

BIRCHLEY AND THE RANDOLPHS OF BIDDENDEN

By H. B. THOMAS, O.B.E.

THE kindness of our member Mrs. Charles Hall¹ makes it possible to draw attention to some unrecorded features of her home at Birchley, Biddenden, and to give a provisional account of its history over the past 350 years. Of particular interest is the uncovering, during interior restorations, of an extensive range of Tudor wall paintings, including four metrical couplets. The house proves to have been the principal seat of the Randolphs of Biddenden. A grievous succession of early deaths brought the senior male line of the family to an end at the beginning of the eighteenth century ; but a surviving daughter, who took the property on marriage to the Brockmans, became a progenitor of the whole of the present wide-spread Drake-Brockman family.

Birchley had become a rented farm well over a hundred years before Hasted's day ; and this fact, coupled with its isolated position in the parish, perhaps accounts for its having so largely escaped attention. At the beginning of the present century, it had been divided into farm cottages ; and it was "grey and crumbling with age . . . the old front door . . . closely nailed up for over twenty-three years," when Sir Charles Igglesden, in the fifth volume of *A Saunter through Kent with Pen and Pencil* (1903), pp. 47-8, gives what seems to be the only notice of the house in print.²

In 1905 the property was acquired by the late Major C. E. H. Hall, R.G.A. (d. 1923) and his wife. In their hands the house has been transformed into a residence of distinction and charm. A south wing has been added which harmonizes admirably with the original buildings. These latter with the north front (illustrated by Igglesden) have been restored with skill and understanding. To-day Birchley stands once more as a fine specimen of the timber "manor" house of a substantial Wealden clothier of the 16th century ; and the whole structure clearly merits skilled architectural survey and record.

On the first floor of the house is a small interior room which may have been a granary approached by an outside stairway. When the north wall of this room came to be stripped of accumulations of white-wash on newspaper a run of some fifteen feet of Tudor wall painting was

¹ The death of Mrs. Hall on 1st March, 1954, is recorded with great regret. [EDS.]

² A portfolio, in the Society's Collections, of prints from drawings and photographs prepared by Mr. J. F. Streatfeild for the proposed revision of Hasted, contains views of the exterior of Birchley, dated 1876-7.

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revealed. Attention has recently been called to the extreme rarity of such paintings by Mr. F. H. Worsfold in *Arch. Cant.*, LXIV, p. 92.

The dominant motif of the design at Birchley has some resemblance to that illustrated from old premises at Rochester in *Arch. Cant.*, XXVIII, p. xcvi, but it is perhaps of cruder execution, nor is the surface at Birchley so closely covered with ornamentation. The whole is now much faded but black and red colours seem to have been employed.

Above as a frieze are three metrical texts in black letter, each of two lines. Reading from west to east the following can be deciphered :

**Beware of foule and fil
Kepe cleane your vessels in the lord . . . that(?) . . . kept(?) . . .**

**We are the temples of the Lord for ye are dearely bought
And they that doe defile the same shall surely com to nought**

**And as ye would that other men against should procede
Do ye the same again to them as they do stand in neede.**

The references seem to be to Isaiah lii. 11 ; 1 Corinthians vi. 19-20 ; Proverbs xxi. 13, respectively ; while the metre will be familiar as that of many of the Sternhold and Hopkins metrical psalms of 1562, a fact which may give some indication of the original date of the house. A similar rhymed text, being another adaptation of Proverbs xxi. 13, from Bazing, Cowden, is illustrated at *Arch. Cant.*, XXI, p. 104, but the script employed at Birchley is without flourishes.

On the opposite side of the room facing this wall is the main chimney stack of the house, against the east side of which is an unlit "cubby hole" closed by a rough oak door which can only be entered by crouching. Here is another text but in a much better state of preservation and colouring for it seems not to have been interfered with :

**Sake fielt I say the libing God sett him all wayes before
And then be sure that he will bless your baskett & youre store.**

The reference here is to Deuteronomy xxviii. 5.

