WESTGATE ON SEA - FASHIONABLE WATERING-PLACE: THE FIRST THIRTY YEARS

DAWN CROUCH

If the subject of seaside resorts should arise today in any context, the name Westgate on Sea, on the north coast of the Isle of Thanet, does not immediately spring to mind. Indeed, it is possible for those travelling between Birchington and Margate to be unaware of the existence, between the A28 and the sea, of the small town, described in 1886 as a 'bijou watering place, a resort for favourites of fortune, rejoicing in well-lined purses'.[1]

Westgate lies two miles to the west of Margate. It reached its zenith as a fashionable watering-place in the 1880s, but was able, as a result of its topography and the ethos of its founding fathers, to maintain a haughty independence and exclusive identity until just before the Second World War, when, despite strenuous opposition, it finally fell victim to its rapacious neighbour and became part of the Borough of Margate.

It is possible to chart accurately the birth of Westgate on Sea, for it was in 1865 that the first pair of houses was built on the eastern side of what was then called Marsh Bay, which was separated from Margate by some two hundred acres of farmland belonging to the Governors of the Bethlehem and Bridewell Hospitals. Westgate was unusual in its creation and possibly unique. It was built at a time when the demand for seaside holidays was increasing and when existing resorts sought to expand, as Hastings had done at St Leonard's and Brighton at Hove and Kemp Town. Westgate was not, however, as sometimes has been said, a suburb or extension of Margate. Indeed its founding fathers and early residents made it clear that they wished to have as little to do with their plebeian neighbour as possible.

Members of the Committee of the House of Commons, hearing evidence in 1882 in favour of building a stretch of railway line from Minster to Westgate, which would allow Westgatonians wishing to travel to Canterbury or Ashford to do so without first having to go to Margate, were incredulous when the witnesses made it clear that they

did not know how much it cost to travel to Margate by train or cab or even exactly how far it was.[2] In 1897 at a meeting to discuss suitable ways in which to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee, it was suggested that Westgate might have a bandstand as a permanent reminder. Dr Flint, a resident since 1880, said that they did not want to 'Margatize Westgate'.[3]

Two years later the Isle of Thanet Light Railway Company, anxious to extend its tramlines from its terminus at Garlinge to Birchington via Westgate along the High Road, met formidable opposition. At an inquiry, the Chairman of the Light Railways' Commission heard legal representation from the 'frontagers', who 'had no desire whatever to see any increased facilities granted for the transmission of surplus visitors from Margate to Westgate for their recreation...Westgate desired to become a separate place'.[4]

Westgate was created on a virgin site, but not on an uncultivable stretch of cliff or coastline, as at Bournemouth where Sir George Tapps-Gervis had turned barren heathland into an exclusive marine development or as at Llandudno, where Lord Mostyn had transformed his lovely, but unproductive, acres around the Great Orme into an exclusive resort for the merchant princes of Liverpool. Although there were few inhabitants on the five hundred or so acres of the Westgate, Street Green and Hundreds Farms, which would in 1894 become the civil parish of Westgate on Sea, the Tithe Awards and Apportionments of 1839 to 1842 show them to have been almost entirely arable. Farming was doing sufficiently well at that time for the Governors of the Bethlehem and Bridewell Hospitals in 1842 to pay the executors of the late Edward Taddy £7,110 for the ninety-four acres of Great Garlinge Farm to add to their existing holding of Little Garlinge Farm and to declare themselves to be well pleased with their purchase.[5] Astute businessmen that they were, they may, however, have had an hidden agenda.

Such owners of farmland were acutely aware of the activities of the railway companies at that time. From 1846 it was possible to travel by train from London to Margate by the circuitous route of the South Eastern Railway Company via Redhill, Tonbridge, Ashford and Canterbury, but a huge swathe of north and east Kent had been totally ignored.

In 1853 the East Kent Railway Company Act enabled the building of a line to Canterbury via Strood and Faversham, which, two years later, was extended to Dover. In 1857 the Kent Coastal Railway Company was authorised to build from Faversham to Herne Bay and it was clear that it would be but a matter of time before this would be extended to Birchington and Margate and that the farmland that lay

between would be of considerable interest to the companies. A golden opportunity was about to present itself to the man, or men, with enterprise and vision prepared to take the risk of creating a new resort, which would be a true child of the railway.

Such a man was Herman Dirs Mertens, an upwardly-mobile, London-born solicitor in partnership in Cecil Square Margate with his brother in law, William Brooke. By the time that the first train of the London, Chatham and Dover Railway Company steamed through the fields between Birchington and Margate on the line leased from the Kent Coastal Railway Company in September 1863, Mertens, through a series of complicated financial and legal manoeuvres, had acquired all the land south of Westgate and Marsh Bays, which would eventually form the exclusive Westgate on Sea and Streete Court Estates.[6] Some he had already sold to the K C R Company. It is not known how much he was paid for it, but the Hospital Governors, after striking a hard bargain, received £1,075 and a promise of two level crossings for just over four acres of theirs, which abutted that of Mertens.[7]

Mertens, who by that time had settled into the life of a gentleman at Street Lodge near the High Road on part of the former Street Green Farm, had a clear vision of what he wanted and valuable local knowledge which would help him to achieve his aim. Many embryonic resorts failed to live up to the expectations of their creators, because the market had not been researched sufficiently or because the timing was wrong.

The land that he had acquired was well suited to become a watering-place. Nature had been kind to Westgate. Like Scarborough and Llandudno, it had the advantage of a double bay, the western one of which was to give its name to the new development. Its shoreline was fringed with gently sloping cliffs, the medieval towers of Reculver, clearly visible across Westgate Bay, afforded beautiful marine views and there were superb sunsets, which had attracted Turner, for, by a peculiar quirk of geography, Westgate Bay actually faces west. The firm golden sands, well washed by the tide and quick to dry, were attractive to families at a time when resorts like Herne Bay with steep, pebbly beaches were in decline.

Visiting the seaside was meant to do one good, with the emphasis on health rather than enjoyment and, as medical opinion changed, so the fashion for sea bathing and sea water drinking were followed in succession by seeking sea air, ozone and sunshine. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century sea bathing was still popular and would remain so, but sea air had become all important and Westgate was able to exploit its breezes straight from the 'German Ocean', for a bracing climate was beginning to be considered the more healthy.

