

The Victorian Era in Bexley

When Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837 the part of Kent which is now the London Borough of Bexley was almost entirely rural in character.

Bexley, Crayford and Erith were small towns of two to four thousand inhabitants and there were some small villages and hamlets but open country predominated. Most men worked on the land or on jobs closely allied to agriculture. There was very little industry. Local government was largely in the hands of the parish vestries.

By the end of Victoria's reign the coming of the railway had made it possible to live locally but work in London. Some of the large estates had been transformed into streets of suburban villas and the new middle-class commuters who lived in them attracted tradesmen and domestic servants to the area. The railway also brought industry and this in turn meant more jobs and more houses for the workers. Most of the district was still rural in appearance. The big housing developments did not begin until the 1920's. During this period there had been great changes in local government and social services and the structure of society was infinitely more complex than it had been 60 years before.

The Victorian home

At this time there were great inequalities of wealth. The rich could well afford large homes, as coal and servants were cheap and plentiful. The poor had small cottages and terraced houses, often badly overcrowded.

It was a time when people felt that only the possession of material property could give real security in a harsh world. Many a working class family had a 'parlour', the front room, which was almost never used except on Sundays. In it they kept the best furniture and ornaments, dusted and polished with fervour. The well-off filled their drawing rooms and dining rooms with solid but ornate furniture, Clutter was not a concern: the object was to impress visitors with the sheer quantity of one's valuables and possessions.

Such expenditure was not lavished on the kitchen and scullery, which were still the scene of traditional drudgery. This was due, not just to the lack of labour- saving equipment but also to the constant need to scrub and polish. Grates were black-leaded, floors and tables scrubbed, metalwork polished. No wonder the words "Woman's work is never done" were so often heard.

Employment

Men were not much better off. They worked long hours for low wages and often in unpleasant surroundings. Perhaps there was more job satisfaction for men: the traditional skills of blacksmiths, coopers, bookmakers and others were still in demand and the production line had not yet made work dull and repetitive.

Work was not only hard, it was fearsomely insecure. A local resident wrote recently about work on a farm in Footscray at the turn of the century: "If you lived in a tied cottage your pay was twelve shillings and a sixpence a week. If you 'caused trouble' - as it was put - you were told to get out on the following day..... that is why a lot of farm workers carried a tent." The employers had their worries too. Banks were known to fail, and prosperous businessmen could become penniless overnight.

However by and large, the well-off found it easier to recover from their troubles. One employer wrote: "About the year 1866 we had a very difficult time at Erith with men...and I became a little low-spirited...(On such occasions). I started off with my wife to the Continent to get fresh again". In varying degrees life was insecure for everyone: it is no wonder that they compensated trying to create a scene of solid security at home.

Education

Before 1870 there were only private schools, for those who could afford them, or charity schools, organised by voluntary societies. Most children went to the local charity school, where they paid a few coppers, and were taught Christian principles and the Three R's. Education was not compulsory and not available at all for some children. Religious controversy, which made education a thorny problem throughout the Victorian Era, delayed serious attempts to improve the situation. The state confined itself to making grants and

setting up a body of inspectors (H.M.I.s) to supervise distribution in schools.

Eventually the gaps in school provision became intolerable, and the Forster Act of 1870 brought the School Board into being, with power to levy a rate. (It was the first public body for which women were eligible for membership). Board Schools were to give no denominational instruction, only Scripture teaching, from which parents had the right to withdraw their children. The Forster Act resulted in a rapid increase in the number of school places, either by the newly established School Boards or by voluntary effort stimulated by a desire to escape the School Board involvement.

Private Schools maintained they taught more than the Three R's. They carried on the tradition of the old grammar schools, heavily biased towards Latin and Greek. Schooling of this kind was solely for boys as the middle classes did not want an academic education for their daughters. They preferred them to acquire some proficiency at embroidery and music, with a little knowledge of literature and perhaps botany as well.

Leisure

It was a world with no TV, no cinema, no radio and leisure activities had to be a 'do-it-yourself' type such as the musical evening. Entertaining was taken very seriously and strict conventions were observed by both hosts and guests. At home parents might relax over a game of cards or mother might knit and fathers try his hand at photography.

The children had their whip-tops and other tops. As they grew older, they would be sending Valentines - taken rather more seriously than today. Outside the home there was little entertainment to be had. Men might play cricket or football or have a drink at the pub. But for the family there was only an occasional concert or play, the annual fair or a visit by a travelling circus.

Local Government

In these years there were enormous changes in social organisations. For example, in the 1830's constables were elected by the parish ratepayers. They had their expenses refunded but got no pay. The

Metropolitan Police took over in the 1840's, although in times of crisis special constables were also enrolled.

In the field of public health great advances were made, which had repercussions on the whole structure of local government. The discovery of the connection between dirt and disease led to the setting up of Local Boards of Health, with powers relating to sewerage, street- cleaning, slaughterhouses and other such matters. These boards gradually acquired other responsibilities and in 1894 they became Urban District Councils. Similarly, the Boards of Guardians, set up in 1835 to administer the Poor Law, gradually received public health functions. They are the ancestors of Rural District Councils. So the structure of Local Government in our day is, in a sense, the outcome of the 19th century concern for public health.