



# Birchington Heritage Trust

Reg. Charity No.1099250

## ***LOCKDOWN NEWS SHEET***

### **March 2021**

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Cash strapped councils seem to increasingly rely on volunteers to cover services that were once the responsibility of the local authority.

Litter picks by groups have been particularly appreciated. The group established to replace the Minnis Bay shelters is another. Then we have those dedicated folk who maintain the flower beds in the Station Approach area. Others have raised our morale in other ways. Knitted figures have graced the tops of pillar boxes at Christmas. Angela & Steve Wright have kept us updated on the 'bears exploits' in Queens Avenue. We thank you, and all others who have raised our spirits.



Flower bed near the station

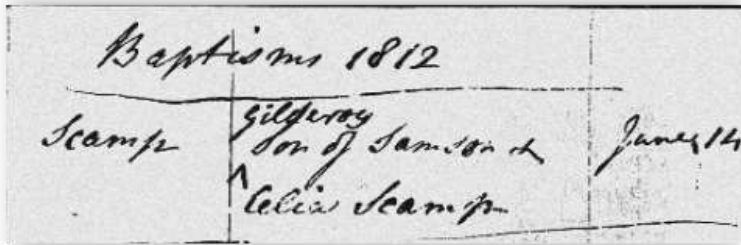


Nativity scene in Station Road at Christmas (2020)

## The Kentish Gypsy King

While searching through my copy of 'A History of the Ville of Birchington' by J.P. Barrett, published in 1893, I came across a brief mention of a Kentish Gypsy King with Birchington connections, so decided to do some investigating.

Gilderoy Scamp was baptized at All Saints, Birchington, on the 14<sup>th</sup> June 1812, son of Samuel and Celia.

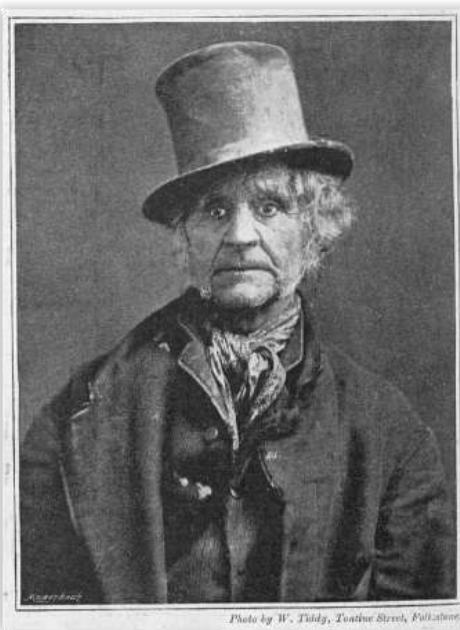


The Scamps were part of a large Kentish family of gypsies. Gilderoy's was the only entry I have found in Birchington, although there were several in St. Nicholas, St. John Margate, and

St. Laurence. The name 'Gilderoy' is a variant of the Irish Gaelic 'Gilroy' meaning son of the red-headed.

He married Katherine Barton, and they had nine children. Gilderoy earned a living as a knife grinder, and occasionally as a horse dealer. The family travelled around most of Kent, and I found mention of them in several Kentish newspapers, usually when he appeared in court for minor misdemeanors. Eventually Gilderoy and his wife settled in Folkestone. When, and how, he obtained his title of King of the Kentish Gypsies I don't know, perhaps it was connected with the article below.

Gilderoy was well known for his battered top hat, and I was lucky to find this photograph of him, taken by a Folkestone photographer, in The London Sketch. Then, I came across an article telling the story of how he acquired the hat.



The newspaper article states 'The late Baron Rothschild was out canvassing. He happened to meet Mr. Gilderoy Scamp, a travelling tinker (who with his pony and trap in which was fixed a grindstone with a treadle) was going his rounds shouting "scissors to grind"'.  
The baron was duly introduced to Scamp. Said the Baron "I am glad to meet you, my friend. I want your vote". The tinker (a good old soul) possessed a sense of humour, and this was proved when he replied "Yes baron, you shall have my vote, but on one condition – that we exchange hats".

The baron smiled and entering into the humorous audacity of the tinker said "Game! We will exchange hats as you suggest." The Baron was wearing a white topper, and Gilderoy Scamp a black 'long-sleever'. It was found the hats fitted to a T on both craniums. The budding member of Parliament went his way crowned with the tinker's (no

Photo by W. Tiddy, Tenthue Street, Folkestone.

doubt) well-seasoned topper, and the tinker, now the happiest man in the town of Folkestone, crowned with the Barons' white hat, crying the while "scissors to grind."

If the Victoria Cross had been awarded there could not have been more 'to-do' than when it became known that Gilderoy Scamp, Folkestone's Gipsy tinker, had been crowned with the Baron's white topper, which the tinker wore for many years.'