Most important, however, for Mertens was the knowledge that it would be possible to keep this land physically exclusive, so that the dangers, perceived or otherwise, of contact with vulgar Margate would be minimised. Topography provided natural barriers to the north and west, the farmland of Quex Park lay to the south with no outlet to the sea and little to commend it for building purposes, whilst the two hundred acres on the east belonging to the Hospital Governors was subject to the control of the Charity Commissioners and would be unlikely to be offered for any development that carried risk. It should, therefore, be possible to develop an exclusive up-market estate, made accessible by the new railway line, which would appeal to wealthy, metropolitan gentlemen, especially those with young families.

Mertens did not intend to carry out the development himself. Retaining some fifty acres on the south side of the High Road, to form the 'Marine Freehold Residential Estate known as Streete Court' (the old name of Street gentrified by the addition of an 'e'), he built himself a 'picturesque Mansion containing very spacious accommodation and standing in its own delightful pleasure grounds and gardens of upwards of seven acres, together with lodge, stabling, conservatories, cottage and outbuildings'.[8]

The remainder of his purchase he sold on, freehold, but with very strict covenants attached to the building land. He knew the dangers of releasing too much building land on to the market at once. Donald Olsen commented when writing of the *Growth of Victorian London* that the failure of over-ambitious speculations often left whole developments in a desolate half-completed state for years.[9] Nothing could be more off-putting to potential buyers. It was, therefore, in keeping with this ethos that in October 1864 Mertens leased the ninety-four acres of the Westgate Farm, the land likely to be the last to be developed, to a Birchington farmer for nine years at a rent of £237 1*s*. 6*d*. per annum.[10] The agreement was meticulous in its detail, especially in relation to the state in which the land was to be left when the lease expired. Not only would this arrangement provide Mertens with an income, but it would keep the land in good order instead of allowing it to become an unsightly jungle of weeds.

In the east some parcels of Street Green Farm around Marsh Bay were sold to individuals, but in December 1869 he sold the ninety-nine acres known as Hundreds Farm, which lay on both sides of the main Margate-Canterbury Road, together with the farm buildings, to William Corbett of the London firm of Corbett and McClymont, who were currently developing the West Brompton Estate. The remaining Street Green land and some land at Epple Bay near the Birchington border was conveyed to Corbett the following

year. Five years later when the lease of the Westgate Farm had fallen in that land too was conveyed to Corbett.[11]

The firm of Corbett and McClymont was well known in London. F. H. W. Sheppard writes that the numbers of houses built by the firm in South Kensington between 1871 and 1878 was greater than the number built by any other firm in the area of the District Surveyor.[12] Mertens' choice of Corbett as his developer was not surprising. Mertens was totally London orientated - he banked with Coutts, was a member of the Junior Carlton Club, used the Westminster firm of Lee, Houseman and Brodie as his solicitors and his Westgate purchases were largely financed by a creditor of Corbett, the London law firm of Lewins.[13]

Corbett immediately appointed an Estate architect, Charles Nightingale Beazley of Westminster, and had him draw up a plan for the proposed estate. The plan is undated, but must be from about 1870, as it was referred to in the *Builder* of 14 October 1870, when the editor, George Godwin, a friend of Corbett and involved with him in the West Brompton development, described Westgate as 'an entirely new location, which bids fair to become, in a very short time, a favourite resort'. He wrote that four miles of road had been completely formed and named, a sea wall and esplanade around the two bays were under construction and the site for a church marked out. Arrangements were being made for the erection on the estate of gas and water works and some houses had been completed - good structures, built by Mr Corbett and designed by Mr Beazley.[14]

Corbett appointed William Wigmore, a contractor from Walham Green, to build the roads and sent William Frostick down to Thanet to be his foreman on the new site. As Corbett was involved in other projects and had to divide his time, he was very reliant on Wigmore and Frostick and there is copious correspondence in his letterbooks, where he gives them instructions and bemoans the problems with suppliers and sub-contractors.[15] He built an Estate Office alongside the new railway line and a modest villa for himself just north of the High Road, naming it Redcliffe Villa after his Brompton Estate and, whilst waiting to develop Hundreds Farm in the south-west, followed Mertens' example of farming it, installing the thirty-year old William Osborn from Acol as bailiff. Although on Beazley's plan the farm was shown to become the site of a large mansion called Westgate Hall, the land remained undeveloped and continued to be farmed until the inter-war years.

The farm buildings were used for the stabling of visitors' horses until mews were built, for it was quite common in those days, for families going on holiday to transport their coach and horses, riding

horses and childrens' ponies in special horse-boxes by train. The farm also, as Corbett pointed out in letters to prospective clients, produced fresh vegetables, milk and eggs.[16]

On 12 April 1871 the Westgate on Sea railway station was opened in a surprisingly low-key ceremony. It was of very modest appearance and the report in the local newspaper hinted of greater expectations, saying that, although 'the building in hand will be amply sufficient for the present wants of the neighbourhood, Mr Mertens.... reserved as a gift an ample space for the large permanent structure which, according to present appearance, will shortly be required'.[17] Although soon the luxurious Granville Express would make Westgate one of its rare stops en route to London, the grander station did not materialise, leading 'Westgatonian' in a letter to the *Isle of Thanet Gazette* in 1913 to 'beseech the Council to order us a new station. Blue-blooded Westgate and no covered platform!'.[18]

David Cannadine opines that, whereas 'a Victorian estate might plan and manage itself, a Victorian seaside resort - at least at first - could not'.[19] Much capital was needed for development on which there was a slow return and as Corbett, in a letter of August 1871 to Mr Harris, the local manager of the LC&DR Company, requested him to send tickets, one hundred up and down at 2*s*. 6*d*. each, 'for which I purpose to charge four shillings, which will give 1/6 per ticket towards the station and platform, the cost of which I am anxious to recoup as soon as possible', it would appear that the station was built at Corbett's expense.[20]

Mundane, but essential, matters such as sea defence, a pure water supply, good drainage and sewage disposal were costly, but developers overlooked them at their peril. At Bournemouth the nucleus of what was to be Southbourne on Sea was reduced to rubble after less than twenty years by the onslaught of the sea, at Folkestone the town's reputation was, at one stage, at risk because of the poor drainage and at Eastbourne an outbreak of scarlet fever in 1863 had been blamed on the water-supply. The friable chalk cliffs around Westgate and Marsh Bays were a cause of concern - a clause in the lease of the Westgate Farm allowed the tenant to be compensated if the sea washed away any land and Corbett's first task had been to construct sea wall, groynes and breakwaters. The expense of maintaining these fell on successive estate owners (until they were eventually handed over to the Rural District Council in the 1920s) and was a constant drain on resources. Wide roads were constructed which would attract the carriage-trade and wide pavements allowed for easy walking. Soon, however, it was necessary to build houses, either to sell or to rent, if he were to make any return on his investment.

