

Early Industry in Bexley

Before the days of mass-production and easy transport every local community had to be self-sufficient in most of its needs.

For centuries the crafts of the shoe-maker, the potter and the weaver were practised in practically every little town and village. The economic structure of society was simple but the range of manual skills deployed within each community was large.

It was not however a static situation. Long before the industrial Revolution a steady process had begun of concentrating certain kinds of industry in areas naturally suited to them. The products of such specialised industries displaced the locally manufactured articles and thus narrowed the range of local skills. Cloth-weaving was the first trade to be so affected. It was in decline throughout south-eastern England from the 17th century. The Industrial Revolution hastened this process.

Corn milling would have been an important industry in the Middle Ages and Bexley ("Bix") is mentioned in Domesday as having a church (St. Mary's) and three water mills. It is likely that one of these stood on the site of the present Old Mill which operated as a mill and latterly for the manufacture of sacks until 1966, when it burnt down. It reopened as a pub and restaurant and today is a complex of flats.

While village industries were losing ground, enterprising men were exploiting the natural resources of the area. They developed Erith's gravel and loam pits, Crayford's fabric printing industry and later used what had been neglected heath for growing fruit and vegetables for the insatiable markets of London. These activities were different from the older local crafts in several ways. They required special skills and techniques: their products were sold outside the area and they depended on an efficient transport system.

It is not usually realised how extensive the transport network was before the coming of the railway. In 1834 Bexley village, with a population of about 2000, was served by the wagons of six firms of carriers operating to and from London. North Cray (population 340) had a daily cart to London. Passengers were even better catered for. Coaches called at the Tiger or the Seven Stars at Footscray seven

times each day on their way London and there were more on the Dover Road through Crayford and Welling. There was also the River Thames, with its capacity for cheap bulk carriage by barge and its many boatmen taking passengers to London or other destinations on the river.

We get some idea of the kinds of skills employed in the past from old directories. A hundred years ago, in 1874, when the total population of the district was only 20,500, we had 38 bookmakers, 17 blacksmiths, 4 wheelwrights, 6 coachbuilders and 6 saddlers. There were also basket-makers, broom-makers, and barrel-makers. Forty years earlier, in 1834, there were representatives of other trades, such as charcoal burning, lime- burning, zinc- refining, straw-hat making, and paper-making.

This note looks at the skilled occupations found within the boundaries of modern Bexley. Some of them were carried out until the 1980s. Silk-printing and others are no longer practised (e.g. paper- making and brick-making); others again are hardly to be found anywhere in their ancient forms (e.g. milling by wind or waterpower). With the rise of modern technology, old crafts and skills are disappearing. It is impossible not to feel a sense of loss over this change. The craftsmen whose skills are no longer valued are those who feel this sense of loss most deeply.