

Falconwood

Looking at the modern suburb of Falconwood today it is hard to believe that, many centuries ago, much of the district was woodland.

A glance at the Ordnance Survey Map of 1870 shows large areas of wood still in existence and there are enough historical records to show that these woodland areas were the survivors of far more extensive woodlands at an earlier date. The Falconwood area was part of the Manor of Bexley which, at that time, stretched from the foot of Shooters Hill to Crayford in one direction and from Brampton to Sidcup in the other. In the places where trees could not grow there was heath land, remembered in names such as Bexleyheath, Northumberland Heath, Lesnes Heath. Areas like Bexley, Crayford and Erith began their existence as settlements cut into the woodlands near river crossings or at the junctions of tracks.

These woods were a source of income to their owners, who sold the timber from them for building purposes and even had the bigger trees carted to London for the construction of ships. Before the 18th century improvements in agriculture, woodland was at least as profitable as arable land or pasture. It is a mistake to suppose that the woods were merely wild and uncared for. Even the fallen branches were used for firewood and there were technical terms in this trade now long forgotten; firewood in general was called talwood, while bundles of firewood came in different sizes, from the smallest, the bavin or pimp, tied with only one string or wiff, to the biggest, the faggot, tied with two wiffs, with the bobbin in between those two. There was also the kilnbrush, an extra large faggot, used for heating kilns.

The Falconwood area itself was covered by West Wood, which was the largest single area of woodland in the manor of Bexley. It covered 350 acres, and lay at the western end of the manor (hence its name), extending as far as Bellegrove Road in the north, Westwood Lane in the east, Blackfen Road in the south, and the Eltham border in the west. The wood was for some centuries part of what were called the demesne lands of the manor, that is, lands cultivated directly on behalf of the Lord of the manor, which is why it remained as one large unit, instead of being divided up into smaller pieces.

A copy of the manor accounts for the year 1279 AD shows that West Wood, in that year, provided nearly one tenth of the total income of the manor (£5.12. 0. out of £58). The accounts of later years also feature this wood and it was obviously a valuable asset. In 1608, there was a survey of the manor of Bexley in which West Wood was said to be worth £70 a year. By then it had been leased to a tenant, who paid £20 and 20 cartloads of wood to the Lord of the manor by way of rent.

The manor of Bexley became the property of Oxford University in 1623 and the University used the income from it to fund a professorship of history. By the middle of the nineteenth century they became dissatisfied on account of the heavy charges on West Wood and the very small profit they derived from it. In 1854 they sent one of their members, a Doctor Norris, to inspect their Bexley properties, including West Wood. He reported that the wood consisted of oaks, properly planted to provide a succession of maturing trees, but that they did not grow to any size; "very few containing 30 feet of timber, most under 20, and very many under 10 feet". He added that the importing of foreign timber into the country and the transport and supply of coal by railway had much reduced the value of the timber in West Wood. In addition, the burden of rates and of management were very great. In fact the outgoings seemed to have been nearly as great as the receipts.

In view of this report the University decided to turn West Wood into a farm. All the trees were felled and the roots grubbed up. Farm buildings and a house were built at what is now The Green, Falconwood and the tenancy of the farm was granted to Mr William Clark, who had been operating a market garden on University land at Bexleyheath and had been highly praised by Dr. Norris in his 1854 report for the efficiency and enterprise he had shown. This took some time but the local rate book for April 1867 shows that Mr Clark was installed as tenant (and the rateable value was doubled, no doubt in anticipation of a higher return from agricultural use). By 1875 Clark had been succeeded by John Hunt, who continued to farm the estate for many years.

The Bexleyheath Railway was constructed in 1894-5. Its line cut the farm in two and soon we find two tenants of the University farming the two parts separately; Mr Hunt retained the larger portion to the south of the railway line, where he was followed c.1905 by W Maxwell, but

the northern part was farmed by Thomas Chaplin. These two farms seem to have been successful but in 1926 they suffered further division when new roads were built across their lands. Welling Way divided the northern farm and Rochester Way the southern one.

By this time the demand for land for house-building was beginning to grow. New suburbs were springing up all around London and in the Bexley area the local authority had just finished building an estate of over 400 houses in East Wickham, while private developers were using their more limited resources to acquire smaller areas for building on. The University therefore decided that the West Wood Farm had been so fragmented by railway and roads the land might as well be sold to developers for housing.

The part of the southern farm that lay on the south side of the new Rochester Way (now the A2) was sold in 1930 and the two parts of the northern farm in 1931. The central area, between the railway and Rochester Way was more difficult at first to sell, since it was too big for the resources of most speculative builders. However, the enormous success of the more efficient operators in the boom years after 1926 meant that by 1933 one firm was able to undertake the development of this large area of nearly 190 acres.

That firm was New Ideal Homesteads, a local firm that began in 1929, steadily expanded during the inter-war period and rose to become perhaps the most prolific of all London housing developers at that time. The firm opened its first estate in Dartford in 1930 and was founded by Leo P. Meyer who was at one time an assistant surveyor with Erith Urban District Council. He was also partner in the building firm of Blackwell & Meyer who were based in Bexleyheath. New Ideal Homesteads specialised in selling affordable, quality housing which could be bought for a very small cash advance. Prices starting as low as £295 for a 3-bedroomed house in some areas made them enormously popular and by 1939 the company had 25 estates in the Greater London area.

New Ideal Homesteads also acquired the northern part of the old Westwood Farm from its first purchaser, and thus were responsible for the development of the bulk of what had once been West Wood, transforming it into the new Falconwood Park Estate. The old farm buildings of 1867 some of which were still standing until the late 1980s became the site of The Green at Falconwood.