Although at the beginning Corbett was forced to use local labour,

such as the Margate firm of Smith and Swain, to build some of the first houses, he was anxious to import his workforce from London. The problem common to exclusive estates and resorts of where to accommodate, out of sight, the workforce needed to build and maintain them, was taken care of very early. In 1872 the builder, Alfred Lockwood, and his architect son arrived with other skilled craftsmen from the building trade in Westgate from London. He bought land to the south-east of the new station and built good quality housing to rent, selling some to investors and remaining landlord of others. The occupants of these new houses, according to the census returns for 1881, were mostly young married men with families - carpenters, bricklayers, joiners, painters and decorators. There was even a whitesmith and a japanner. A number of them had lodgers in the building trade, some of whom were relatives, such was the demand.

The new watering-place had already received a welcome recommendation from an illustrious early resident. Professor Erasmus Wilson, Mayfair physician and well-known skin specialist, already familiar with the Royal Seabathing Hospital at Margate, had the very first bungalow in Britain built for himself at Marsh Bay by the innovative architect, John Taylor, in 1869. *The Bungalow*, as it was always known, was a large 'gentleman's residence' complete with stabling, coach house, conservatory, greenhouse and extensive servants' quarters, set in an acre of garden reaching down to the sea (**Fig. 1**).[21]

Fig. 1. [The Gardens]. Right, Osborne House, the County Club for Gentlemen established 1877, centre, *The Bungalow*, left, Sussex Mansions.

Wilson, who was knighted in 1881, the year in which he became President of the Royal College of Surgeons, was a great enthusiast for the sea. 'The hypochondriac or nervous person', he said, 'could be half cured by residing on the sea coast and enjoying the grand scenes of nature such as the rising and setting of the sun over the blue expanse of water, and the awful majesty of the waves in a storm'.[22] What Dr Russell did for Brighton, Dr Granville for Bournemouth and Dr Jebb for Exmouth, Wilson did for Westgate.

Three more bungalows were built at Marsh Bay, soon re-named St Mildred's Bay, because as Wilson himself said, 'When our London friends come down, Marsh seems so unwholesome'.[23] When Corbett and McClymont acquired the estate, Taylor moved to Birchington to develop, because, as his partner John Seddon explained to a House of Commons Committee in 1882, they could not hope to compete with Corbett, who had access to much more capital.[24]

By 1875 the infrastructure was complete, houses suitable to let as apartments - the favourite form of holiday accommodation at the time - had been erected and the first 'habitual residents' had built their homes on the seafront. Westgate land was sold freehold, which was rare for an intended exclusive estate, but as John K. Walton wrote 'Westgate is a reminder that the freehold system was not incompatible with a very high social tone indeed'.[25] Mertens could have continued as ground landlord, but he chose not to do so. This may have been for financial reasons, but also, as the solicitors to the Hospital Governors pointed out just before the First World War when the Garlinge land was not selling well for development, there was difficulty in dealing with leasehold property 'in this part of the country where it is practically unknown'.[26]

The high social tone that was intended to be part of the attraction of the development was maintained by the restrictive clauses in building agreements. Most Westgate land was sold at public auction by the firm of Rogers, Thompson and Chapman of South Kensington and Belgravia, agents for the Brompton Estate. The founder of the firm, William Bennett Rogers, bought for investment one of Corbett's first Westgate houses and then purchased one of the best sites in the area, overlooking Westgate Bay, to build his spacious family home, *Danehurst*, which was to have some very distinguished guests over the years, including the Duke and Duchess of Fife in 1893 (**Fig. 2**).

Special trains were laid on from London to take interested gentlemen to Westgate with time to view before the auctions at a local hotel. Details, always available well in advance, included in full the covenants imposed, which enabled successive proprietors of the estate to insist on their being kept. If there were any breach of

Fig. 2. [West Bay] Originally Westgate Bay. Right, *Waterside*, then either side of Rowena Road, *Danehurst* (home of William Rogers) and *Ledge Point* (home of Henry Weigall and Lady Rose) The last two have been demolished.

covenant, the offender was reminded that he had bought his land at public auction and that the covenants were public knowledge.[27] Even today they could be enforced - the owner of one of six town-houses built on the site of the former *Cliffside* was advised by her solicitor to take out an indemnity insurance, as the covenants stated that only one house was to be built on the site.

By the summer of 1875 that first pair of houses to be built at St Mildred's Bay had been upgraded to become the *Beach House Hotel*, which was ready for opening. It boasted a private entrance to each suite and the public rooms, which included those for reading, music, billiards and smoking, claimed to be 'noted for their cheerful location and tasteful furniture', whilst the hotel had 'first-class stabling, loose-boxes for hunters and a lock-up coach house with comfortable quarters for coachmen'.[28] Hotel guests that first season included Sir John and Lady Hawkshaw, Viscountess Strangford, the Dowager Countess of Buchan, Lady Mary Legge and Lord Archibald Campbell. Lord and Lady Henley had taken a house nearby for their family, whilst Lady Rose Weigall, daughter of the Earl of Westmorland, and her Royal Academician husband had completed their seaside family home, *Ledge Point*, overlooking Westgate Bay.[29]

Despite the seeming success of the new watering-place, there was

some anxiety in financial circles over the future of its proprietors and on 1 May 1878 Corbett sold the Westgate Estate and all his interest in it to Edmund Francis Davis, a thirty-two year old solicitor from London, already involved in developing the Granville and Albion Estates at Ramsgate.[30] Three days later Corbett and McClymont went into liquidation. Their joint liabilities amounted to £1,300,000; separately Corbett's were £65-70,000 and McClymont's £45,000.[31] Sheppard, writing of the West Brompton Estate, says that their handling of the legal and financial interest in their properties was not simple or easily intelligble.[32] It was no more so at Westgate, as is shown in conveyances, mortgage agreements, charges and transfer mortgages relating to the Estate, which was financed totally by metropolitan capital.

