

# A Shortish History of Bickering on Sea

by

**Audrey E. Possett,**

Bickering on Sea Heritage Museum



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The earliest records of the picturesque town, now known as Bickering on Sea, date back to approximately 928AD, when a small manor on the coast was given as a deed of land to one Beacran the Timid, by King Eadred, grandson of Alfred the Great.

Beacran was known to be a pious man and is thought to have attempted to remove the now famous circle of standing stones known as Beacran's Ring, which lies to the East of the town on Bickering Mound, an ancient burial site. He was unsuccessful, but historians believe that it was due to his efforts that its major blue stone now leans at the alarming angle of some 28 degrees from the vertical. Over the centuries, rumours have abounded that the stone circle holds mystical properties, possibly inspired by this curious misalignment of the stones. Stories of time travel and portals to other magical lands and dimensions seem most prevalent during the few days either side of a solstice. (See later note about Sir Henry Possett.) It is believed that three ley lines run through the town, intersecting at the stone circle and carrying pockets of disturbance in the space time continuum; but this is only entertained by those people commonly termed 'crack pots.'

Bickering on Sea is recorded in the Domesday Book, simply as Bickren, which is believed to be a shortening of Beacran's Ring. Beacran himself lived to a ripe old age, and was followed by his descendants, who remained in the area for many generations, largely due to the fact that they switched their allegiance fairly freely between the warring King Stephen, and his cousin Matilda, from whom he usurped the throne in 1135. On the whole, Bickrenites were supporters of Stephen, but if things looked favourable for Matilda, they were rumoured to have a set of her colours to display on the town stockade, a wooden barrier which was positioned where the ruins of Bickering Castle now stand.

Also recorded in the Domesday Book is St Jude's Church, although this is thought to have been a wooden structure, built much earlier than the current Parish Church, and predating the Norman Invasion. The church was not rebuilt

in stone until the Tudor era.

In 1155, King Henry II created the First Baron of Bickren, a title bestowed on Beacran's descendent, Ronald of Bickren (known as Ronald the Bandy, due to his bandy-legged gait). This was both in recognition of the town's support of his mother (albeit briefly) and as thanks for a late wedding present and twenty first birthday gift to the young king, delivered the previous year. Henry was said to be delighted with the deeds to a small manor in nearby heavily forested wold land.

Henry later gifted this manor to his then favourite carousing partner, one Simon the Squab (a term for a young pigeon) so called for his overly thin legs and barrel-chested figure. Simon the Squab was a drunkard and treated the bond servants indentured to the manor with cruelty; for which they blamed the inhabitants of Bickren, giving rise to an enduring animosity. Simon the Squab died mysteriously in a freak pigeon-shooting accident in 1184 when his bow backfired, and he was impaled on the wrong end of his own arrow. This manor, once named after its cruel master, is now known as Squabbling on the Wold.

One of the first known flags of St George was flown over the newly completed Castle Bickren (latterly Bickering Castle) in 1278. This flag of St George was sewn together by Brunhilda of Brandon, the 6th Baroness of Bickren, and her ladies; keen to follow the latest fashion from the royal court. It is completely untrue that she first wore it as a tabard over her medieval dress, or that it in any way inspired the much later attire of the 20th century Spice Girls. Her husband, Branwell the Bold, 6th Baron Bickren, did import some spices, but had no connection with the popular music of the day and was known to be keenly averse to madrigals. He was, however, created 1st Marquess of Branchester in recognition of his completion of the castle.

His descendant, Reginald, 6th Marquess of Branchester, rebuilt the church of St Jude's in 1463. The church had largely fallen down in the great storm of 1462, weakened by dry rot and an infestation of stag beetles. It had then been hit by lightning and caught fire. Reginald's first proposal, a new edifice constructed entirely from boiled eggs, honey and moss was tactfully turned down by the town council, in favour of sandstone and flint, which was cut from the hillside just outside Squabbling on the Wold. The 6th Marquess was often referred to afterwards as Reginald the Bonkers. A monastery was also constructed at about this time, although that was completely destroyed in 1539, during the dissolution of the monasteries. Many monks were driven out and

several were murdered, which some historians claim gave rise to macabre legends of headless monks, and similar childish nonsense. However, those who give credence to the existence of the so-called ‘headless monk’ of Bickering Castle more commonly believe him to originate from a much earlier era, perhaps even dating from the incursions of the Vikings.

