

A brief history of Bexley

The London Borough of Bexley came into being on 1 April 1965 as a result of the London Government Act 1963.

The former Boroughs of Bexley and Erith, along with Crayford Urban District Council were abolished and their functions transferred to the new authority. Chislehurst and Sidcup was partitioned, with Sidcup absorbed into Bexley, while Chislehurst went to Bromley.

Erith had been the earliest area of the Borough to be developed. Before the Civil War it possessed its own Mayor and Corporation, but Charles II revoked its charter in 1660, leaving responsibility for local government divided between the Parish Vestry and the still functioning Manorial Courts. After the opening of the Crossness sewage plant in 1865 Erith was transformed from a small riverside resort into an industrial port. The existing administrative structures proved unsatisfactory so Erith Local Board was established under the Public Health Act 1875 to act as the sanitary authority for the Parish.

About the same time a new town began to grow up along the London to Dover Road, where it crossed Bexleyheath. The common lands of Bexley had been enclosed by special Act of Parliament in 1819, which facilitated the building of private houses there. The town was still administered by Bexley Parish Vestry, but this arrangement proved unpopular with the people of Bexleyheath. One result of this was the creation of a separate Bexleyheath Burial Board in 1852. In 1880 a solution was found by the creation of a Bexley Local Board, similar to the one at Erith.

Education in Bexley

In 1871 Erith School Board was established to provide a secular education for the children of the district. However in Bexley the tradition of church schools was still strong and a Bexley School Board was only created in 1894. The Local Government Act 1894 created Urban District Councils for both Bexley and Erith, replacing the Local Boards and Parish Vestries. In 1902 Fooks Cray was also constituted an Urban District, while East Wickham was absorbed into Bexley Council. Eight years later the boundaries were again reviewed and Lamorbey Ward was transferred from Bexley to Fooks Cray. The

Education Act 1902 abolished the School Boards. In Bexley responsibility for education passed to Kent County Council. Erith, however, succeeded in acquiring delegated powers to run its own schools. Over time the Councils were granted further powers covering such matters as electricity supply and tramways for which they obtained special Acts of Parliament.

During the First World War the village of Crayford developed into a small town due to the growth of the local munitions works and in 1920 the Parish was constituted an Urban District. After the War this industry languished in depression, while Bexley and Foots Cray, re-named Sidcup in 1921, experienced rapid sub-urbanisation during the great housing boom. This was accompanied by important administrative changes. In 1934 Sidcup merged with Chislehurst and North Cray to form Chislehurst and Sidcup Urban District Council. In 1936 Bexley Council finally took over the duties of the Bexleyheath Burial Board.

Royal charters were granted to Bexley in 1937 and to Erith in 1938 making the towns into Boroughs with their own Mayors. In 1944 Bexley also acquired delegated responsibility for local schools from Kent County Council, while Erith lost the same powers, which it had exercised since 1903. After the Second World War Bexley became a parliamentary constituency, to be joined by Erith and Crayford ten years later. Sidcup however had to wait until 1970 to have a seat in its own right. Although the boundaries of the three constituencies altered over time, from 1950 until 2001 Bexley was to count Sir Edward Heath as one of its representatives.

Today the Borough is best known for its many historic sites and beauty spots such as the ruins of Lesnes Abbey in Abbey Wood, Hall Place, the Tudor mansion with its magnificent gardens in Old Bexley and the Red House, William Morris's home in Bexleyheath. Danson Park in Welling with its Palladian villa and boating lake is the largest public open space in outer London, while Foots Cray meadows on the boundaries of Foots Cray and North Cray is the home of much interesting flora and fauna.