Corbett's system appears to have been to mortgage a property as soon as it was complete, in order to pay the mortgagee of his building land. In Westgate, for example, he repaid the Lewins the £16,000 that he had borrowed for the purchase of Street Green Farm from a series of mortgages on properties from small investors, arranged through Lee, Houseman and Brodie, who appeared to have a limitless supply of clergymen, widows and spinsters ready to invest in bricks and mortar.[33]

There is no doubt that he had overstretched himself, trying to match developers of other exclusive resorts such as the Duke of Devonshire at Eastbourne or Lord Radnor at Folkestone. For example, he had seen the importance of having a church for his new estate and had encouraged Canon Josiah Bateman, the Vicar of St John the Baptist, Margate, in whose parish part of the new Westgate was situated, to build St James' Church, Westgate in 1873. However, he was unable to obtain much financial support despite appeals to the new residents at St Mildred's Bay, such as Erasmus Wilson, and had been forced to donate £1,100, a third of the cost himself.[34] He had also heavily committed himself by the erection of the gas works, which, he complained, when summoned before the magistrates in 1877 for non-payment of rates, had cost him £6,000, on which he had not, by then, received a shilling in return.[35]

His successor was a charismatic figure, who has been given more than his fair share of credit for the establishing of Westgate as an exclusive and fashionable resort, bearing in mind that he was proprietor of the Westgate Estate for only two years and that much of the ground work had been done by Corbett. Davis was, however, a superb self-publicist with grandiose ideas, who appears to have been able to convince others of his certain success. He obtained mortgages of £80,000 for the Estate - the uncovered building land, the private

roads and squares, the sea walls and promenades - and of £15,000 for the gas and water works from the private bank of Coutts, for whom William Rogers worked as valuer and agent.

The complicated seventeen-page agreement stipulates in minute detail how the land was to be sold, with minimum prices according to its situation and with restrictive clauses on the type of building to be erected. The most expensive land was not, as might be expected on the seafront, but in the proposed residential squares slightly back from the front, although the seafront plots were much larger, some as much as an acre in size.[36] Such profligacy with land points to the desire to create an exclusive estate by the sea, rather than a seaside resort.

A second plan was drawn up by Beazley. Dated 1878 and inscribed as having been drawn for Edmund Davis, it is similar to the first plan, but shows every blank space filled with detached villas or terraced housing around the private gardens of the six squares, which were so much like London squares (**Fig. 3**).[37] It is interesting to note that there is no space, except for the cliff-top gardens and the promenade, for that essential of any resort - a public gathering place, for not all visitors or part-time residents would be like Sir Erasmus Wilson seeking the seclusion afforded by his bungalow. Anthony King in his

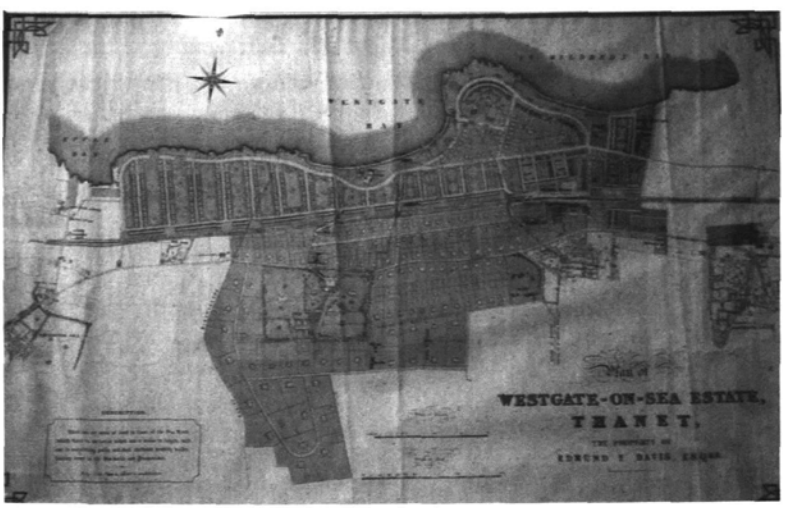

Fig. 3. Second Plan for the Westgate on Sea Estate drawn for Edmund Davis by Beazley 1878. Photographed by permission of John King.

essay 'Buildings and Society' opines that 'early nineteenth century resorts had been essentially social places, providing opportunities for group enjoyment, social rituals and personal display. The bungalow was an early rejection of this behaviour, representing a search for solitude, a quest for quiet and isolation from the city crowd'.[38]

All the houses that were built, however, for the wealthy second or third homeowner were of such a standard that they provided all that was needed for amusement and recreation, for they contained large dining rooms, drawing and morning rooms, libraries, billiard rooms and extensive servants' quarters, including the ubiquitous butler's pantry and wine and beer cellars.[39] The occupants of such houses, set in extensive gardens, often with tennis courts, and with horses in their stables or at the mews, did not need public areas for recreation - a further reason for the conclusion that the aim of the founding fathers was to establish first and foremost an exclusive estate by the sea, made easily accessible by the railway to well-heeled and well-connected metropolitan families.

Further support is provided by the advertisements which appeared weekly in 1878 in *Keble's Gazette*, which always began by extolling the virtues of the Westgate and Granville Express, which travelled daily to London Victoria and the City from Ramsgate. This train did not stop at Birchington, which was a source of irritation to those wishing to develop there. The journey took less time than it does today and was made in comfort. Fares were high, but this ensured exclusivity. The excursionist was kept out, as for many years excursion trains did not stop at Westgate. As all the roads, except the High Road, were privately owned by the estate and vehicles wishing to use them had to obtain a licence, it was easy to keep the new watering-place exclusive.

Under Davis the seafront gardens were upgraded and the gas and water works completed. In November 1878 public notices were placed of the intention of applying in the 1879 parliamentary session for the passage of the Westgate and Birchington Gas and Water Bill and of an application for a Provisional Order to erect a landing-stage and promenade pier stretching a thousand yards between St Mildred's and Westgate Bays.[40] In December a quarter of a mile of Westgate sea front was lit with electric lights - the first provincial town to carry out such a trial. On the first occasion scientists and other special guests watched the spectacle, visible from Margate jetty, and then, after being entertained to a sumptuous dinner at the *Beach House Hotel*, returned by special train to London.[41] The month-long experiment was then abandoned and it was to be nearly half a century before Westgate was to enjoy the benefits of an electricity supply.

Fig. 4. Station Road shops, built on one side of the road only to allow room for carriages and cabs to stand. Canopies on the nearer block are of slate, those of the further and earlier block of corrugated iron.

