

Erith

The origins of Erith date back to the days of the Anglo-Saxons.

Following the collapse of Roman rule at the beginning of the 5th century, Britain was colonised by invaders from northern Europe called the Anglo-Saxons. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that they won the Battle of Crayford in 457, slaying many men in the process, and shortly after claimed the whole of Kent. Their different way of life was reflected in their pattern of settlement. The town and country estates of the Roman bureaucrats gave way to a network of villages, occupied by warriors and farmers. Erith was one of these villages, and has a Saxon name, thought to have been derived from a word meaning "muddy harbour" or "gravelly landing place". There was probably a church on the site of the present St John the Baptist back in Roman times and almost definitely a Saxon building. The early settlement was based around this church meaning that the centre of Erith would have been slightly to the west of where it now is.

The earliest reference to the area is in a Latin charter of 695 recording a grant by the Bishop of the East Saxons of certain lands at Erith. In early times the area may also have been known as Lesnes or Lessness. After the Norman Conquest in 1066 Erith passed into the possession of Bishop Odo and is mentioned in the Domesday Survey. The year 1178 saw the foundation of the Augustinian Abbey of St Mary and St Thomas the Martyr at Lesnes. Richard de Lucy, Chief Justiciar of England founded it, perhaps in penance for the murder of Thomas à Becket, in which he was involved.

In 1316 during the reign of Edward II Erith was granted a weekly market and two annual fairs. Then in 1381 Abel Ker of Erith led a local uprising linked to the famous Peasants' Revolt. It actually began in Essex but a mob from Erith burst in to nearby Lesnes Abbey and forced the abbot to swear an oath to support them. After this they marched to Maidstone to join the main body of men led by Wat Tyler.

The reign of Henry VIII brought changes to Erith and he is even thought to have spent a night at Erith on his way to France. He founded his naval dockyard at Erith, at the eastern end of West Street (roughly where the Riverside Gardens are now) and his famous warship, Henri Grace à Dieu or Great Harry, was fitted out there in

1515. The foundation of this dockyard may have been responsible for the movement of the centre of the town from around St John's Church to its present site.

The Abbot of Lesnes Abbey was an important local landlord and took a leading part in draining the marshland. However, this and the cost of maintaining river embankments was one of the reasons given for the Abbey's chronic financial difficulties. It never became a large community and was closed by Cardinal Wolsey in 1525, under a licence to suppress monasteries of less than seven inmates.

The district had some small share in the eighteenth century country house boom. Belvedere House, after which the Belvedere district was named, was built during the early part of George II's reign and owned by Charles Calvert, Lord Baltimore. When Calvert died in 1751 it became the home of Sampson Gideon, a wealthy businessman. His son, also called Sampson, rebuilt the house in 1764 and he became Baron Eardley in 1789. The Eardley Arms, which still exists in Belvedere today, commemorates the family and the influence they had on the district.

However, it was during the Victorian era that Erith was to develop fully as both an industrial and residential centre. The main reason for the sudden growth of the town at this time was the opening of Erith railway station on the North Kent Line in 1849 (the original building still survives today). The railway allowed easy access to London from Erith for many potential wealthy residents and it was not long before local landowners realised this and started to develop some or all of their land to fulfil this need. One of the first to do this in the 1850s was Sir Culling Eardley who began building villas on his Belvedere estate. At Erith, the Wheatley estate, which comprised practically the whole of Erith, was sold in 1874, and the open land quickly built on. Consequently the population of Erith rose from a meagre 2,082 in 1841 to 25,296 by 1901.

Similarly, easy access to both the new railway and the river was bringing many different industries to Erith. The range of manufacturers present in nineteenth century Erith was vast and included steam engines, armaments, stoneware and mining equipment, as well as bricks and loam from the local pits. Typical of the firms who came to Erith towards the last years of the nineteenth century was Callender's Bitumen Telegraph and Waterproof

Company. William Callender was involved in road-making until 1881, when he patented "Vulcanized Bitumen", an insulating material and formed a new firm to exploit this discovery. In 1882 Callender's was involved in the wiring of Hatfield House, one of the first country houses to install electric lighting. The company soon became the well-known major cable manufacturer, BICC renamed Balfour Beatty in 2000.

As mentioned, earlier Erith owes its existence to the Thames and was, until the 1850s, essentially a small riverside port, originally given prominence by Henry VIII's decision to open a naval dockyard in the town. At that time, and until the 19th century, Erith was a popular anchorage. Ships often discharged some cargo here before proceeding through the shallows upstream. Sailing barges still found it a convenient anchorage until recent years. John Stone and his descendants built and sailed barges from a yard behind the Cross Keys.

The river has provided Erith's recreation as well as its livelihood. In the 1840s a steamer landing, hotel and pleasure grounds were built, but the town's life as a resort was short. The Royal Corinthian Yacht Club was formed in Erith in 1872, but moved to Burnham-on-Crouch in 1898. At the turn of the century, the annual regatta attracted large crowds, and was the highlight of the town's year. In the 1860s, the sailing barge races started and finished at Erith. Even today, the Riverside Festival commemorates in its name the importance of the river in the development of the town and community.