On the surface of the "tempera" of the main wall have been scratched various names. The earliest date, without name, seems to be "1691" ; another is "S.S. 1780." "B.B." can with some certainty be regarded as the initials of Benjamin Beken the elder (c. 1723-79) who, followed by his widow Deborah, occupied the farm from about 1756 (when he paid land-tax) to 1793. He died at Birchley as the result of an accident, and is the "diligent Parish officer for more than 20 years" of his grave-stone in Biddenden churchyard ; and as a churchwarden his name is cast on the 5th and 7th bells in the church

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tower. A great-great-great-grandson in the direct male line still owns the adjoining property of High Pauls. Other names are "Elizabeth Beken," "Richard Weston," "John Mather" and (more doubtful) "Catherine Beken." The Biddenden parish registers show Catharine (bapt. 1756) and Elizabeth (bapt. 1765) as daughters of Benjamin Beken; while the former married Richard Weston in 1774. John Mather was Rector of Biddenden from 1746/7 to 1794, and witnessed Benjamin Beken's will. A close study of these *graffiti* would be of considerable interest. Evidently they were not obliterated much before the end of the 18th century; remaining fragments of newsprint might yield a clue to the date.

Much of this run of wall paintings is in a fragile condition, faint and deteriorating. Meanwhile they are receiving the greatest care, the wall being completely covered by a curtain. But they clearly call for expert examination of their execution and craftsmanship and, if possible, illustration, with a view to relating them to the few remaining specimens of this form of domestic decoration; while more letters of the texts might still be identified. Furthermore, the provenance and authorship have still to be determined of these paraphrases of pre-Authorized Version biblical texts, which (from the reference of those which are said to have disappeared at Scarletts, Cowden, *Arch. Cant.*, XXI, p. 105) seem to have been widely distributed during this period.

* * * * *

There is no mention of Birchley in the normal authorities—Hasted or *Archæologia Cantiana*. Hasted has much to say of Lessenden in Biddenden; and one is left to infer that that estate, which came to the Randolph family on the marriage of Bernard Randolph (c. 1556-1628) to Jane Boddenden, was the original Randolph seat.

On a small diamond pane in one of the ground-floor windows of the north front of Birchley is scratched in a contemporary hand "Bernard Randolph 1610." This has provided the clue for subsequent research. He is clearly Bernard Randolphe, gent., whose brass is in Biddenden church. He died in 1628, aged 72; his wife, Jane, daughter of William Boddenden, died in 1619, aged 48.

The fascia board at Birchley, inscribed WR 1632 ER BR which is described by Igglesden (*op. cit.*) is still in position. For this an entirely satisfactory solution is furnished by another brass in Biddenden church—to Bernard's eldest son, William Randolph (1589-1641), his wife Elizabeth (c. 1601-41), daughter of Stephen Curtis of Tenterden, with their eldest son Bernard (1626-47).

Such evidence as there is of the disposition of Birchley during the

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17th century comes from the wills of Bernard Randolph, 1628 (P.C.C. Barrington 50), of his son William, 1641 (P.C.C. Brent 272 and Cant. Consist. 245 (1642)), of his grandson William, 1717 (P.C.C. Whitfield 102), and of his great-grandson William, 1705/6 (Cant. Archd. 80/303).

Seemingly Bernard senior, having become a widower, had some years before his death in 1628 conveyed his principal seat, Birchley, to his eldest son William ; while " the inheritance of their deare mother " which would include Lessenden, had been settled upon the fourth son, Herbert (d. 1644). Bernard left £5 for highways between " my son William's dwelling house (sc. Birchley) and Worchinden (sc. Worsenden) Green." Bernard may have ended his days with Herbert at Lessenden ; for bequests are made to some of Herbert's men- and maid-servants, and Herbert himself was to receive " my copper and workhouse implements and hardells (sc. hurdles) and taynt (sc. wooden frame for stretching cloth) and other necessaries towards his trade of clothing where he dwells."