At a land sale in October 1879 forty lots of building land were sold for £2,730 or £2,400 per acre.[42] New wealthy residents, such as William Quiller Orchardson, society painter and Royal Academician, were moving in to their custom-built marine residences. The *Beach House Hotel* was gaining fame and had played host in June 1879 to Sarah Bernhardt and her friends, for as was said in the *Whitehall Review* in September that year, Westgate was 'very much a Saturday to Monday sort of place', where it was possible to 'smoke the weed and chew the lotus, [as] repose was the order of the day'.[43] In January 1880 Assembly Rooms and Baths were opened at St Mildred's Bay. Privately funded, they were a great asset to the new watering-place and became a venue for high-class entertainment, both musical and dramatic. A second block of shops with spacious living accommodation and canopied fronts to protect the shopper from the elements was ready for occupation (**Fig. 4**).

There was, therefore, widespread surprise when, in July 1880, it was reported that Davis had sold the Westgate Estate, the utility companies and all other interests to his solicitors, William and Frederick Searle Parker of Bedford Row, London with the management in the hands of Rogers, Chapman and Thomas in the person of Herbert Rogers, William's brother.[44] The mortgages were transferred to them, for Davis was seriously in debt and unable to pay even the interest of

nearly £8,000 due to Coutts in July 1880.[45] Local capital was neither sought nor obtained and Westgate's fate remained in the hands of Londoners. The editor of the *Westgate Chronicle and Birchington News* was optimistic. 'In welcoming the new proprietors, we welcome gentlemen of position, ability and skill; their agents are tried men well up to their business and, under their guidance and management, we are assured of a successful future', he wrote.[46]

The 1880s saw Westgate reach its zenith as a fashionable watering-place and show the first revelations of a remarkable capacity for self-help. There was no long-standing resident aristocracy, established family interest or influential family in control of society. It was, like the Hampstead described by F. M. L. Thompson, a place, where as 'no one was in possession, empires could be carved out by the freshly-risen'.[47] Moreover, as the editor of the *Westgate Chronicle* remarked in 1880, 'No one governs Westgate, and, so left to itself in this manner, Westgate must perforce govern itself'. Thus at a time when local government was playing an increasingly important role in the development of seaside resorts, a vocal and assertive group of Westgatonians was able to establish a self-appointed and unrepresentative oligarchy, which was to set the agenda for Westgate's government for many years to come.

The Westgate and Streete Court Estates were comprised of land from four civil parishes (Acol, Birchington, a detached part of Minster and St John the Baptist Margate) and three ecclesiastical (Acol with Birchington, Minster and, after 1873, the new parish of St James' Westgate). Occupants of the new properties, therefore, were subject to the Overseers of whichever parish their house was situated within, to the Guardians of the Poor of the Isle of Thanet, to the St John's Burial Board and, from 1875, to the Isle of Thanet Sanitary District and the Margate School Board. Part of Westgate was under the jurisdiction of the Ramsgate portion of the Wingham Petty Session Division, part under the Justices of the Peace for the Liberties of the Cinque Ports and part under the Justices for the Cinque Port of Dover.[48] The foreshore was in private ownership and the Estates controlled the roads, promenades and lighting.

As it was not one single parish, Westgate was not allowed to have its own Board of Health, but it was permitted to have a Sanitary Committee and in 1880 sixteen of the new Westgatonians formed such a committee, with Erasmus Wilson as chairman. Fifteen would have considered themselves to be gentlemen; Henry Minter, high-class grocer, was the token tradesman.[49] Only seven of them were full time residents. The same names were to be found on many committees set up over the next decade or so.

Public health, law and order were the priorities of the residents and when these were not provided adequately for their liking they were quite capable of taking matters into their own hands. For example, at a meeting of the Sanitary Committee in May 1882 matters under discussion were the deficiencies of the Westgate Postal Service, the nuisance caused by organ grinders, indecent bathing and the inadequacy of the Police, for which they had to pay a fourpenny rate. As a result, Parkers were advised by William Rogers to engage a private constable.[50] Such action was not unique. Lord Radnor's private force patrolled The Leas at Folkestone until after the turn of the century.

The new development continued to grow and new names appeared in visitors' lists and directories. The local press reported the arrival of the well-known and the fashionable. Close friends of Lady Rose Weigall were the daughters of the Earl of Airlie, Lady Clementine and Lady Blanche Ogilvy. Lady Clementine had married Algernon Bertram Mitford (later Lord Redesdale) in 1874, a close friend of the Prince of Wales. Their Chelsea circle included the Duke of Newcastle, a guest at the *Beach House Hotel* in 1878, and the de Rothschilds who spent several summers in Westgate.[51] In 1880 the Mitfords, who by that time had five children under six, bought a site at Westgate Bay and built their seaside home, *Exbury*, named after the idyllic estate on the Solent, where Bertram Mitford was brought up (**Fig. 5**). Three more

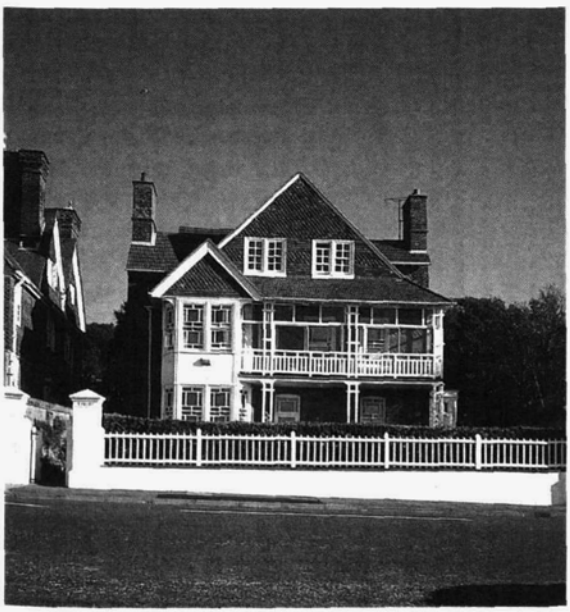

Fig. 5. *Exbury* designed by Charles Beazley for A. B. Mitford 1880.

children were born in the period with which they were associated with Westgate and *Exbury* had an extensive nursery suite at the top of the house.

Lady Blanche, who married ex-soldier and Secretary of Lloyds, Henry Hozier, made many visits to Westgate when her children were small and her twin babies were baptised in the new church of St Saviour in 1888.[52] The Marchioness of Waterford, another frequent visitor, who first brought her husband to recuperate after a hunting accident, was a distant cousin of Lady Rose. It is not surprising that the new watering-place did not feel the necessity to advertise its charms - no guidebook was issued until 1908 - with such a 'network' available.

