

## Village Echoes

Many readers may be unaware of a hamlet in the parish of Kilndown called Priors Heath. It is centred on a triangle of houses with a few additional dwellings scattered nearby. It was where our past Chairman, Gordon Batchelor, lived for many years and this piece is largely drawn from his research on the area (with permission of his widow Betty).

As with most places there have been many versions or corruptions of the name over time, but it is suggested that originally it was connected with Richard Puyl who appeared in a local document of 1254. A more positive reference appears in 1684 when a John Hatch was paying £2 per annum for 'Pryors Heath' and later in 1781 when land was described as being next to 'Poyles Heath'

In 1811 the Overseers of the Poor of Goudhurst bought a 'cottage and twenty-five rods at Poiles Heath' for £40 as an extension of the Goudhurst Workhouse. This was Black Dog Cottage, Gordon's home for over 50 years. It is now number one of twelve houses in the triangle. The Cottage was sold in 1839 when the Cranbrook Union opened to accommodate the poor of several local parishes, including Goudhurst. The sales particulars quoted its location as Piles Heath. The origin of the name Black Dog, which is also the name of the adjacent field and wood, comes from an old smuggling legend. This told of a dog fitted with a false black skin by smugglers that travelled from Priors Heath to the coast, returning loaded with lace and silks.

The owner of a beer shop set up in the 1850s at Black Dog Cottage was fined 25/- for not having a licence to trade, but this wasn't the only retail outlet at Priors Heath. There was also a small handy shop run by a Mrs Lucas, which used to stand on what is now known as 'The Heath'. Although no buying and selling now takes place, the residents often meet here to celebrate auspicious occasions such as the Millennium and Royal weddings etc. A tea party was held to mark the retirement of the local postman Barry. Mostly it is used by the children for playing on.

Once the census records started in 1841, other occupants were listed at Piols Heath! Although it is difficult to place everyone in individual houses, they included a stonemason, a gardener and shoemaker. At that time stone was being quarried in the field to the west, to build Bedgebury. In the following years the census returns show a frequent change of residents in what were then tied cottages housing domestic staff for Bedgebury and agricultural labourers for the tenant farmers of the estate.

The Beresford family built additional cottages in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and converted others to ensure that they had three bedrooms. Two more pairs of cottages were built by Isaac Lewis who bought the Bedgebury Estate in 1899. Lewis sold to the Crown in 1916 and ten years after the end of WWII electricity was installed together with two communal septic tanks, one now replaced with a Klargester bought by the community. When the larders were converted to bathrooms, the outside toilets became tool sheds.

The increasing mechanisation of farming made the tied cottages redundant and eventually all were sold by the estate. All but one have been extended and modernised to be unrecognisable by their early tenants. The story of change at Priors Heath could probably be repeated in any rural hamlet countryside.

Local History Society

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