

North Cray

The village of North Cray lies on the eastern bank of the River Cray in the southeast corner of the London Borough of Bexley.

The Manor

According to the Domesday Book, in 1086 the Manor of North Cray belonged to Ansketel of Rots. The population consisted of seven villagers and six smallholders, who together with their dependents made a total population of fifty-two, the same as nearby Foots Cray. They farmed sixty acres of land plus an acre of meadow and three acres of pasture. The whole estate was valued at £3 compared to £4 in the time of Leofric, who owned it before the Norman Conquest.

By the reign of Richard the Lionheart the Manor had come into the possession of Sir John de Rokesle, who accompanied the King on the Third Crusade. The Rokesles also owned the neighbouring Manor of Ruxley from which they derived their name. They were influential in the City and Sir John's grandson, Gregory, became Lord Mayor of London. In the early fifteenth century the estate passed to the Poynings family and then on the death of Robert de Poynings in 1446 to his daughter Alianora. She married Sir Henry Percy, whose family were Earls of Northumberland. In 1538 the sixth Earl died without heirs and the Percy lands, including North Cray, passed to the Crown. Henry VIII granted the Manor to Sir Roger Cholmley in 1545. He sold it to Sir Martin Bowes in 1547. Sir Martin's son, William, died in 1634 leaving the Manor to his son in law William Buggin. In 1710 Sir Thomas D'aeth bought the estate from William's heir, John Buggin. Sir Thomas' son, Narborough sold it to Jeffry Hetherington. He died in 1767 leaving the Manor to his brother, the Reverend William Hetherington.

The Church

St James Church is recorded in the Domesday Book. The first recorded Rector of North Cray was John Foucher in 1371. The Parish was small and in 1557 an order by Cardinal Pole, the last Catholic Archbishop of Canterbury united the benefice with that of the adjacent Parish of Ruxley.

The parish registers testify to the charitable work of the villagers. Money was raised for victims of the plague in London on six separate occasions in 1665. There were numerous appeals for fires and the relief of Irish, French and even Lithuanian Protestants. The year 1659 saw 4s 6d being given to Philip Dandulo, a Turk who had converted to Christianity, while in 1670 the sum of £4.10s was raised for the redemption of English slaves held by the Turks. This tradition carried on into the next century. In 1771 the Lord of the Manor, the Reverend William Hetherington and his sister Elizabeth, built five almshouses in the Parish. Three were for the poor, one for the parish clerk and one for a schoolmaster. Six years later Hetherington gave £200 to the parish for the maintenance of the almshouses, which stood on the North Cray Road opposite the Rectory. In 1819 funds were raised to pay for the repair of the church by selling pews to the principal landowners in the district. The final cost of the work came to £450 of which Lord Castlereagh gave £150 and the Coventry family £100. Further improvements to the church were instigated in 1852 with repairs to the roof, the addition of a spire, new church bells and the installation of a heating system. The cost of these building works was met by public subscription, which raised £1484.19s.2d. In 1865 a new Rector was appointed, the Reverend Hugh Johnstone. He was to remain in office until 1919. In 1870 he extended the chancel, whereby the church assumed the shape we know today.

The Great Houses

North Cray contained a number of fine country houses. The most important of these was North Cray Place. This was the original Manor house. On the death of the Reverend William Hetherington in 1778 it passed to Thomas Coventry, a relative of the Earl of Coventry. He had the grounds laid out by Capability Brown in about 1782. In 1823 a new house was built designed by Henry Walker. Ten years later the whole estate was bought by Lord Bexley, owner of Foots Cray Place. His family, the Vansittarts, continued to own the house until 1918. North Cray Place was hit by an enemy bomb in 1944 and was finally demolished in 1961. Loring Hall was built in 1760 on the site of a Tudor house known as Wallets. Between 1811 and 1822 it was the home of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh. It was there that Castlereagh, now Marquis of Londonderry killed himself in 1822. Today Loring Hall, a Grade II listed building, is a private mental care facility.

