



# Birchington Heritage Trust

Reg. Charity No.1099250

## ***LOCKDOWN NEWS SHEET***

**January 2021**

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### The Great Stink of 1898

Visitors flocked to Birchington after a 10 ton whale was washed up on the beach between Minnis Bay and Reculver in August 1898.

“News of the unusual arrival soon spread,” reported the Illustrated London News. “On Friday, Saturday and Sunday, brakes, motor-cars, bicycles and every kind of vehicle brought shoals of people from all parts to gaze upon the stranded monster. Pedestrians too, flocked to the scene in goodly numbers.”

The 40-ft long whale had a large gash in its side believed to have been inflicted by a harpoon or a steamship's propeller, was dead before it became stranded.

“It continued to attract the curious until the 23<sup>rd</sup> August,” said the account, “when inevitable natural chemical processes rendered the visitor no longer desirable,” It stank!

The smell was so bad the rural district council decided to burn it.

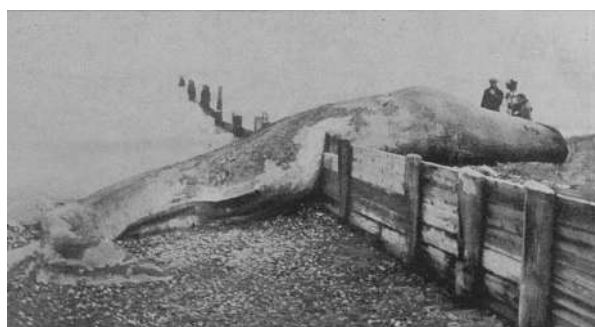
“The whale was deluged with petrol, and this together with the cetacean's own inflammable properties, rendered it a very credible bonfire on the beach.” Unfortunately the tide came in and put the fire out!

No-one could be found to cut up the whale, and in desperation the Sanitary Inspector suggested blowing it up with dynamite, but the council feared the explosion would damage the groynes and the cost of repairing them would be considerable.

It was suggested the onus should fall on the owner, Mr R. Osmond, a rag and bone dealer of Ramsgate, who had bought the whale for ten shillings. The surveyor pointed out it was not on his land, therefore he was not responsible.

After Mr Osmond relinquished his rights, the surveyor travelled to the Natural History Museum in South Kensington to seek advice. He was referred to Mr Garrod of Camden Town, a dealer in curiosities, who agreed to separate the carcass from the skeleton on condition the council removed and disposed of the flesh.

A few days later Garrod's men set to work. Council workers buried the flesh, Mr Garrod had his skeleton and the Great Stink of 1898 was over.

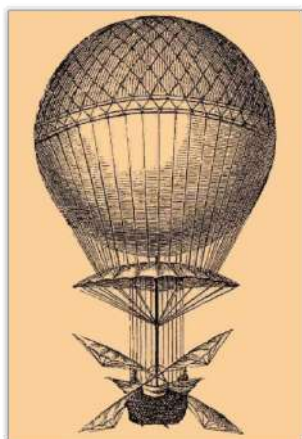


Beached whale August 1898 between Minnis Bay & Reculver

## DESCENT OF A BALLOON NEAR BIRCHINGTON

The information for the local part of this article is taken from a newspaper report in Keeble's Gazette of 18<sup>th</sup> August 1888. This was an early local Thanet newspaper. It describes the local excitement when a hot air balloon made a crash landing in the area. In the article the name of the balloonist is given as Simmonds, but his name was actually Joseph Simmons, without the 'd' and that is the spelling I will use. I have been unable to find a picture of the actual balloon involved so I am just using an illustration of a Victorian balloon.

### **THE 'COSMO' BALLOON – August 18<sup>th</sup> 1888**



*The appearance of a balloon in the vicinity of Birchington and Westgate on Monday evening, created quite a sensation and as the 'Cosmo' (for such it proved to be) was evidently making its descent, there was a stampede of bicycles and flies and vehicles of every description, as well as a motley collection of pedestrians, who took the shortest cut to the neighbourhood of the strange visitor, which was brought to earth a few yards from the little church of Acol.*



*The Cosmo, which is the largest balloon in the world, left the Irish Exhibition at Olympia just before half-past five (pm) with Mr. Simmons and five passengers, with the intention of crossing the Channel to Vienna, or at any rate to Calais. As the balloon holds 62,000 cubic feet of gas, the work of inflation occupied about five hours and it took a hundred men just before starting to hold it down.*

*Mr. Simmons is a middle-aged wiry looking, iron-grey whiskered man wearing a frock coat and a wide-awake hat. His balloon is made of a white material, and the car, which will seat nine passengers, is constructed of a strong iron mesh.*