At the Birchington end of the Estate, the Hon. Cecil Forester (from 1894 fifth Baron Forester), Member of Parliament for Much Wenlock, owner of fifteen thousand acres at Willey Park in Shropshire and married to Georgina, daughter of Sir Wolstan Dixie of Market Harborough, had created 'Rosebank', a mini-estate by the sea, as the holiday home for his large young family.

Royalty also visited Westgate in its heyday. In 1881 the Princesses Victoria and Louise stayed throughout September at *Goodwin House* in Sea Road, which had been taken by the Earl and Countess of Ellesmere for their family and household for the summer. The princesses attended the temporary iron church, which had been erected in 1880, where a pew had been put at their disposal. They expressed concern at the inadequate church accommodation for the new watering-place and pledged their support for the building fund for the permanent church, which had just been launched.[53]

Westgate was honoured in 1882 by a visit from their father, Prince Christian of Schleswig Holstein (husband of Princess Helena), when he came for the birthday of his son, Prince Victor, who, with his tutor, was lodging at the seafront home of Dr Harding. *Keble's Gazette* reported that Prince Christian had travelled in a special carriage attached to the train from London and had been met at Westgate station by Dr Harding and Prince Victor for the drive to *Northlawn*.[54]

In August 1883 guests of the Mitfords at *Exbury* were H.R.H. the Grand Duchess of Mecklenberg-Strelitz and the Hereditary Grand Duke and Duchess, who visited Canterbury to view the cathedral, leaving Westgate the next day for St James' Palace.[55] Such distinguished visitors must have gladdened the hearts of the Estate proprietors.

Between 1878 and 1880 William Ingram, Member of Parliament for Boston in Lincolnshire and proprietor of the *Illustrated London News*, which had been founded by his father, bought several plots of

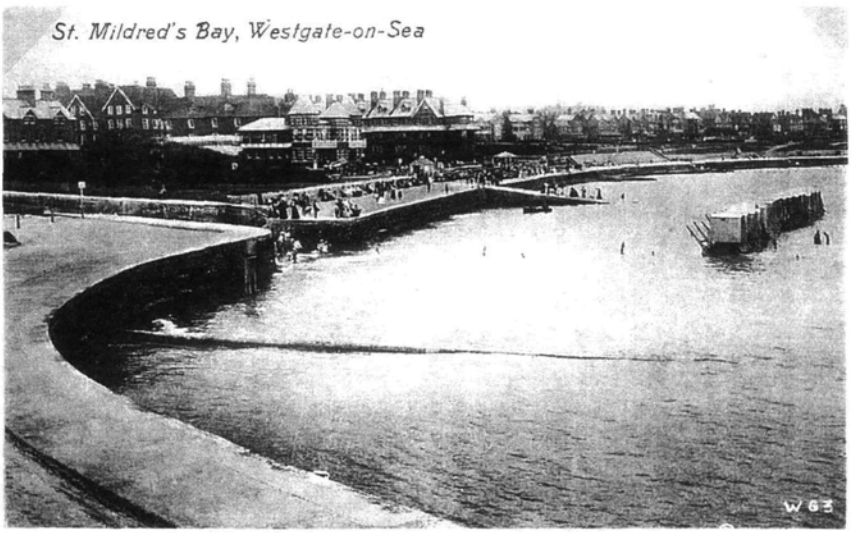

Fig. 6. The bathing machines were still in operation when the First World War started. The twin towers of St Mildred's Hotel can be seen in the centre.

land from Davis at St Mildred's Bay. This area, Sussex Gardens, became very much his fiefdom, for he built Sussex Mansions where *Loudwater*, with its distinctive apse-like end overlooking the sea, was his own home until he bought *The Bungalow* after the death of the widowed Lady Wilson in 1887 and in 1883 erected the prestigious *St Mildred's Hotel* (**Fig. 6**). Ingram, who was created a baronet in 1895, enjoyed a somewhat stormy relationship with Westgate for, sometimes, his business interests clashed with those of other Westgatonians.

The year 1883 also saw the erection of the *Westcliff Hotel* on the promontory between the bays, a symbol of Westgate's aspirations (**Fig. 7**). The foundation stones of two churches were laid that year, although the population at the time of the 1881 census was only just over a thousand.[56] St James' Church was regarded as too far away for the new residents, habitual or full-time, for the Victorians were still anxious to obey the commandment that their grooms and horses should not labour on the Sabbath Day. It was also not a suitable setting for the Sunday Church Parade that was part of the social scene in exclusive parishes, where the fashionable strolled around after Divine Service to see and be seen and to prove that they did not have to cook their own dinner.

In February 1880 a meeting was held of leading Westgatonians,

Fig. 7. [The Gardens] Left, *St Mildred's Court* built for Alfred Waterman, timber merchant of Gracechurch Street and a creditor of Corbett. Had the highest tower in Westgate and has a magnificent carved staircase. Centre, Westcliff Hotel built 1883. Destroyed by fire 1938.

chaired by Herman Mertens, at which it was decided to erect a temporary church as soon as possible and start a permanent church building fund and a committee was set up under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury. It included many well-known London gentlemen, although the working committee was mostly from full-time Westgate residents under the leadership of the Rev. Alfred Sitwell, Vicar of Minster, in whose parish the site for the new church was situated, and the Rev. Augustus Lyne, who was Curate of Minster with responsibility for Westgate.[57]

Westgate might well have become a one denomination estate, as often landowners were reluctant to release land for non-conformist churches, but the strong contingent of Congregationalists who had settled in Westgate, led by Alfred Lockwood, had begun to negotiate for a site for a church with Davis, who was Jewish and, therefore, less likely to be as pro-Anglican as many estate owners. In 1878 they had held services in a tent and from 1880 in the Assembly Rooms, but their determination to build their own church gained the support of the Kent Congregational Association.[58]

Both denominations set about fund-raising and it is interesting to note that the appeal leaflets of both were at pains to point out that the permanent community at Westgate was very small and that they

would need support from visitors and other well-wishers from outside.[59] Both denominations were equally ambitious, although the plans of each had to be scaled down, as the need for accommodation increased before sufficient funds were available.

