

## **Bexleyheath**

**It was in the King's Head Public House in Bexley Village that the story of Bexleyheath began.**

A move was made by local landowners to prevent squatters settling and acquiring rights of possession on the area of heath to the north of the village. In 1814 these landowners secured through Parliament an Enclosure Act under which the land was surveyed, legally divided and enclosed. The Bexley Enclosure Award can still be seen in the Local Studies Centre. This was the beginning of the town then known as Bexley New Town and now known as Bexleyheath.

However, the story of the area is older. It is a story about communications across a fairly level dry area of land on a straight route between London, Canterbury and the coast. It is likely that there were trackways dating from the time of the Ancient Britons across the heath. Later the Romans built a paved road from London to Dover, the modern Watling Street. This road passed through Bexleyheath slightly to the south of the present Broadway. Hasted in his "History of Kent", notes that in 1782 it was still possible to see sections of the old Roman Road passing through the area. No real evidence has been uncovered to suggest that the Romans settled in this area, although coins and jewellery have been found and a Roman burial urn with human remains was found in 1973.

The road continued as a main thoroughfare after the departure of the Romans. Medieval pilgrims passed on their way to visit the tomb of Thomas à Becket at Canterbury and in the Peasants Revolt of 1381 several thousands of the rebels must have passed this way to congregate at Blackheath. It is said that Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon were entertained here by courtiers dressed as Robin Hood and his men on the May Day Morning of 1511. During the Civil War the heath was turned into a military station and many local men were quartered here.

By the 18th century the heath was gaining a reputation for highwaymen and footpads as the area was well wooded and therefore a good place for ambush both by day and night. On capture, however, the penalty was severe as the gibbets dotted along the

roadside bore witness. Dickens described just such an encounter on the Dover Road in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

The road across the heath remained in a state of disrepair until the New Cross Turnpike trust was set up. The Trust agreed to repair the roads in exchange for a toll. This toll was collected at a toll gate on the Dover Road where the main gates of Danson Park now stand. To cater for the traveller, there were coaching inns like the Golden Lion, Fox and Hounds and a small beer shop, Ye Olde Crook Log. The oldest of these would seem to be the Golden Lion, for a survey for the New Cross Turnpike in 1739 mentioned the Golden Lion Ale-house. By the 1820's it had become a well-known coaching and posting house and as many as forty-eight coaches passed through in one day. The Crook Log can be traced back in the Bexley rate books to 1808, although a reference to Crook Log House on a list published by the New Cross Turnpike Trust in 1738 may mean this public house was in existence even earlier than the Golden Lion. Why the name Crook Log? It is said that the area south of the road as late as 1609 was wooded and cut wood from here was sold as firewood in the City of London. The pollarded trees became "crooked logs" timber much sought after for ship building. Thus when a hostelry was built it took the name the Inn at the Crooked Log.

After the Enclosure Award of 1819 a village, at one time called Bexley New Town, grew up around the road junction, which became the Market Place and a large number of fashionable houses were built along the road. The parts of the heath surrounding the village were cultivated for the growing of cereals and fruit crops, especially soft fruits such as strawberries, and glass houses for the production of flowers were established. The fruit and flowers were sent up to London by road and later by railway. As late as the 1930's there was still farm land on the heath. An early industry set up by the squatters was the making of brooms and brushes using the broom plant which was common on the heath. This occupation gained the local inhabitants the nickname of Broom Dashers.

Wheat must have been grown in the vicinity of the heath because there was a windmill (post mill) on the Erith Road where the bus garage is now. By 1894 the area was known as Bexley Heath and that year it was decided to join the words together so as to suggest the genteel atmosphere of Blackheath rather than the coarser Dartford Heath. Since then the area has always been known as Bexleyheath.

