



## FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

### NEWSLETTER No. 31 – Summer 2007

#### CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F. Taylor

At the March meeting we had an illustrated talk by Paul Holt entitled 'Shakespeare Cliff, Peoples History.' Paul is the warden at Samphire Hoe and with his colleague plus fourteen volunteers they have researched the history of the area (1843-1973), which will eventually be published.

During the building of the railway between Folkestone and Dover (1843), Round Down Hill near Shakespeare Cliff was blown up (26<sup>th</sup> January 1843) to clear the way for the railway track. The chalk came tumbling down into the sea and created a platform, which was used for the first attempt to build a Channel Tunnel in 1882. So Samphire Hoe was not the first man made bit of headland! After work stopped on the tunnel in the 1890's a coal shaft was sunk on the site. This was prompted by the fact that coal had been found in Northern France in 1896. The coal at Shakespeare was poor quality and had no commercial use so the mine closed and the colliery chimney was demolished in 1914. Charlie Gatehouse who was born 1862 in a wooden hut on the beach nearby had a job in the engine house at the coalmine. After the mine closed he got a caretaker's job looking after the buildings. Charlie subsequently moved his wife Elizabeth and family of ten children from the wooden hut on the beach into the old cement shed.

I have fond memories of the Warren and the old coalmine site, my family picnicked and camped in the Warren from 1946 to 1960. At Whit-sun weekend we would pitch our tent just back from the sea wall at the bottom of the Royal Oak steps, where we would leave it for the whole summer spending every weekend and school holiday camping. On occasions when the tide was out I would take a walk along the beach to the old coalmine, invariably Mr Gatehouse was sitting on his bench seat watching the ships going up and down the channel, he would tell me about the ships passing by and how often they went up and down the channel. At 4 pm Mrs Gatehouse would come out with tea and fruitcake for both of us. I also got to know Don MacLellan very well as he was brought up by the Gatehouse's. Big Don as he was known worked in the Railway Company's Marine workshops in Snargate Street, Dover, as a fitter. In about 1955 the sea wall was extended towards Dover past the headland where Don had his boathouse, consequently he had to give it up. I purchased some of his fishing nets and he moved his boat to the Green's boathouse, which was back towards Folkestone. With Mr Gatehouse dying in 1951 the day before his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and the extension of the sea wall saw the end of the Gatehouse settlement in the Warren.

Sixty-six people attended the meeting, four of whom were visitors.

At the April meeting we welcomed back Richard Filmer who gave us his illustrated talk on Kentish Trades. Richard started by saying the basic material is wood and that it takes 1000 oak trees to build a Man of War. Chestnut is used for producing poles and brushwood by either

pollarding whereby the trees were beheaded at a certain height so that they would produce a bushy crown of young growth, or by coppicing, which since 16<sup>th</sup> century has been an excellent form of woodland management. The wood is cut just above ground level and the stools quickly throw up new straight vigorous shoots, which after several years depending upon the diameter of poles required are cut down to ground level and the process repeated.

Ash is used for hay rake making, hazel wood is used to make waffles, and thatch roofs are held down with hazel. Basket makers use willow. Richard also spoke about making gunpowder and charcoal burning, the work of wheelwrights, Mr Greenstreet the boot maker from Dover, cricket ball making, paper making in Kent since Elizabethan times, cider making and stilt walking. Sixty-one people attended the meeting three of whom were visitors.

The May meeting was an illustrated talk on Great Castles, Houses and Gardens in Kent by Anthea Bryant. Among the places Anthea talked about were: Saltwood, Lympe, and Scotney Castles, Knole Court, Grombridge Place, Hever Castle, Eastwell Manor, Cissinghurst, Smallhythe, Walmer Castle, Port Lympe, Mount Ephraim and Leeds Castle. Sixty-two people attended the meeting one of whom was a visitor.

**Dates for your diary:** A coffee morning has been arranged for Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> June 11am at the Langhorne Hotel, Langhorne Gardens.

**Leas Cliff Hall 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday.** June and Ken Paine will present their Leas Cliff Hall History from 15<sup>th</sup> July to 21<sup>st</sup> July. A complete collection of Archive photographs and memorabilia will be on display from 10am to 4pm. There will also be two tours of the building each day at 11am and 2pm. Booking will be essential, details from the Leas Cliff Hall Box Office. There will also be a photograph display in the Foyer, copy photographs and captions courtesy of myself.

We would like to welcome our new members: Mr & Mrs Hignett, Mrs Beryl Barker and Mr William S. Cleary.  
A.F.T.

#### **Michael Bentine in Folkestone**

#### **Potted Biography of Michael Bentine**



Michael Bentine



Pop, c.1915.



Ma, c. 1916.

Michael Bentine CBE (26 January 1922 - 26 November 1996) was a comedian, comic actor, and member of the Goons. Bentine was born in Watford, Hertfordshire, of Anglo-Peruvian parentage and grew up in Folkestone, Kent. He was educated at Eton College. He spoke fluent Spanish and French. His father was an early aeronautical engineer for Sopwith aircraft during and after World War I.