The Anglicans held a Grand Bazaar at the Assembly Rooms lasting two days in August 1882. Its patrons included Prince and Princess Christian, the Marquis and Marchioness of Bath, the Marchioness of Conyngham, four earls and their countesses, Lord and Lady Brabourne, Lady Mitford and Sir Erasmus and Lady Wilson.[60] True to their word, the Princesses Victoria and Louise supported the cause by donating articles of needlework for the stall of Mrs Lyne, wife of the Vicar designate.

In the time-honoured fashion of estate owners, the Parker brothers, donated the site for the Anglican church in a conveyance to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in April 1883 and promised to defray the cost of the steeple of the original design by Beazley.[61] Despite all efforts, however, this design for a church, which would seat a thousand, had to be abandoned and a new, less ambitious design drawn up for one without a steeple, which would seat about six hundred.

The foundation stone of St Saviour's Anglican Church, to be built by the Rochester firm of Naylar and Son from Kentish ragstone, was laid by Sir Erasmus Wilson in August 1883 (**Fig. 8**).[62] The foundation stone of Christ Church Congregational Church, designed by John Sulman and to be built by the Ramsgate firm of W. W. Martin in red brick, had been laid by Samuel Morley, the philanthropist and temperance advocate in June that year (**Fig. 9**).[63]

Fig. 8. St Saviour's Anglican Church designed by Charles Beazley.

Fig. 9. [Westgate Bay Avenue] Centre, Christ Church Congregational Church designed by John Sulman.

The crumpled manuscript list discovered at the bottom of the Churchwardens' Box of those who subscribed between 1882 and 1884 to the permanent building fund of St Saviour's Church makes fascinating reading, for scattered amongst the names of local gentry, Kentish aristocracy and fashionable Londoners were those of the Prince and Princess of Schleswig-Holstein and their daughters and that of H.R.H Princess William of Prussia.[64] Even with so much support, there was still a debt of £3,000 on the building in July 1884 and it would not have been consecrated had not that debt been guaranteed by the Rev. Lyne himself.[65] The four-hour service of Dedication and Consecration took place before a glittering congregation - those in town at the time included such aristocrats as the Marquis of Waterford and family, the Earl of Tyrone and Lady Susan and Lady Clodagh Beresford.[66]

Architects today enthuse about the high quality of workmanship and materials used to build the Grade II listed church and second best was never good enough. Valuable gifts such as the Communion silver were given for the day of consecration and over the years Lyne persuaded wealthy visitors and habitual residents to give furnishings and furniture and to contribute towards an organ. Its most valuable gift was the fine stained-glass east window by Charles Kempe given in 1887 by A. B. Mitford in memory of his father, who died at Westgate.[67] At a time when flowers were still frowned upon in some ecclesiastical circles, St

Saviour's became renowned for its floral displays at Harvest and other festivals, as those with gardeners and forcing-houses vied with each other to produce the most exotic blooms and fruits.[68]

By the beginning of the 1890s, as the fashionable and artistic began to gather in Westgate, the architectural styles of London, especially Chelsea, began to be seen on its streets and seafront. In the chapter on the 'Architecture of Enjoyment' in his book *Sweetness and Light*, Mark Girouard describes how the 'Queen Anne' style with 'red brick and white-painted sash windows, with curly pedimented gables and delicate brick panels of sunflowers, swags or cherubs...with wooden balconies and little fancy oriels jutting out where one would least expect them' was well suited to the holiday mood and chose Westgate to point out its success.[69] As in so many places today, Westgate has lost some of its best building to the bulldozer and unsympathetic developer, but there is enough still to be seen for it to be evident of the high quality of building that took place, especially in the 1880s.

Girouard was especially interested in Mitford's house, which bears so many of the characteristics of the 'Queen Anne' style. The fireplace in the drawing room, with Mitford's monogram and the date 1880 entwined in a sunflower, is almost exactly like that at *44, Tite Street*, Chelsea, used by him to illustrate the style.[70] *Waterside*, the house designed by Sir Ernest George for William Peto in 1880, is regarded as Westgate's best 'Queen Anne' building (**Fig. 10**). It is

Fig. 10. *Waterside* designed by Ernest George for William Peto 1880.

unchanged from its original and still has its stables, designed to match the house, standing at the rear. There are others to be seen on the sea front and in neighbouring roads, particularly at the northern end of St Mildred's Road. Small wonder that there were no fewer than twenty-seven carpenters in Westgate on the night of the 1881 census. Such properties also demanded a great deal of upkeep, especially the painting of the intricate fretted bargeboards and the beautifully turned white balconies, some of which, as at *Ellingham* in Sea Road, went right round the building.

Nor was the new style confined to the homes of the wealthy. There is an unexpected glimpse of 'Queen Anne' decoration in the terra-cotta panel with the sunflower motif to the left of the door of Christ Church. The most easterly of the new row of shops in Cuthbert Road boasts a delightful curly-pedimented gable end, whilst those on the opposite side of St Mildred's Road, with the date 1883 in a cartouche set in elaborate diapered-brick gables are yet more examples of the quality of building to be found. In Ethelbert Square, *Lymington House*, the apartments built by Alfred Read, a master craftsman who had come to Westgate with the Lockwoods in 1872, is similar in conception and quality.

Yet, just as these buildings, in the vanguard of fashion, were in the course of erection and occupation and all seemed to be going well, another financial scandal broke which would have a profound effect upon the future of Westgate. On 6 March 1884 a creditor of the Parkers, a former army lieutenant, filed a petition naming the brothers jointly for an alleged act of bankruptcy, namely, 'departing from their dwelling-houses with intent to defeat or delay their creditors'.[71] Two days later *The Times* made the first of many reports on the activities of the brothers, who had been engaged in widespread fraud and had bought properties in their own names with their clients' money. The debtors had fled on 23 February and no one knew their whereabouts. Throughout the summer the trustees tried to unravel the complexities. By November it was known that at least £2,000,000 was missing.[72] (£84,000,000 in today's money.[73]). Many clients lost everything.

Parkers owed Coutts' bank a quarter of a million pounds, but they at least had the requisite deeds and documents safely in the hands of their solicitors. They had no choice, therefore, but to foreclose and, as mortgagees, entered into possession not only of all the uncovered land of the Westgate Estate, but of gas and water works, an hotel, a farm with a large acreage of agricultural land, sea walls, promenades, squares, roads and some town houses. They acknowledged that they had little hope of recovering much of the debt and eventually became

Beneficial Owners controlling the Estate, and with it much of the life of the town, for just on half a century.[74]

The transference of ownership was carried out discreetly with only a brief report of the bankruptcy on the back page of the local newspaper.[75] The bank took a low profile - transactions were carried out in the names of the partners of the day, referred to simply as the proprietors of the estate. There was no hasty selling off of land at reduced prices, as at Bognor when Sir Richard Hotham became bankrupt. Prestige was more important than money and the high social tone was maintained.