It is alleged that in 1548, Anne of Cleves travelled through Bickren, staying the night at The Tides Inn. Anne is said to have complained that, “...the bed was over-lumpsome, the boisterous madrigal players in the drinking parlour below kept us awake the full night with their antics, the chamber pot struck uncommon chill and the mead, like the landlord, was of poor taste.” This account cannot be verified from any contemporary sources. Nor can claims that she herself set up a rival pub, The Anne of Cleves; although a hostelry of this name, dating from around this time, still stands today in Cleves Street.

The town is mentioned in several documents dating from the late 1500s with its present-day spelling of Bickering. By Tudor times, Bickering had become established as a fishing port, with a moderate but profitable wool trade; wool being imported from the Netherlands.

During the English Civil War, Bickering was Royalist in its leanings, while its arch rivals, the townsfolk of Squabbling on the Wold, came out in support of the Parliamentarians. The two sides clashed at the famous battle of Much Heckling, a small settlement, virtually equidistant from the two. Although it lasted a mere 18 minutes, and was concluded with a direct hit with a hard cabbage and a sharp nip from a small dog, this conflict deepened the ancient rivalry between the two towns.

There followed the Siege of Bickering in 1648, in which Bickering Castle was largely destroyed by cannon fire. The town, under the leadership of Ronald the Blunderbuss, 19th Marquess of Branchester, was forced to surrender. This was a bitter blow to the town’s pride, as they were defeated with the assistance of the puritans of Squabbling on the Wold. Ronald the Blunderbuss fled to Flanders with his comely young wife Marietta, and their four children.

Bickering Congregational Church was founded soon after in 1652, although it later took on the name of Bickering Free Church, the nomenclature by which it is known today.

There are no accurate records of how Ronald and Marietta spent their time on the continent. They sat out the Interregnum until the return of Charles II in

1660, when they returned in triumph with their fourteen children to share in the celebrations of the Restoration of the Monarchy.

The restoration of Bickering Castle proved impossible, however, and they were forced to sell the land and castle ruins as a ‘fixer upper’; possibly the oldest recorded use of this term. Finally, they returned to the continent with their sixteen children. The 20th Marquess, their son, Hubert the Blatant, returned in middle life to the English Court, where he met and married a fabulously wealthy, aging heiress and moved to Brighton. There, he constructed a sumptuous seaside villa with a magnificent folly in the form of a Grecian temple. His wife later also moved to Brighton, though it is thought that they saw little of each other. Hubert the Blatant devoted the rest of his life to spending what remained of her money. His first wife died when Hubert was 65, whereupon he promptly married again, a woman less than half his age. The couple had just one son, who unkind friends said strongly resembled the local corn merchant.

Devoid of its noble family, the town of Bickering fell into relative obscurity for several decades. Its prestige was revived in 1743, when the magnificent Georgian mansion of Bickering Hall was built by the distinguished retired privateer, Captain Edward Horatio Montmorency Possett. Captain Possett had made his fortune in the Caribbean, capturing Spanish galleons laden with gold.

Landing at Bickering on his return to England, he stayed a full month at the Tides Inn. There, Captain Possett courted Bess, the daughter of the proprietor, one Ronald Frumleigh, who was also the town’s Mayor. The legend goes that Captain Possett admired Bess’s jugs, family heirlooms inherited from her late mother, and the pair were betrothed within days. Edward and Bess married soon after and together produced seven children and twenty-nine grandchildren. It was due to the heroic Captain Possett’s influence that the town took on the official title of Bickering on Sea.

Bickering on Sea is also notable for the invention of the ‘Shuffling Nelly’ (an innovative wood and iron gadget designed to semi-automate the carding of wool) drawings of which were first produced by Captain Possett’s younger brother, Gerald Gervais Possett, in 1746. He did not apply for a patent, believing such things to be utter nonsense. The following year, one Paul Lewis stayed at The Tides Inn. He later invented his own system for carding wool, which was patented in 1748. Sadly, the ‘Shuffling Nelly’ has been largely

forgotten, except in Bickering on Sea, particularly among the Possett family.