The eldest son, William I, who in his will describes himself as " clothier of Biddenden " died 1st December, 1641, at the early age of 52. His wife died a fortnight later. They left (in addition to six daughters) two sons, Bernard (1626-47) and William (1635-1715/6). The position of these orphaned minors was made more difficult when their uncle and guardian, Herbert I, already a widower, died in 1644. He had an only son Herbert II (d. 1685), from whose son Herbert III (d. 1724), Recorder of Canterbury and father of twenty-one children, is descended a line of Randolphs which was to give many generations of distinguished service to the Church and the University of Oxford, and continued to own Lessenden in Biddenden in Hasted's day.

Only three years later, in 1647, young Bernard died in his 21st year " before taking burden " under his father's will. By the terms of this will William II, then 12 years of age, became the heir of the senior male line of the Biddenden Randolphs. It is some reflexion on the complexities of the situation created by these deaths that there were six successive grants of administration of the will of William I. Not until William II came of full age was he able to take over his patrimony (24th February, 1655/6). His last guardian, his grandfather, Stephen Curtis, Mayor of Tenterden, had in fact already died on 12th August, 1654.

By his will, William Randolph I, having made his son Bernard his principal heir, had left to him specifically " Barkley Farm." This suggests that even before his death Birchley may have ceased to be the family seat ; certainly it may be assumed that after the death of Bernard in 1647 it was never again occupied as a Randolph home.

Hasted says that it was by William I (described as " of Canterbury ") that the seat of Burton in Kennington near Ashford was acquired " in

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the reign of Charles I."¹ The property is not referred to in his will, but substantial provision was made for the younger William, and it was perhaps with this fund that the purchase of Burton, which became the latter's seat, was completed.

The end of this senior male line of Randolphs may be read for the most part from inscriptions, now decipherable with difficulty, on stones in the floor of the south chancel of Kennington Church.

William Randolph II (1635-1715/6) married in 1658,² Dorothea daughter of Sir Richard Hardres, Bart. She died (M.I.) 15 June, 1664. William III would be her child, though, as pointed out below, the date of his birth is uncertain (probably 1662). He married at Willesborough 25 February, 1689-90, Mary daughter of Anthony Aucher, Esq.; their Canterbury Marriage Licence (22 February 1689) gives the ages of both parties at 28 years. She died (M.I.) 15 August, 1703, aged 39.

William Randolph II married again, at Great Chart, 16 November, 1665, to Abigail *née* Kneveatt, who died (M.I.) 30 May, 1728, aged 88 years. Of this second marriage a son, Richard, died young and was buried at Kennington, 6 June, 1674; while in the Kennington transcripts at Canterbury are the baptisms of two daughters (explicitly of William and Abigail), Alice (23 September, 1669) and Carolina (15 September, 1672). The latter married Colonel Johnston (M.I. died 1725) and died (M.I.) 15 August, 1743 in her 68th (*sic*) year. The elder daughter Alice married William Kingsley, Esq., and died (M.I.) 26 November, 1705 aged 44. This her age must be in error as it would make her a child of William's first wife (as is set out by Berry, *Pedigrees of Kent*, 1830, who probably deduced his dates from the M.I.). Alice Kingsley had two daughters, Alicia and Carolina, and a son William (later General) Kingsley. Ultimately on the failure of a male heir of William Randolph III, William II by his will left the Burton property to his granddaughters Alicia and Carolina Kingsley, and it was still in Kingsley hands in Hasted's day.

Although Hasted says that William III died (in 1705) *s.p.*, his will mentions three daughters, Abigail, Elizabeth and Katherine and a son, Thomas. Abigail would be the first-born, and the entry in the Kennington Registers, "Abigail Daughter of William Randolph Gent. and Mary his wife baptized March ye 19th Anno 1690/1. God grant her long life," inscribed in an especially bold hand suggests that this was regarded as an event. The baptisms of Thomas, Elizabeth and

¹ The Randolph acquisition of Burton was unknown to Philipott (*Villare Cantianum*, 1659), who gives Nevill Hall as still the owner.

² See Hardres pedigree at *Archæologia Cantiana*, IV, p. 56, where she is stated to have been born in 1637. Her M.I. at Kennington, however, gives her age as 29. The pedigree refers to her burial at "Kensington," a misprint for "Kennington." The will of William II recites a deed of settlement made 31st December, 1657, which would probably be in anticipation of this his first marriage.

