magpies). The eggs of the birds were to be shown to the wardens.

Further renewals of the legislation took place in 1572 and 1597-98. In Birchington, the Churchwardens discharged the duty. The first mention of a payment for the killing of vermin was in 1670, when it was made for the killing of a "poulcatt" (polecat).

Quite shocking for us today, but the records show that in 1698 payment was made to Mr Peters for killing six dozen (72) sparrows. In 1702, 103 dozen (1,236) sparrows were killed along with 4 "poulcatts" and 16 hedgehogs.

Killing of vermin continued on a huge scale. 4,173 rats were killed in 1773, at a cost of £8-12s-0d (£8.62p). In 1835, 20,376 sparrows were killed at a cost of £15-3s-4d (£15.16p). Records show that sparrowhawks, kites and snakes were also killed in the parish.

Rooks and "whezells" (weasels) were also caught and destroyed, as were "baggers" (badgers) and "puttises" (stoat).

Some of these are no longer seen in the parish or even in Thanet. There is no mention of killing foxes, probably because these were hunted by the gentry and so the killing of foxes by ordinary people was forbidden. The Hunt often met in Birchington Square and the Boxing Day Meet was an event which attracted a large following from all over Thanet and East Kent.

Fortunately today, we have a more enlightened attitude to what had been regarded as vermin. For example, the polecat (*below*) is protected. It is roughly the size of a ferret - its domesticated cousin. Brought to the brink of extinction through persecution, the polecat has been undergoing a recovery recently and can be found in Wales, parts of Scotland and central, southern and eastern England.



Some legislation to deal with vermin remains. The Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949, which repealed a previous 1919 Act, deals with rats and mice. It imposes a duty on every local authority to take such steps as may be necessary to secure as far as practicable that their district is kept free from rats and mice. They must carry out inspections and enforce the duties of owners and occupiers of land under the provisions of the Act.



A 1920's
"Nipper"
rat/mouse trap
from the Trust's
collection

From Wax House to Garden of Remembrance?

If you enter the grounds of All Saints Church via the Lych Gate and follow the wall on the right, you will reach the north corner of the churchyard. There, you will find an area fenced off, which, until recently, was completely overgrown (see photo below).



Two volunteers from the War Graves Guardian's Group have been clearing this area and the remains of a building, constructed from stone, possibly Kent Ragstone, are now clearly visible once again.

Church records show that in the 1500's there stood a Wax House on this site. This appears to be the first written reference, although in the 1400's there is mention of some parishioners leaving money in their will to purchase wax for the 'Lights' of the altar and church. Wax candles and tapers were an important commodity and needed to light the church and adorn the many altars to the different Saints. As wax was expensive, all old and used candles were melted down and reused with fresh wicks. The records state that this task was carried out by the 'Chaundler' who worked at 'strekyng' – old English for casting or moulding the candles and tapers. Supply of wax was also given to the church in payment of annual rent of church land.

Up until the Reformation, All Saints would have had candles lighting up the church and images of many saints. During the Reformation, (circa 1530-1550), the use of candles was dramatically reduced as images were pulled down and lighting candles at altars was forbidden.

Church records refer to the Wax House being demolished in the late 1700's, although candles continued to be used to provide light in churches up to about 1904, when gas standards were introduced.

Subsequently, this site and the one to the left have had various uses. In the late 1800's there existed a Mausoleum, to hold coffins waiting to be buried. In 1884 John Bristow, a carpenter and undertaker was paid to build a 'new tool house' for the gardener's tools. The volunteers have also found some broken pieces of a headstone in the area adjoining the Wax House. The recorded inscription states: '*In ever loving memory of my dear wife Phyllis Evelyn Marks, who passed away 5th August 1935 aged 43 years*'. The plot map records also refer to a "Garden of Remembrance" against this entry. Maybe the large rectangular area in the centre could be a flower bed or the grave of Mrs Marks, but more records need to be checked to confirm this. (see photo below).



The volunteers are continuing to clear the overgrowth on the left-hand side and, so far, have discovered another row of brick shaped stones in the ground. They wish to find out as much information as possible and would be very interested in hearing from anyone who can recall any outbuildings or gardens in this area of the churchyard. Please contact via email: waxhouse@binternet.com

(I am indebted to the two volunteers for this and look forward to a follow up article in due course Ed.)

Sir Charles Frederick Gill KC

Charles Frederick Gill, the son of Charles Gill, of Dublin, the elder brother of Mr. Arthur Gill, the Metropolitan Police Magistrate, was born on 10 June 1851, and educated at the Royal School, Dungannon. He was intended for Dublin University, but preferred to take up farming, a subject in which he retained an interest through life. It is said that an accidental visit to the Old Bailey in company with some school friends who were reading for the Bar, inspired him with a sudden resolution to follow their example. He was called in 1874 by the Middle Temple, of which he became a Bencher in 1905 and Lent Reader in 1919.

Gill's first notable success, which made his name familiar to every newspaper reader and must have brought him an enormous amount of work, was his defence in 1890 before the Recorder of London, Sir Thomas Chambers, of an individual named Butterfield, charged with the criminal libel of Mr. Harry Marks. Sir Charles Russell (afterwards Lord Russell of Killowen) led for the prosecution. That great advocate, then near the close of his career at the Bar, probably never had a tougher fight than with the comparatively youthful junior, who beat him handsomely at his own game. Gill's cross examination of Mr. Marks was highly approved by the Bar, and all Russell's eloquence failed to convince the jury, who brought in a verdict of "Not guilty".

About this time Gill again fought Russell in a drawn out battle in the divorce proceedings between Miss Florence St. John and her husband, M. Marius, in which he appeared for the latter in 1890. The following year he acted as junior to Sir William Gordon-Cumming, in the Tranby Croft Baccarat case, perhaps the most sensational cause of celebration of his forensic career. In 1895 he was the prosecutor in one of the famous Oscar Wilde trials at the Old Bailey.

In 1899 Gill resigned the office of senior counsel to the Treasury on taking silk, and his name thenceforth appeared less in the public eye. He limited his appearances in court to

cases in which his services were specially desired.

His first appearance in an important criminal trial was in December 1920, when he successfully led for the Crown in the Eastbourne beach murder trial. His opinion was to the end constantly sought in criminal matters which never saw the light of publicity. He invariably subjected facts to a system of detailed analysis that seemed to make it impossible for the truth to be hidden.

He was knighted in 1921.

Sir Frederick was living at "Orion" in Nasmyth Road in 1903 with his wife, son and four servants. He died aged 71 on 22 February 1923 and is buried in All Saint's churchyard.

Birchington "Alphabet" – N

NASMYTH ROAD

Running parallel to Coleman's Stairs Road and named after the Scottish portrait and landscape painter Alexander Nasmyth (1758-1840). This is one of the roads named after famous poets and painters by John Taylor (1818-1884) the original architect and surveyor of the Cliff End Estate development of 1878 onwards. Although the plots sold, they were initially purchased mainly for investment and building was slow, gradually increasing from the early 1900s onwards. The first to be built in Nasmyth Road was "Orion", now 1 Coleman's Stairs Road, which records show was in existence by 1893. At that time, it had an elevated second-storey veranda surrounding a 360° lookout and large landscaped grounds. The building has since been modified and the garden sub-divided for other properties. The prominence of the 'bungalow' is illustrated by its past prestigious residents; Sir Edward Henry (the Right Hon. Lord) Carson (1854-1935), Brevet Lieut. Colonel George Ingoldsby Phillips (1866-1936) and Sir Charles Frederick Gill KC (1851-1923).

[Information is from the Trust's Archives; no responsibility is accepted for errors or omissions].