In 1786, George, Prince of Wales, visited Bickering on Sea, the name under which it was now firmly established. He was attracted to the town by the poetic descriptions of his friend, Ronald Montmorency Possett; commonly known as Beau Possett, due to his penchant for outlandish attire and expensive lace handkerchiefs. Great excitement gripped the town, as it was rumoured that his Royal Highness was considering making Bickering on Sea his official royal seaside summer residence; which would have meant the bestowing of the title Bickering Regis. Alas, this was not to be.

Despite the best efforts of Beau Possett and his family, the town council and the local traders, this dream was thwarted when the inhabitants of nearby Squabbling on the Wold discharged six dozen barrels of rotting fish into the River Bick, which runs through the town before meeting the sea in the shadow of Bickering Castle. The putrid smell from this was enough to cause His Royal Highness to take carriage for London immediately. His Highness was never to return. The following month, he visited his old friend, (a descendent of Hubert Bickren) one Reginald Bickren – ‘Beau Blatant’ – in Brighton, and fell in love with the town, choosing to build his Royal Pavilion there instead.

The rotting fish were largely recovered from the river and, in revenge, were posted back through the open windows of the houses of Squabbling on the Wold, under cover of moonlight. This dispute further deepened the enmity between the two towns.

In 1802, Miss Jane Austen stayed at The Tides Inn, an event which is documented in a somewhat smudged entry in the Inn’s ledger from that year. Some accounts have it that she stayed a full fortnight, others a mere three days. Nonetheless, it is a fact that the esteemed authoress wrote enthusiastically about the town in a letter, dated June 1802, to her friend, Miss Eliza Snodgrass.

*“We found Bickering on Sea to be a most charming Summer resort, though it lacks proper assembly rooms. There are some seven families of note in the region, most prominent among them the Possetts. I confess I took a great liking to Miss Constance Possett, with whom I enjoyed much lively conversation over dinner at the home of her uncle, the Reverend Ronald Possett; by whose kind invitation we dined. According to our appointment, upon the following morn, she and I took a turn along the promenade, which, although short, is not without points of interest, affording as it does an excellent view of the ruins of Bickering Castle. I was greatly diverted by tales of the Castle ruins, which Miss*

*Possett was kind enough to show to me. I must own that I pressed hard for her to do so. This once magnificent edifice predates her own delightful home of Bickering Hall by several hundred years and gives rise to many delightfully macabre tales including a thrilling headless monk. All in all, I was much enamoured of Bickering on Sea. The nearby town of Squabbling on the Wold, in contrast, was a great disappointment. It claims that its cultural influences are Dutch, due to its wool trading with the Netherlands. It certainly puts one in mind of a collection of Nether Regions.”*

Disreputable historians have had the temerity to attempt to cast doubt on the authenticity of this letter; most notably the now discredited claims of Herbert Rowbottom of Squabbling on the Wold. It was suspiciously soon after this visit that Miss Austen penned her famous novel, *Northanger Abbey*. Some say she was inspired by Bickering Castle and its tales of ghostly happenings; although it was not until after her sadly premature death that this work was published.

The great Victorian explorer, Sir Henry Augustus Possett, was thought to have disappeared through the ancient stone circle known as Beacran’s Ring in 1847, never to be seen again. However, in truth, he was discovered, 17 years later in the town of Squabbling on the Wold, by his youngest son, the famous author, Mungo Ronald Possett. Living under the name of Harold Porter, he was bigamously married to a second wife, with a further eleven children. His initial ‘disappearance’ did much to perpetuate rumours of Beacran’s Ring possessing quasi-magical properties, including time travel.

The town’s strong association with charitable youth work began with the founding, in 1898, of The Boys and Girls Society (B.A.G.S.) of Branchester. This began on the Branchester Estate, near Branchester itself, some 17 miles inland. The same year, a second group (or “set”, as the gatherings were known within the Boys and Girls Society) was formed in Bickering on Sea. This was a full ten years before the start of the rather better-known Scouts, which the founders of BAGS, Lord Archibald St-John Patterson and his wife, Lady Marigold, always insisted was a direct and outrageous copy. Lord Archibald had been very big in ladies’ underwear, and had recently been created Lord Branchester, in recognition of his achievements in the undergarments and corsetry of HM Queen Victoria and several of her ladies in waiting. His most notable creation, ‘the whale-bustier’, was highly popular amongst portly

aristocratic ladies of the day, and, indeed, made his not inconsiderable fortune. Sadly, in 1912, Sir Archibald went down with his under-footman on the Titanic, leaving Lady Marigold to bring up their young son, Hector, then aged 12.