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Katherine have not been traced. Tragedy continued to overtake the family, for Thomas the son died before he came of age. He may well be "Mr. Thomas Randolph of Maidstone," who was buried at Kennington. 13 December, 1710. Katherine also probably died young; she may be "Catharine Randolph of Lydden," buried at Kennington 10 January, 1713/14; Burton was by this time let, and William II the head of the house was residing at Maidstone.

Two stones¹ record the eclipse of the family.

Hic jacet corpus Gulielmi
Randolph de Burton Jun^r
Gen^r qui obiit 19 die
Novembris 1705 Aet 53²

Sub hoc saxo
Depositae sunt reliquiae

Gulielmi Randolph Armⁱ
de Burton
Regibus Car 2do Jacobo 2do
Gul^{mo} et Maria Anna
et Georgio Justiciarij
ad Pacem
Propositi vero semper tenacis
Et patriae salute
Per omnes vicissitudines
Fixe et constanter addicti
Obiit Martii 11^o
Anno Aetatis 81^{mo}
Salutis 1715

* * * * *

The extant title deeds of Birchley go back no further than 1714/5. It is disappointing that they give no information regarding the origins of Birchley, or which might point to it as the meeting place of Barkley

¹ Both are dismissed as "illegible through extreme damp" by the Rev. Philip Parsons (*The Monuments and Painted Glass of upwards of 100 Churches, chiefly in the Eastern Part of Kent*, Canterbury, 1794), who recorded the inscriptions in Kennington Church in 1789. He omits also stones, still in place, to other members of the Randolph family, viz., Mary Randolph, *née* Aucher (d. 1703), Mrs. Abigail Randolph (d. 1728), Miss Carolina Kingsley (d. 1756, aged 55). Very little of the inscription to Mrs. Caroline Johnston (d. 1743) and to General Kingsley (d. 1769) is now legible, and reference to Parsons is necessary.

² It seems probable that W.R. III's age, 53 years, is incorrect, though it is so given by Berry (*Pedigrees of Kent*, 1830), who probably got his information from this source. For W.R. III could hardly have been born in 1652 when his father was but 17 years of age, and (on the record) still unmarried. Perhaps the stone should read 43 years, for as stated above, his age on marriage in 1689/90 is given as 28 years.

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Hundred. Wallenburg (*Place Names of Kent*, 1934) discounts an identification of these names. Yet there is cogent evidence for their association.

Eastwards from Birchley house the land slopes gently upwards for about a quarter of a mile until (according to 6-inch Ordnance sheet 71 N.W.) it tops for a short space the 250-foot contour. From this summit, mapped as Sharp's Hill, there is a view, surprising in extent and of great beauty, over the intervening Weald to the North Downs. Here undoubtedly is the site of Barkley Beacon, which Lambarde in his *Carde of Beacons of 1570* (reproduced at *Arch. Cant.*, XLVI, p. 77) shows to have been within sight of Cox Heath, Westwell and Tenterden Church Tower. Later, and until recent times, the spot was occupied by a windmill. The property was known as Barkley farm in the first half of the 17th century (cf. William Randolph's will of 1641) and the name persisted into the 18th century (cf. will of W.R. II of 1715/6, where the Windmill Lands are also referred to). The parcels of the settlement of 14 February, 1714/5 (see *post*) include "The Beaken," while the name of Beacon Field occurs in deeds of the latter half of the 18th century, and is in use to this day. It is remarkable that another of the Seven Hundreds, Blackborne, gives its name to one of Lambarde's beacons (cf. also Alosesbridge), and it is reasonable to infer that the servicing of these beacons was among the obligations of the Musters of the Hundreds (cf. Furley, *The Weald of Kent*, 1871-4, vol. i, p. 321, and vol. ii, p. 499). The dispute in 1585 between the Seven Hundreds and Lydd concerning the watch at Denge Marsh demonstrates how closely concerned with the beacon system were the Hundred authorities (*Arch. Cant.*, VIII, p. 299).