Two other important houses in the village were Mount Mascall and Vale Mascall. Built around 1600 Mount Mascall stood on the hillside overlooking the North Cray Road. It was named after the Mascall family who had owned the property in Tudor times. Notable owners included Sir John Leman and Sir Robert Ladbroke, both of whom had held office as Lord Mayor of London. It was demolished in 1957. Vale Mascall was built in 1740 by Sir John Tash, another former Lord Mayor. Subsequent owners included Sir Comport Fitch and Sir Francis Burdett MP. Unlike other country houses in the area Vale Mascall is still privately owned. The Gothic Bath House, built c1766, in the grounds of Vale Mascall survives and is now part of the garden of a private house. It can be viewed by appointment (see <https://www.bexley.gov.uk/services/visitor-attractions/gothic-bath-house>)

The Inn

The only public house in the village is the White Cross Inn on North Cray Road, which dates back at least as far as 1729. It was known as the Red Cross Inn, after the flag of St George or possibly the cross of the Knights Templars. However, in 1935 officials at the War Office ruled that the name violated the terms of the Geneva Convention protecting the symbols of the International Red Cross Society. The brewers were obliged to change the name and adopted the White Cross of the Knights Hospitallers instead.

Local Government

The welfare of the poor in the parish was the responsibility of the Vestry, an assembly of landowners meeting in the church vestry after the service on Sunday under the chairmanship of the Rector. The minutes of its meetings record grants of money to widows, unmarried mothers and the like. Thus on 15 February 1712 Margaret Eves was given a grant of two shillings and six pence per week for the upkeep of her daughter and son. However this sort of outdoor relief was abandoned in 1761 when it was resolved to send all the destitute of the parish to the work house at Farnborough. The old system seems to have been resumed as prosperity grew only to come under attack again in times of depression. Thus in 1831 the Vestry recommended that a widow, Mrs Wallis, should get her son out to work or have her pension reduced, while other recipients saw their payments reduced

or cancelled altogether. On 25 June 1836, as a result of the Poor Law (Amendment) Act the parish was incorporated into the Bromley Union. Outdoor relief was abolished and the poor of the parish confined to the Union poorhouse. The role of the Overseers of the Poor was diminished while that of the Surveyor of Highways increased.

The Vestry also had a duty to maintain the highways. In 1753 and again in 1754 it paid eight pounds to the turnpike trust that was repairing the road from Foots Cray to Wrotham Heath. A further grant followed in 1763. By 1843 the age of the turnpike trust was coming to an end and in that year the Surveyor was authorised to make repairs to the road running through the village himself. In 1858 the Vestry created a Nuisance Removal Committee to improve sanitation in the Parish.

Education was another concern of the Vestry. In 1777 Elisabeth Hetherington, sister of the Rector, William Hetherington had left £100 to the Parish to provide a school in the village. In 1859 an Infants School was established and the following year the old schoolroom was replaced by a new school with its own grounds, built and presented to the Parish by Western Wood MP, owner of North Cray Place.

Under the Local Government Act 1894, North Cray was incorporated into the Rural District of Bromley. At the local level the old Vestry was replaced by an elected Parish Council, which ran the Hetherington charities, allotments and related matters. The Parish Council was finally abolished in 1934, when North Cray was absorbed into the new Urban District of Chislehurst and Sidcup. In 1965 North Cray became, like Sidcup, part of the London Borough of Bexley.

Between 1967 and 1969 the North Cray Road was widened, demolishing much of the historic heart of the village. In the course of the development one of the group of cottages destined for demolition was revealed to have at its core an intact fifteenth century hall house. The medieval house, the oldest secular building in the Borough was taken down and eventually re-erected at the Weald and Downland Museum at Singleton, West Sussex. The road-widening scheme did much to destroy the identity of North Cray as a village, although something of the old community spirit survived. Even so in 2001 the

Church of St James, North Cray was united with that of All Saints, Fooks Cray.