Gilderoy Scamp died in Folkestone in May 1893, at the age of 81, and was buried at Hawkinge, overlooking the countryside he loved.

<i>Gilderoy Scamp</i> No. 386.	<i>Folkestone</i>	<i>May</i> <i>27<sup>th</sup></i> <i>1893.</i>	<i>81</i> <i>Years</i>	<i>William</i> <i>Leff</i> <i>Rector</i>
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I never did find the article I was looking for in the Birchington history book, but instead found an interesting character, and I hope you enjoyed reading about him, and we can truthfully boast that we had a Kentish King baptised in our village church.



This is a picture of a knife grinder similar to one which used to travel around Margate when I was a child. We would watch, fascinated, as he went about his work.

Janet Robinson.

Here are a few old newspaper reports which caught my eye, illustrated with pictures from the Birchington Heritage Society collection or from the internet.

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### **DUCKING A WOMAN BEATER** – Illustrated Police News 5<sup>th</sup> June 1909.

A trampling hawker was sentenced at Margate on Saturday to fourteen days hard labour, in addition to the punishment he had already received.

He had been seen the previous afternoon brutally kicking a woman about in Birchington Square.



Augustus Pointer, a workman, taking the law into his own hands, roundly thrashed the woman beater.

A hostile crowd of men and women then carried him to a pond and threw him into it. Emerging from the stagnant water – he used such bad language that a constable who had arrived on the scene took him into custody.

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### **DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI** – Illustrated London News 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1883

Assuredly pertaining to *a* – if not *the* – Silly Season is the complaint of the gentleman who writes to the papers to say that one day last May he walked over from Margate to Birchington to visit the grave of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who is buried in the churchyard there. He sought in vain for a tombstone bearing the deceased painter's name; and none of the inhabitants knew where his grave lay, or were familiar with his name. It was only "by chance application to the sexton" that the



inquisitive gentleman had one of the number of grass covered mounds pointed out to him as Rossetti's resting-place.

Why did not the inquisitive gentleman *begin* the operations by asking the sexton where the grave was? **How on earth could the unsophisticated rustics of Birchington-on-Sea be expected to know anything about Dante Gabriel Rossetti?** The gentleman should have recalled the story of the late Mr. Roebuck telling the agricultural labourer that the great Duke of Wellington was dead. "I'm mortal sorry for he," replied the husbandman; "but who was he?"

*(Rossetti only lived in Birchington for 65 days before his death, and died on the 9<sup>th</sup> April 1882. Probably the headstone was not in place at the time of this article, so I think we can forgive the*

*'rustics.'* How many of today's residents would know where to find the grave?)



**MRS JOHN WOOD** – Illustrated London News 26<sup>th</sup> April 1890.



“The favourite relaxation of Mrs. John Wood, the celebrated actress, is kite-flying. She has a bungalow at Birchington, and from there has frequent trials of this harmless and healthy sport.”

So, who was Mrs John Wood?

Matilda Charlotte Vining was born in 1831 in Liverpool, into a well-known theatrical family. She became an actress with a genius for comedy. She married a fellow actor, Mr. John Wood, and the couple spent twelve years working in America, and had a daughter. The couple separated, and Matilda returned to England where she continued as an actress and also as a theatre manager.

Matilda bought a bungalow in Birchington as a holiday home, before moving here permanently. The bungalow was called ‘Dilkoosha’ and was in Spencer Road. The building is no longer there, but was somewhere in the area between Beresford Gap slipway and the Tower bungalows. In the 1911 census she was living there with a house keeper, servant and butler.

Mrs. John Wood died on the 11<sup>th</sup> January 1915, aged 83, at her home in Birchington, after being in poor health for five years.

I have tried to find information on kite flying in Birchington at this time, and the ‘trials’ mentioned, but have had no success.

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**DISCOVERY OF SMUGGLERS’ CAVES** – Cotton Factory Times 30<sup>th</sup> July 1886.

Some extensive subterranean caverns have just been discovered by the Rev. H.A. Thorne, beneath a garden at the rear of a house occupied by him at Westfield, Birchington-on-Sea. When lowering a bucket down a well in the garden, the bucket, which was swinging, mysteriously disappeared in the side of the well. This aroused the curiosity of Mr. Thorne, who himself descended, and discovered extensive excavations, supposed to have been made by smugglers. The place has since



been thoroughly examined, and subterranean passages and chambers representing 20,000 cubic feet of space found to exist.

The entrance on the side of the well is 32 feet below the surface, and the chambers are very roomy, their height being 8ft and upwards. One very long passage leads off in the direction of the shore, which seems to indicate that the occupants contemplated opening up underground communications with the sea, which,

however, they failed to accomplish.

*The house is on Canterbury Road, at its junction with Park Road. Being such a distance from the sea, it is more likely that the tunnels were built to join up with a cellar in a nearby property. The newspaper was established in 1885, aimed at cotton mill workers in Lancashire and Cheshire.*