Michael Bentine volunteered for all of the services in World War II but was initially rejected on account of his Peruvian heritage. Pursuing an acting career he joined a touring stage company, and was performing a Shakespearean play in Hyde Park (dressed in doublet and hose) when two Military Policemen from the RAF marched on stage and arrested him for desertion. Unbeknownst to him whilst touring with his company a conscription notice had been following him around for a month. Following his RAF training he was due to be sent to Canada to receive new aircraft, during the preparatory medical all the flight cadets from his class were to receive inoculation for Typhoid. Being second to last in line the vaccine ran out and the medical orderlies had to refill the bottle in order to inoculate him and the last cadet in the line, unfortunately by error the bottle was refilled with a pure Typhoid culture, the other cadet died immediately and Bentine was in a coma for six weeks. This error led him to suffer from Myopia, which rendered him grounded from his flying duties. Having been physically disqualified from flying he was transferred to RAF intelligence and was seconded to MI9, a unit that supported resistance movements and escape attempts across occupied Europe, his superior officer was Colditz escapee Airey Neave. For a period of time in 1944 he was based at Hawkinge, he recounts in his autobiography how he and his pilot were very nearly shot down a number of times en-route to their new posting. Flying in an old Sopwith Pup a number of anti-aircraft batteries opened fire on them, mistaking the drone of the Sopwith engine for that of a V-1 flying bomb.

Following the war he took up acting again, this time specialising in Comedy and particularly in off the wall humour. Having worked on his own project *It's a Square World* in 1951 he collaborated with Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe and Peter Sellers in founding the *Goon Show*. He only appeared in the first 38 episodes, but made a return to the cast to appear in the *Goon Show* film *Down among the Z men*. He left the *Goon Show* to work on his own radio series.

A television presenter and writer, he also led the first Hovercraft expedition up the Amazon river during the 1960's, was regarded as a crack shot with the Pistol and helped develop the idea of founding a counter-terrorist unit within 22 SAS, consequently he was one of the first non-SAS person to fire a weapon inside the close quarters battle training house in Hereford. Amongst other pursuits Michael Bentine was also interested in Parapsychology and wrote two books on his research into paranormal phenomena.



#### **Michael Bentine's Childhood Memoirs of Folkestone**

The Bentine family moved to Folkestone in 1923, on account that "*Folkestone, high up on its chalk cliffs, is marvellous for asthma.*" Bentine's father suffered from severe bronchial asthma, and it was following the above recommendation from his specialist that the family decided to move to the south coast. Initially the breeze coming from the channel caused his asthma to get worse, but having strained their resources in the expensive move from Watford to Folkestone, the family were unable to move anywhere else and gradually the father became acclimatized to the local air, only suffering severe attacks once a month.

At first the Bentine family, plus cook and nanny, moved into rented accommodation at the Elysee Mansions in Westbourne Gardens. He recalls living in the middle house of a "*Tall, yellow-and-red-striped brick block of terraced Victorian buildings.*"

Michaels' initial observations of the local populace and the less than warm welcome they initially supplied, led him to declare that the tolerance of Folkestonians made the prejudicial Southerners seem comparatively liberal. It would appear that South Americans were an unusual phenomena in 1920's Folkestone. However the family settled in on account of what Bentine described as the super-snobbery of the locals who accepted them as 'retired gentfolk' in accordance with their income. A further aid to their integration into social circles was the comical and tongue in cheek inferences that his mother made of the fathers descent from the Spanish Conquistadors; this the locals equated with being members of the Spanish nobility. As a result of this social elevation Mother Bentine was invited to join the bridge club, a game at which she excelled, further boosting the family income. Later the family moved to a house in Bouverie Road West.

Following the death of an uncle in Peru the family inherited enough money to build themselves a house, a Bridge playing friend of the mother designed and built the house next to a large playing field adjoining the girls' school. The house was named *Belen* after the family home in Peru and was a spacious, white, Georgian-style house, which featured a nursery the length of the entire attic. The designer and builder of this house, whom the mother had known from her Bridge club was Seton Dahl, the architect and builder of the Leas Cliff Hall. After many happy years an offer was made for the house that they felt unable to refuse, so they moved once again into a new house built, once more, by Seton Dahl. This new house named *Rimac* was sited at the end of Pelham Gardens, at the top of Sandgate Hill, and was designed in the Dutch style with overhanging slate tiles, and windows flanked by louvred shutters. This house with its channel views led others to build around it, and held such happy memories for Michael that when he married he contemplated buying it himself.

Folkestone of the 20's and 30's was, Michael recalled, the town at its very best, it's prosperity brought about by its reputation as a fashionable resort for the well-to-do and its suitability as a retirement centre for former military officers. Then, much as now, the town was "*class-consciously divided*" between the working class east end and the more prosperous west end with its tall houses, imposing hotels and large mansions. Modern day Folkestone\*, he describes with an air of depression, as forlorn and run-down "*a once-wealthy Victorian matron fallen on hard times.*" He noted however "*mercifully, the repellent class-conscious snobbery has gone as well.*"

The Folkestone of Bentine's youth was, he described, a town still scarred by its role in the conflict of the Great War. The scars however were not apparent in the structure of the town but within the psyche of the people. He recalled a great many veterans, permanently wounded and disabled by the war residing in the town.

Apart from these observations life in Folkestone was on the whole quiet and uneventful, and many of Michael Bentine's further recollections were of personal experiences including beachcombing along the sands, playing war-games in the various relics of the Great War and trips to the pier during the season. One memory he had of the pier was of "*a 'hard-hat' diver who, for a small fee, sang 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles' while working on the bottom inside his traditional copper helmet and heavy rubberised-canvas diving suit.*"

Overall despite his memories of Folkestone's snobbery, and his two brief, but painful experiences at the hands of a local drunk GP, his memories of the town were happy ones. He relished the open air and the sheer variety of landscape that Folkestone and its immediate environs offered, from sandy and pebbled beaches, to the rolling downs and their ancient groves of trees, to the chalk cliffs and the ever-changing faces of Romney Marsh.

*\*The Modern Folkestone he is talking about is in 1992.*

Andrew Taylor

To be continued in the next Newsletter.