Yet subtle changes began to take place. There had never been much provision for the entertainment of visitors - those who were outside the social circle of the 'network' had to be content with bathing in the sea from the machines at St Mildred's Bay and gentle strolls along the clifftops or promenades. Recreational facilities were provided, but they were for the residents, full-time or habitual and were often kept exclusive by the high cost. In 1882 a few gentlemen had leased part of Hundreds Farm to establish a Lawn Tennis and Cricket Club, but membership fees were expensive.[76] Joseph Jackson, one of Westgate's most successful businessmen, advertised in the *Westgate Chronicle* in September 1880 that his livery stables offered, 'Phaetons, Waggonettes, Basket Chairs, Pony Carriages, Victorias and pair and single horse-carriages of every description for hire', whilst there were saddle horse and ponies and the services of a riding master, if required. By the time of the 1891 census, he described himself as Riding master, whereas in 1881 he had called himself a Livery Stable owner. Within a decade the value of his 'live and dead stock, utensils, stables and coach houses' increased for insurance purposes from £1,000 in 1879 to £4,000 in 1884 and in 1888 a new wing was built to his Station Road mews to stable a further thirty horses.[77]

A County Club for Gentlemen had been established in 1877 and within a year had a membership (obtained by ballot and the entrance fee of one guinea) of one hundred and eighty members.[78] As well as a dining-room and library, it had a smoking-room in the garden. Such facilities were expected of an exclusive watering-place.

Although private musical functions took place frequently and a Westgate Choral Society was formed in 1886, there was no public music - a matter of controversy in the town for many years to come for most residents did not want it, although visitors often expected it. In 1887 'Well-wisher' had complained on the correspondence page of *Keble's Gazette* that, 'No watering-place can live on its past or a mere name... or on the report of the health giving character of its air...it must adapt itself to the needs of the present and it must care in every respect

for the wants of its visitors'.[79] Later that year, the first commercial entertainment was introduced in the shape of Victor Rushworth's London Chamber Orchestra, leading to the comment that, 'as Westgate is so peculiarly devoid of the class of amusements so abundant at seaside resorts, the band is a decided relief and is much appreciated'.[80]

In 1889 a Permanent Improvement Committee was set up to provide genteel added attractions such as the illumination of the sea front, but there was still much disagreement over the provision of a bandstand and, in particular, over who should pay for one (**Fig. 11**). This was to be recurrent for many years, especially after the arrival of Westgate's most vociferous and demanding residents, the private schoolmasters, who put Westgate into a category of its own, for in no other resort did such a class of professional dominate the life of a town and have such a profound influence upon its development.

Westgate was developed at a time when the demand for private schools for both boys and girls was increasing and its healthy atmosphere made it a suitable venue. There was no place on the original plans for any kind of school, but Miss Fanny Perkins' School for Young Ladies, Ethandene, was listed in Kelly's *Directory for Kent* as early as 1874 and William Thornton Bullock was advertising in *Keble's Gazette* for pupils in 1876. Bullock started Ringslow College, a High Class Preparatory School for Boys and became a

Fig. 11. The sea front bandstand erected in 1903, after great controversy, to commemorate the Coronation of Edward VII. A similar plan to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee was outvoted in 1897.

pillar of the local community until he overstretched himself and found himself bankrupt.

However, it was the arrival first of the Rev. John Hawtrey in 1883 with his preparatory school, St Michael's, which was connected with Eton, where he had had been housemaster, and then in 1886 of the Rev. Herbert Bull from Wellington School, where he had been housemaster at a time when Bertram Mitford was a school governor, that was to place Westgate on the scholastic map and eventually lead to the naming of it by a Local Government Inspector in 1934 as a 'place for schools'.[81] Bull and his brother took over the failed Ringslow College and established it as Wellington House Preparatory School. Both Wellington House and St Michael's had many members of aristocratic families on their registers and this, with the arrival of others boys' schools and high-class girls' schools such as St Margaret's, helped to maintain that high social tone so much prized. The schools were not, however, easy neighbours for those who were trying to establish Westgate as an exclusive resort for a wider clientéle, but they were, as they were at pains to point out, the largest ratepayers and all-year source of income and expected their needs to come first.

It is not possible to fix a date when Westgate ceased to be fashionable and became merely exclusive. Titled families were still visiting in 1890 and even a decade later, but many of the marine residences had been put on to the market as the children had grown up and outgrown the seaside. Few found a new private owner for their upkeep was high and they needed an army of servants. *Exbury* was on the market for years before it was bought by a wealthy spinster of impeccable ancestry. Most became private schools or small hotels. Coutts' list of conveyances show that the number of land sales declined steadily at the same time.

A quarter of a century after its birth, Westgate still did not enjoy its own local government. The consecration of St Saviour's Church had been followed by the creation in September 1884 by Orders of the Queen in Council of the Consolidated Chapelry of St Saviour's Westgate on Sea, but it had no civil authority other than the annual vestry meeting.[82] When Local Government Reform became a matter of discussion a decade later, it was widely expected that Westgate, which always claimed to be totally urban in character, would become an Urban District. Instead it became in 1894 the Civil Parish of Westgate on Sea, slightly larger than the ecclesiastical parish, and part of the Isle of Thanet Rural District. This was a source of bitterness and conflict which was never resolved and came to a climax at the time of the Local Government Review in 1929.

Westgate was indeed fortunate that it remained fashionable and a

London satellite for so long, for even at the time of its inception, English seaside resorts were no longer popular with high-class society. Anthony Hern wrote that, 'as early as 1850, along the English coastline, the aristocracy was in full retreat from the Victorian middle-class', whilst Sarah Howell was of the opinion that, 'by the second half of the nineteenth-century, the English resorts had become so popular with everyone else that they had scarcely any attraction left for people in high society'.[83]

It was the particular appeal of beauty and tranquillity and the capability of complete privacy that sustained Westgate, for fashion is always fickle and the attractions of the spas and resorts of continental Europe were very tempting. By the turn of the century, when the population had more than doubled in a decade to 2,738, twenty private schools had established themselves and holiday accommodation for the 'right kind of visitor' was increasing. The first phase of Westgate's history was over, a no less fascinating one had already begun.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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