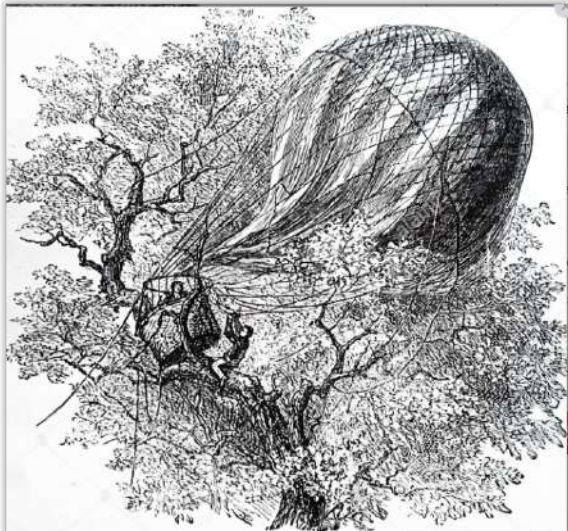
*The spot where the balloon came down is very near a number of small cottages, one of which had a narrow escape of having its roof destroyed by the drag-rope. The district is a rather out of the way one, but a few minutes after the descent there were no less than 500 persons present. Upon leaving the car it was found that an aperture about two feet long had been made in the silk, probably by coming in contact with the trees.*



(The landing happened in a wheat field belonging to Cleve Court).

An article in the London Standard describes the flight. Within three minutes of its release the Cosmo attained an altitude of twelve hundred feet, and journeyed on over South Kensington, and the Thames at Charring Cross. Within forty minutes they had travelled 25 miles, and reached a height of 6,000 feet., passing Tilbury Docks, reaching the Medway by 6.10pm, then over Chatham and Faversham.

At this point Mr. Simmons enquired if all the passengers were wanting to carry on with the flight across the Channel, or, if anyone wished to alight now, he would approach within two or three feet of the earth and drop them safely, and two of them agreed to this. In dropping however, they got into a current which bore them rapidly to the North, towards the sea, making further descent



impracticable. Passing Herne Bay, they drifted slowly back to land, with the balloon rotating considerably. Mr. Simmons decided that for safety he would land. The valve was opened for the first time, and they rapidly approached land, coming down in a field. The grapnel failed to hold and they rushed on, the car (basket) striking a rail fence and tearing down one of the sections. A small quantity of the ballast was thrown out, and the balloon rose to the topmost branches of a tree, which bent beneath its weight. By that time several of the locals had reached the spot and hauled them down, leaving the grapnel in the branches of another tree.

The newspaper report tells us about one of the passengers.

*Among the passengers was a young Parsee, who was in the Olympia at the time, and who decided to travel in the balloon upon very short notice, being compelled to purchase an overcoat in the grounds. The latter requisite was found to be highly necessary, for during the voyage the thermometer went down to as low as 28 degrees, or four degrees of frost. The gay young Indian appeared to enjoy his adventure immensely, and upon alighting gave an excellent exhibition of his knowledge of the English language to an admiring group of the fair sex.*

Joseph Simmons was most anxious about the Cosmo balloon, and would not consent to leave it until he had seen it safely tucked away at the Birchington Railway Station, ready for transit the next day. Subsequently he was taken to Margate by a Westgate gentleman, spent the night at the White Hart Hotel and travelled to Town on Tuesday morning with his balloon.

*In the course of an interview, Mr. Simmons was asked if he considered ballooning a dangerous mode of travelling, he replied in the affirmative and stated that when going upon a voyage he always considered whether he was taking his life in his hands. The voyage on Monday was described as a particularly dangerous one.*

Joseph Simmons stated that he was paid twenty pounds by the directors of the exhibition for an ascent in their grounds, and that each passenger paid five pounds for their 'fare', if landed in England, and twenty-five pounds if disembarked on the Continent.

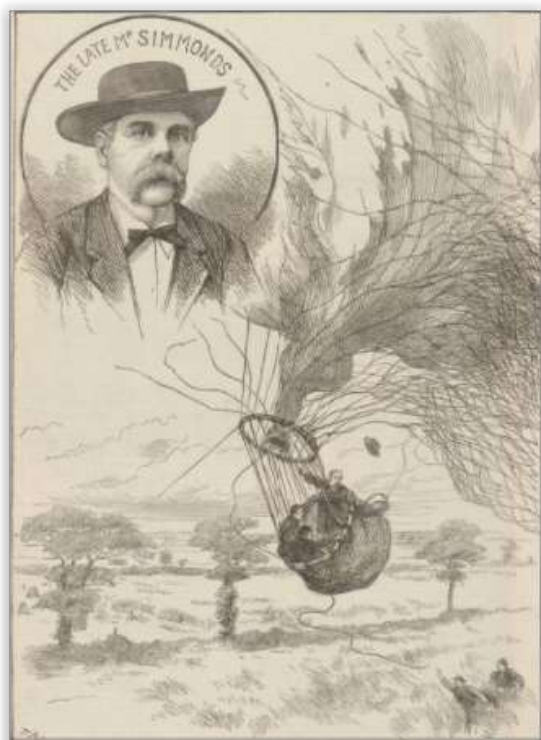
During a period of thirty years he had made no less than 192 successful ascents.