The earliest document is a marriage settlement dated 14 February, 1714/5. The parties are William Randolph of Maidstone, Esq., and Abigail and Elizabeth Randolph, granddaughters of the said W.R., of the one part and Henry Brockman of Cheriton, Gentleman, of the other part. Abigail and Elizabeth are seized of lands at Denton and Biddenden; in consideration of the marriage agreed upon between Elizabeth and Henry, Elizabeth's moiety of certain, specified, lands in Biddenden in the occupation of William Kelsey and John Jennings, is conveyed to Henry. A marriage licence was granted at Canterbury 26 February, 1714/5 and the marriage took place at Canterbury Cathedral.¹

¹ Some doubt attends the exact date of this marriage. Hovenden's transcription (*Registers of Canterbury Cathedral*, Harleian Society, 1878) follows the entry in the original register which reads "Henry Brockman Gent. of Cheriton and Ms. Elizabeth Randolph of the Precincts of the Bishoppes Pallace married Feb. the —5, 1714." There is a long stroke between *the* and 5, but it is merely a stroke and not capable of other interpretation. This would date the marriage before both the marriage settlement and the licence. Possibly the clerk inadvertently entered February instead of March. The next marriage registered is dated 27 March 1715.

Although the descent of the Brockmans of Beachborough in Newington is well established the parentage of Henry Brockman's wife is not identified in the Brockman pedigree at *Arch. Cant.*, XLIII, p. 282, nor by Brigadier-General D. H. Drake-Brockman in his privately printed *Record of the Brockman and Drake-Brockman Family*, 1936 (reviewed at *Arch. Cant.*, XLVIII, p. 273). Henry and Elizabeth, who both died in 1752, were the parents of four daughters, of whom the youngest, Caroline, became the wife of the Rev. Ralph Drake. The senior line of the Brockmans came to an end with the death unmarried in 1767 of James Brockman. Before his death he nominated Ralph Drake, who was a great-nephew of his mother, as his heir. Caroline, Ralph's wife, was a distant kinswoman, for she and James had a common great-great-grandfather in Henry Brockman (d. 1630). In his "Reflections" of 1754-5 (Drake-Brockman, *op. cit.*) James Brockman remarks "I have now placed ye Revnd Mr. Ralph Drake at Beachborough, who having a promising issue, and both he and his wife being my nearest relatives . . ." His name having been changed by Act of Parliament (No. 14 Anno 8^o Geo. III), the Rev. Ralph Drake-Brockman, the "Squire of Beachborough," was the founder of the whole of the present family of that name.

Returning to Birchley. The will of William Randolph II (dated 28 January, 1715/6, less than three months before his death) refers to various deeds of settlement, of 31 December, 1657 (presumably in anticipation of his first marriage), of 23 November, 1665 (presumably on his second marriage), and 29 February, 1695. The occasion of this last may be a sequence of the birth at length of a male Randolph grandchild, Thomas. The will recites that "it hath pleased God to take away my grandson Thomas Randolph before he had attained the age of one and twenty years and leaving no issue of his body"; and it was Thomas' death that freed lands settled in tail mail at Kennington, Biddenden and elsewhere, and opened the way to the settlements on the marriage of his sister Elizabeth to Henry Brockman. The will declares the confirmation of (*inter alia*) "all that messuage called Barkly and all the lands thereto belonging" in Biddenden in the occupation of John Jennings; and also lands called Windmill Lands containing fifteen acres in the occupation of William Kelsey to the several uses . . . expressed in . . . a deed of settlement dated 29 February, 1695.

In 1717 (26-27 March) Henry Brockman sold his half share of the Biddenden property for £475 to his sister-in-law Abigail. But in 1750 (23-24 October) Abigail Randolph, spinster of Biddenden (then a woman of 60) sold the whole now described for the first time as Birchley Farm of about 132 acres, in the occupation of James Ifield, to James Brockman for £1,000.