By 1867 the area had a local newspaper The Bexley Heath, Erith and Sidcup Observer although the first newspaper to be actually printed in Erith was The Erith Times in 1882 at their office in the High Street.

In 1871 the Erith School Board was formed and was one of the first school boards in Kent. The setting up of the board was largely due to William Anderson, an engineer and businessman, who had moved to Erith in 1864. He was head of one of the most important firms in Victorian Erith, Easton & Anderson's Ironworks. Another important development was the establishment in 1876 of Erith Local Board of Health which was really an early form of local government organising such things as road repairs, street lighting and refuse collection. This body was succeeded in 1894 by Erith Urban District Council which greatly expanded the range of public services to the local population.

During the First World War Erith was an extremely important area for the manufacture of guns and ammunition largely due to the presence of the large Vickers works in the Fraser Road area. In 1918 Queen Mary visited the Vickers factory in recognition of their efforts during the war.

By the end of the last century Erith had become a thriving industrial and retail centre. In addition to Callender's, large industrial firms established in the town included Easton & Anderson, Vickers, Fraser & Chalmers (steam plant and milling machinery), William Cory & Son (coal merchants) and Cannon & Gaze (flour mills). Mitchell's Department Store in the High Street and Pier Road was the main retail outlet. The store was very large and in publicity leaflets it was often called " The Shopping Centre of Kent " and boasted no fewer than 35 departments! The store began life as a small shop in the middle of the nineteenth century but it was not until the 1890s when its owner James Dudney sold out to Mr Hedley Mitchell, that the business really took off.

The expansion of public services continued with a new public library built in Walnut Tree Road in 1906 and Erith Hospital which was opened by the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VIII, in 1924. Next to the library an impressive new town hall was opened for the Urban District Council in 1931 and shortly after, in 1933, the town began the mobile or travelling library with the first purpose-built vehicles in the country.

A further development in the history of local government in Erith occurred in 1938 when the town was granted a charter of incorporation as a borough and the Urban District Council became Erith Borough Council.

In the Second World War, Erith found itself in the thick of the conflict being directly on the German bombing routes from Europe to London and also because of the nearby armament factories. Between 1939 and 1945 the "alert" was sounded in Erith 1,050 times and 444 high explosive bombs, 10 oil bombs, 6 parachute mines, 12 V1 flying bombs, 15 V2 rockets and approximately 8,500 incendiaries fell in the district. Five hundred and seventy two properties were destroyed and 10,904 damaged, 750 of them severely. There were 109 people killed, and 1,381 people injured, 509 of them seriously enough to be

detained in hospital. Two thousand five hundred children were evacuated and 2,911 homeless people were accommodated in rest centres.

Perhaps the most wide-ranging and controversial period of development in Erith's history came in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the town centre was redeveloped under the Erith Redevelopment Plan, which was approved by the Minister for Housing and Local Government in 1964. The plan arose because of the steady decline in trade in the area after the Second World War which was blamed on poor access and, in general, the bad layout of the town centre. It was decided that the problem should be "tackled with vigour if the town was to survive". The main theme of the plan was the demolition of almost the whole of the existing town centre to be replaced by a new modern centre incorporating both retail and residential developments. This began in 1966 and, symbolically, Mitchell's, the largest and oldest surviving shop in the town, was the first to go. The shopping centre and other nearby developments such as the Riverside Swimming Centre were designed by the architect Richard Seifert in 1968 in the modernist style of that period.

However, the redevelopment was dogged by problems including delays, financial problems resulting from a slump in the development market, local opposition and high rents in new retail units. As a result much of the original scheme had to be modified and replanned and this meant that the original well-intentioned ideas of the architect to revive the town centre appear to have failed. As early as the 1970s the problems of unoccupied shops and vandalism were being highlighted in local newspapers. The subsequent development of Bexleyheath as the main retail centre in the borough has also had its effect. In addition, doubts have since been cast on the architectural style and material used. The above plan was inherited by the London Borough of Bexley when it was created in 1965, drawing together the former local authority areas of Erith, Sidcup, Crayford and Bexley.

In 1996 Bexley Council issued its Erith Town Centre Strategy and Action Plan which recognises that the Redevelopment Plan of the 1960s did not achieve its objectives for whatever reasons and aims again to revitalise the centre of Erith especially in respect of retail activity. The neglected area around Erith Deep Wharf was singled out for a major new supermarket development in addition to the renovation of the jetty to expand the present riverfront walkway.

One major project in Erith is the Erith-Thamesmead Spine Road opened in May 1997 and named Bronze Age Way after important archaeological discoveries during its construction. The Erith - Thamesmead link was the fourth and final phase of the major spine road, originally proposed by the Greater London Council in 1976, between Woolwich and Erith. The aim was that, in conjunction with the strategy and action plan mentioned above, this major new transport link would stimulate redevelopment by making the town centre at Erith more accessible to new and existing business.