Bexleyheath did not have its own rail link until 1895, many years after Bexley and Erith stations were opened. A company was formed in 1882 in order to build a rail link between Blackheath and Slade Green, there to join with the North Kent Line of the South Eastern Railway. An Act of Parliament was passed in 1887 allowing the connection and four years later, after many problems, work began. The line was opened quietly on 1 May 1895. The railway brought Bexleyheath within commuting distance of the city and many people came to settle in the area and from this time onwards Bexleyheath's days as an agricultural community were numbered.

Eight years later on 1 October 1903 the Bexley Council opened a tram service from Plumstead through Welling and Bexleyheath to the Erith boundary at Northumberland Heath. Bexleyheath's growth can be shown by the population figures: at the time of the Enclosure the number of squatters on the Heath could be counted in hundreds, by the end of the century the population was approximately 6,000 and in the census of 1931 the figure was 14,737.

The Clock Tower, designed by W.M. Epps and costing £590, was built to commemorate the coronation of King George V. The foundation stone was laid on 8 January 1912. The tower is 31 feet high and the four dials of the clock are 40 inches in diameter. The inaugural ceremony was held on Wednesday 17 July 1912 amid much celebration. In the west facing alcove of the Tower stands a bust of George V. In 1997 another bust was added in the east facing alcove that of William Morris (who lived in the Red House) to commemorate the centenary of his death in 1896. In 2013 a bust of Queen Elizabeth II was added to the south facing alcove to commemorate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the centenary of the Clock Tower in 2012.

## **Churches**

The first church to be built on the Heath was a Chapel of Ease consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1836. It stood in Oaklands Road and was run by a curate from St Mary's, Bexley. In 1866 Bexley Heath became a separate parish under its first vicar, the Rev W H Pincott. As the population grew it was felt that a new church was needed. The foundation stone of Christ Church was laid on 16 September 1872 and the new building was consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury on 26 September 1877 after many financial

problems. A memorial was erected, by public subscription, to Rev Pincott after his death and stood at the market square. It took the form of a drinking fountain and horse trough and was subsequently moved to its present site by Christ Church. There had been Wesleyans on the Heath as early as 1843 and John Wesley is known to have travelled through the area on his journeys. A wooden chapel was built by 1845. After a lapse between 1850 and 1857, the Methodist cause was revived and the Wesleyan Chapel in North Street was built in 1860.

The original Baptist Church was built in 1823 and continued until 1865 when work on a new building was commenced. The Trinity Baptist Chapel was finally opened on 7 October 1868. The United Reformed Church (originally the Congregational Church) in Bexleyheath dates from 1850 and the chapel on the Market Place was opened on 14 June 1854 at a cost of £869. The Rev James Geddes was minister here from 1868 to 1920. This chapel was subsequently demolished in the mid 1980's and a new church now stands just behind the Market Place in Geddes Place.

## **Education**

At the beginning of the century children living on the Heath went to school in Bexley Village. In 1829 the master of the Bexley Village School opened a school for boys and girls on the heath at a cost of 2d (1p) per week. The room had been provided in 1826 when the purchase of the Dissenting Chapel in Mill Lane was made possible by a £100 grant from the National Society. An infants' school was built in 1837, a room for girls in 1852, to be replaced with a new department in Station Road in 1871 and, finally, the New Bexley Heath National School at Albert Road (now Graham Road) completed in 1883. A School Board was elected at Bexleyheath in 1894. It established Upland School in Church Road, creating a competitor for Christ Church School, which nevertheless survived under ecclesiastical control until 1921.

The twentieth century has seen Bexleyheath grow from a small market gardening community to a fully-fledged suburb of London and with the New Town Centre Development, Bexleyheath has become an important shopping and commercial centre. The main Shopping Mall was opened in 1984 by HRH Duke of Edinburgh and the Market Place area has now been pedestrianised.

**Sources**

Buckland, F - Bexleyheath

Castells, Rev F De P - Bexleyheath and Welling

Hasted, Edward - History of Kent, Vol II

Levy, L A & L M - Education in Bexley

(All these books are available for at the Bexley Local Studies and Archive Centre)