

BEACH HOUSE HISTORY - by Sue Austen

Beach House was built in 1899 to provide offices and a home to the local gas manager and his family. The Herne Bay Gas Company was formed by act of Parliament on 1 November 1837, and by the end of the century it had rapidly expanded its activities to service Herne Bay's building and tourism boom.

In July 1883, the Herne Bay Gas Company minutes reported that they wished to increase their storage capacity by building a new holder. Negotiations began with Major Gray, the owner of land opposite the old works, and an agreement was reached in December 1883 for the sum of £300. A condition by means of covenant was that no retorts or gas purifiers were to be built on the site, but only a year later the first of two holders was built.

The company's expansion required a new manager, with offices and a house for him and his family. The Gas Company minutes of March 1899 record that a Mr Welby's amended tender of £1296 was accepted and building of Beach House began soon after.

If you look carefully at Beach House you still see that the building always had a dual purpose. The right hand door led into the house where the family lived and the left door led into the gas showrooms and offices. The hatch we are using in our café is original to the building and was used to pay the gas workers wages and take orders for gas fires and appliances. In the 1930s a second showroom opened at 91-95 High Street and eventually replaced the one at Beach House.

The first family to live here were Charles Vincent Bennett and his wife Jessie Ann (nee Watson) who moved in with their four children - William, Charles, Florence and Millicent. Both Charles and Jessie came from families who were pioneers in the new gas industry and had moved around the country until they settled into their new home in Herne Bay. Their first child William Henry was born in Ramsgate, their second son, Charles Valon, was born five years later in Walton Upon Thames. Their daughters Florence Gertrude and Millicent were born in Wells in Somerset. They returned to Kent to their new home here in 1900 and Beach House appears for the first time on the census in April 1901. They brought their general servant, Sarah Bendell, with them from Wells and also had a visitor staying on census night who was Charles' nephew, Neam Bennett, aged 13, the son of his brother Frank who kept a chemist shop on the Edgware Road, London.

On 14 September 1901 an article appeared praising the new gas lighting installed along Herne Bay's famous promenade, supervised by Charles Bennett. This is how it was described at the time.

This week the promenade at Herne Bay has burst forth in unwonted splendour after the sun has set, thanks to an installation of intensified incandescent gas lighting, which has just been completed by the Gas Company, to the order of the local authority. The intention originally was to install a high-pressure system, but for various reasons this was abandoned in favour of the Welsbach Incandescent Gas Light Company's self-intensifying lamp, which was recently introduced upon the market. The promenade at Herne Bay extends along the front for a distance of about 1 ½ miles, and this stretch is now lighted by forty of the new lamps. The lantern employed is the Welsbach "Shadowless" pattern, erected upon a handsome column and each lantern is fitted with one Kern burner and with the Welsbach Company's self intensifying arrangement.

The lamps are placed 40 yards apart and each gives about 300 candle-power. The promenade gardens and the entrance to the pier are further lighted by five similar lamps, but each fitted with three burners. Thus each of these special lamps gives between 500 and 1000 candle-power. All the lamps are supplied with gas by a special main laid direct from the gasworks, enabling a uniform pressure of 35-tenths to be given. The lighting scheme was designed by Mr Henry Woodall and the work was carried out under the supervision of the gas manager Mr C. V. Bennett. The result appears to be giving the visitors to this popular holiday resort the greatest satisfaction. There are a few electric lamps upon the pier, but these make very poor impression indeed by the side of the new gas lamps.

Henry Woodall was the son of Sir Corbet Woodall who was the Governor of the Gas Light and Coke Company from 1906-1916.

Charles and Jessie Bennett and their family lived at Beach House until at least the outbreak of World War I. They appear there on the 1911 census, although the two boys have now left home and only the girls remain. Kelly's Directory of 1916 also lists Charles Bennett as the occupant of Beach House. Their son Charles Valon Bennett went on to become President of the Institute of Gas Engineers and their daughter Florence Bennett married into a well-established Herne Bay family, the Greensteds. Still standing on the corner of William Street and Mortimer Street, and now a café, Greensted's was then a master butchers. Florence married Leslie Greensted in 1912 and their son Bryan Greensted became a celebrated pioneering test pilot.



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This aerial photograph dates from about the 1920s and shows the two gas storage cylinders and Beach House with a long walled garden running all the way down Beach Street to the corner of the present car park. Some of the original flint wall remains. Local resident, Ken Brown, remembers this as a beautiful garden where he played as a child between the wars, with his school friend Peter Davies. Peter's father David Harold Davies was Herne Bay's gas manager at this time. The 1930-31 Kelly's Directory lists him at Beach House with the phone number 329. But by this time the gas show room had moved entirely to its new premises in Herne Bay High Street. During World War II, army and navy personnel were billeted at Beach House including a group of commandoes who took part in the Normandy landings. In the 1960s the property was occupied by Frank Diamond and was run as a social club. Census returns for Beach House from 1901 and 1911 © The National Archives

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