On 6-7 April, 1761, James Brockman, anticipating the provisions

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of his will, conveyed the property then in the occupation of Benjamin Beken to his "cousin" the Rev. Ralph Drake of Hythe "in consideration of regard and affection"; and a month later (1-2 May, 1761) the Rev. Ralph on his marriage to Caroline Brockman granted it to trustees as part of his wife's jointure.

The Rev. Ralph died in 1781 and was succeeded by his eldest son, James Drake-Brockman. Later Caroline accepted an annuity of £400 in lieu of settlements, and her son, with the consent of Chancery, was free to dispose of Birchley. On 9-10 October, 1793, the greater part of the property now of an area of 145 acres, lately in the occupation of Benjamin Beken (the elder) then of Deborah his widow, was sold for £2,450 to John Morphett of Pickhill and Edward Winsor the elder of Tenterden; while some of the outlying fields were bought by Benjamin Beken the younger, yeoman (1754-1838), who had in 1791 acquired the adjoining High Paules (or High Poles) Farm from Quaker Trustees who had become possessed of it by the will (1722, Cant. Archd., 84/36) of James Stone of Cranbrook, the founder of the Stone Charity of Biddenden. There was a deed of covenant to produce title deeds which remained with the vendor; and one wonders if the earlier history of Birchley is still to be found in the "two enormous chests" of Brockman papers which have now passed to the British Museum. (*Arch. Cant.*, XLIII, p. 281).

Edward Winsor, having acquired the whole of Morphett's interest, conveyed all on 9-10 October, 1800 to Thomas Boorman of Benenden and James Boorman of East Sutton, farmers.¹ During the nineteenth century the property passed through the hands of various members of the Boorman family until, following the death in 1899 of Henry Boorman, J.P., of Tenterden, his executors, in 1905, sold to Major and Mrs. Hall.

APPENDIX

A deed of 1570 among the Wykeham-Martin MSS. in the Kent Archives Office contains a reference to "Bartly" in Biddenden which may with every probability be regarded as a miswriting for "Barkly," and would carry the history of Birchley back well into the 16th century.

This is an indenture dated 1 April 12 Eliz. I. between Thomas and Henrye Guldeforde and Walter Mayne of Biddenden, and is a settlement to provide a jointure for Thomas and Henry's sister Anne Guldeforde upon her marriage to Walter. (See Pedigree of Guldeford in *Arch. Cant.*, XIV (1882), p. 4.)

Walter is by the will of his father John Mayne (*ob.* 1566) seized of a number of properties in Biddenden and elsewhere of a yearly value of

¹ Burke, *Landed Gentry*, 1953, article "Boorman of St. Augustine's Priory," seems to be incorrect in placing the head of the line at Birchley in the 18th century.

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£300. Among the parcels are "one farme called Lessenden" in Biddenden and Smarden in the occupation of John Wagstaffe, and "one messuage with the appurtenances called Bartly in Byddenden" in the occupation of Roger Garrat and three score and ten acres of pasture or thereabouts.

From this it seems that Lessenden was not the original seat in Biddenden of the Boddendens, who at this date had been settled in the parish for some years. Within two years Walter Mayne had died intestate (*Arch. Cant.*, XVIII (1889), p. 19); and the dispersal of these settled lands by his relict, Anne, including a sale of Lessenden to Boddenden, may soon have followed. For William Boddenden, whose daughter Jane, wife of Bernard Randolph, inherited Lessenden, died in 1579.

The first Randolph entry in Biddenden Parish Registers (which run from 1538) is of the marriage of Bernard Randolph and Jane Boddenden on 21 August, 1587; and this perhaps dates the first settlement of a Randolph in Biddenden and Bernard's acquisition of Birchley. Before the end of the century Bernard appears in the Biddenden churchwardens accounts as constable of the Hundred of Berkeley.

Roger Garrat, the tenant in 1570, seems to have been at odds with the ecclesiastical authorities some years before. In Archdeacon Harpsfield's Visitation of Biddenden in 1557 (*Catholic Record Society*, vol. 45 (1950)), he is referred to as "ludi magister nuper famulus Magistri Kinge familie Dominorum Regis et Regine" and is enjoined, without specifying his offence, to appear at Cranbrook to hear the will of the justice

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