At the outbreak of the first World War, young Sir Henry Possett eagerly enlisted and was sent to fight in Flanders. Being only nineteen and what his relatives indulgently described as, ‘a bit of a chump’, he was immediately given a commission and placed in command of a battalion of seasoned fighting men. His mother, Lady Gwendoline Possett, turned Bickering Hall into a convalescent home, specialising in the rehabilitation of aristocratic and artistic officers. During these years, a poetry writing circle was formed, the now famous ‘Scribblings’, who met regularly to share concepts and mock each other’s efforts at poetry. Sir Henry returned home in 1917 with a slight wound and a slim volume of poetry of his own creation. Sadly, he died in 1918 in a freak Christmas cracker accident.

Between the wars, the Posset family struggled financially and found the upkeep of Bickering Hall a huge burden, so it was with relief that Sir Norman, (born posthumously in 1919 after Sir Henry’s tragic death the Christmas before) turned the house over to HM Government for use as a spy training centre in the spring of 1940.

Bickering Hall was second only to Bletchley Park for the number of spies and code breakers that it housed, but rather more discreetly. Codebreaking and espionage training were carried out in a vast warren of secret underground bunkers beneath the grounds of the Hall. The location of the entrance to the complex has never officially been revealed, though theories abound that it was via the wine cellars; concealed at the foot of the clock tower; through a trapdoor in the library floor; or under a sliding section of the tennis courts. Serious modern historians theorise that those who believe the rumours of sliding sections of tennis courts have simply watched too many episodes of Thunderbirds.

Bickering on Sea also played host to a POW camp, situated at nearby Bickren Farm, which itself dates from at least the 15th century. The residents were predominantly Italian. At the end of World War II, one of the released POWs, Guiseppe Pagrolino, married local girl Doreen Frumleigh, and set up the UK’s first recorded pizza parlour, on Harbour Street. Pagrolino’s Pizza and Ice Cream Parlour is still owned and run by the Pagrolino family, now in its fourth generation.



In the 1970s, the now internationally famous annual Bickering Folk Festival was founded and began to attract musicians, folk dancers, artists, poets and Morris men from all over the UK and, latterly, Europe. On a visit to the festival, the now almost derelict Bickering Hall caught the eye of pop legend Rick Rhymes, who promptly bought it as a summer home. It is estimated that he spent over £5 million renovating and improving the Hall, introducing seventeen new marble bathrooms, a swimming pool, an indoor bowling alley, a recording studio, a squash court and a small private cinema, much to the dismay of the local residents. It was rumoured that there was an onyx table lighter and matching ashtray in every habitable room. He never lived there. Bored with the project after three years of renovations, he instead donated it to National Heritage.

In the three decades that followed, National Heritage spent a further £17 million undoing the improvements wrought by Rick Rhymes and restoring it, as far as possible, to its former glory. Most of the house is now open to the public between April and October each year; except for the abandoned ice house in the grounds, to which access is permanently denied due to ‘structural integrity problems.’ Since 2004 the house has had a permanent custodian and onsite housekeeper in the persons of retired environmentalists Sir Ronald and Lady Gloria Possett.

There are many exhibits in Bickering on Sea Heritage Museum which tell the history of the town. Of special interest are: a tennis racquet that once belonged to the 1st Marquess of Branchester; a jewelled comb said to have belonged to Anne of Cleves; lead shot from the Seige of Bickering; Captain Possett’s souvenir Spanish wooden leg, fashioned into an umbrella stand; a sundial from Bickering Hall; a fan which might have been owned by a friend of Jane Austen; and a cannabis plant discovered by National Heritage when clearing out Bickering Hall’s former recording studio in 1979.

(Author’s note: This last exhibit was the only item stolen in the museum break-in of 2017.)