Only two weeks later Joseph Simmons was involved in another balloon accident, and sadly, this time he lost his life.

A report states that on the 27<sup>th</sup> August 1888, Simmons with two companions, Horace Field, a photographer from Brighton, and Henry Alexander Miers, an assistant at the Natural History Museum, took off from Olympia Exhibition in London. They intended to cross the English Channel and ultimately reach Vienna. The winds turned unfavourable and they followed the Great Eastern Railway line as far as Witham. Simmons then decided to abandon the attempt, and land.

At first there were too many houses in the area to land, but he then identified a barley field in Ulting, which seemed to be a suitable landing spot. A newspaper later disparagingly described it as a “bleak spot”. As they tried to land, a grappling iron was thrown out but failed to connect with the ground, and became entangled in a tree. The balloon hit the ground, bounced two or three times, and then burst, plunging the basket to the ground.

Joseph Simmons died at the scene, Field and Miers were both badly injured and taken to a nearby house from where they later gave evidence to the Coroner and a jury. Percival Spencer, a director of a balloon manufacturers, gave evidence to the inquest that he considered that the main cause of the accident was a sudden gust of wind, which caused the balloon to rip open.



Simmons was buried at South Norwood, where the funeral was reported to have been attended by many intrepid ‘aeronauts’.



During Joseph Simmons interview, following the crash landing at Acol, he mentioned that in 1874 he had been employed to lift Groof, the unfortunate Chelsea “flying man” from the Cremorne Gardens.

Who was Groof? Why was he called the flying man?

**Vincent De Groof the Flying Man** information from various newspapers and the Londonist.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> June 1874 a peculiar sight could be spied over Chelsea. A hot-air balloon hovered a kilometer above the ground with the most curious of payloads dangling beneath, a gigantic bat with a human at its controls.

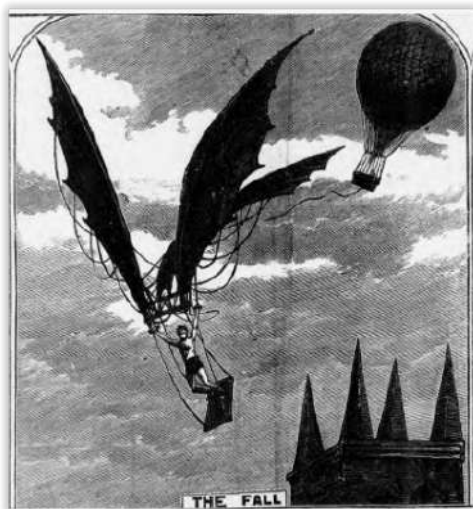
This Victorian Batman was M Vincent de Groof, otherwise known as "The Flying Man". Newspaper reports of this ambitious individual contradict each other. He was either Belgian, French or Dutch, and aged 35 or 36, he had had some success with his flying machine on the continent, or else he had rarely left the ground.



Whatever the details of his biography, he was now set on piloting his fragile wings through the skies of Chelsea.

The balloon, known as Czar, had taken off from Cremorne Pleasure Gardens, its dangling cargo was built from cane and waterproof silk, with a complex network

of ropes and pulley to be operated by de Groof. At some point in the flight, de Groof was to cut the cord and part-flap, part-glide his contraption back to earth.



After hovering over the Thames for some time, the balloon pilot reduced the height to around 90 metres in preparation for separation. The decent came so low, in fact, that de Groof's bat contraption was swinging dangerously close to the tower of St. Luke's church, just north of King's Road.

At this point the press reports again disagree. Perhaps sensing he would hit the church, perhaps by accident, or maybe because he was ready to begin his stunt, de Groof cut the rope.

His batwings immediately flipped over and the unfortunate aeronaut tumbled to the ground, landing in what is now Sydney Street. Some accounts suggest that he was killed instantly, others that he lived long enough to be carried to Chelsea hospital. The inquest described he had a broken neck and caved-in-skull.

There was almost a second tragedy. As soon as de Groof was loosed to his death, the unburdened balloon shot into the air, eventually reaching such a height that the pilot, Mr. Joseph Simmons, of Regent Street, passed out. On regaining consciousness, he found himself over Victoria Park, eventually coming down on railway tracks a mile from Chingford, narrowly missing a train.

