

Northumberland Heath

The area now known as Northumberland Heath was originally part of the ancient Saxon manor of Earhythe or Erith, as we know it today.

The first mention of the area is in a Kent Assize Roll for 1292, which mentions Northumbre. The name means to the north of the "humbre", which was the word for stream or river, presumably a tributary of the River Cray.

In early times the area was simply common ground or heath as indicated in a deed of 1592, which mentioned Northumberlond Hethe. Another early mention was on 28 April 1642 at Howberry Court when John Kettle was charged with grazing cattle on common land called Northumberland Heath. There are no features or houses shown in the area on Andrews, Drury and Herbert's map of 1769 and even in 1797, Hasted, in his 'History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent', refers to the land simply as 'barren heath'.

It was probably in the early nineteenth century that the first significant settlement began. Certainly the building of a workhouse in 1805 (towards the western end of what is now Sussex Road) would suggest that the area had a population of some note. The workhouse was for six families and was financed by the Lords Eardley and Wheatley and General Hulse. The Wheatley family had a considerable influence on Erith as a whole but they became particularly associated with Northumberland Heath, largely as a result of land awarded to them after the Erith Enclosure Act of 1812.

This enclosure of land became very common throughout the country during the latter half of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth. The process was mostly initiated by prominent local landowners who wanted to have land officially designated to them often before selling it off for development. In Erith's case the main push to enclose land was provided by Baron Eardley who lived at Belvedere House. The major award of land at Northumberland Heath under the enclosure scheme was 38 acres to William Wheatley but other names mentioned in the award as having smaller plots of land include John Holding, James Page and Sophia Strand.

It is probable that most people living and working on the land at this time were involved in agriculture, in particular fruit and vegetable growing. The Tithe Map of 1843 shows the areas allotted by the enclosure sub-divided further into smallholdings and orchards. These would have produced basic crops for local markets and shops especially those at Erith. However, the arrival of the railway in 1849 meant that agricultural production was gradually expanded as produce, especially soft and perishable fruit such as strawberries, could now be got quickly to the London markets.

Other local employers would have been the industries at Erith, especially towards the second half of the nineteenth century (Erith Iron Works was established as early as 1863), and also the brickfields and gravel pits to the north and west of Northumberland Heath.

One important local industry which deserves a mention is milling. In 1819 a post mill was built, probably by Myles Barne, in a field off what is now Mill Road. This mill would have used locally grown corn and it quickly became a major landmark situated at the very top of the heath and clearly visible from the river. In 1858 it was purchased by Samuel Strickland who had previously owned the windmill at Bexleyheath. The mill fell into disuse towards the end of the nineteenth century after being severely damaged by gales but part of the base still survives today and can be seen from St Pauls Road. The earliest census record for the area is from 1841 and records 24 houses and 100 people 'in Northumberland Heath and land out to Beden Well' some of them in barns and sheds.

By the second half of the nineteenth century although most of the heath was still rural in nature there were the beginnings of change. Erith, which had always been a fairly important port, began to expand largely because of the combination of its river and railway connections. Lords Eardley and Wheatley began developing part of their vast estates at Belvedere and Erith to provide country houses or villas for rich new commuters to London. In addition extensive industrial development started at Erith as other firms followed early pioneers such as Erith Iron Works to the prime riverside site.

All this had a dramatic effect on the small hamlet of Northumberland Heath. Residential development began in earnest, mostly of terraced housing for the workers employed in the industries at Erith. Certainly houses on the north side of Manor Road, for example, date back to the

1860s and are typical of the kind of housing being built. By the 1880s there had been more extensive building along the main roads such as Brook Street, Mill Road and Bexley Road although there was still plenty of open space mostly filled by market gardens and orchards. A few large houses were also built including Oakhurst on the corner of Mill and Bexley Roads which was completed in about 1892 and later, in 1921, became the Labour Club whose current premises is in Mill Road. Oakhurst was demolished in the 1950s.

The Pheasant in Belmont Road was probably the earliest pub on the Heath, built in the 1830s and the census records show several beer houses in the area. Others began to appear in the second half of the nineteenth century including the Brewers Arms, The Duchess of Kent, The Duke of Northumberland and The Royal Oak all built in the 1860s. The Pheasant (now closed) and Royal Oak were subsequently rebuilt in the 1930s.

Public services in the area were also greatly improved during the last half of the century. The Erith School Board, formed in 1870, opened an infants school in what is now Belmont Road in 1872 attended by 34 pupils. The building still survives as a snooker hall near to The Pheasant public house. Brook Street School was built in 1895 to cater for increasing numbers of schoolchildren.

By the turn of the century Northumberland Heath was an established village with the cross roads of Brook Street, Bedonwell Road and Mill Road as its centre together with the Duke of Northumberland public house. Some people in houses along the main roads opened shops on their ground floors, recognising the need for services for the expanding community. Small traders listed in the area in the street directory for 1900 include two butchers, a baker, bootmaker, fruiterer, florist and chemist.

Transport links also improved in the early 1900s with Bexley Urban District Council trams running to the junction of Erith Road and Brook Street and by 1905, those of Erith Urban District Council to the junction of Bexley Road and Brook Street. Residential development continued at an ever-increasing pace with the Vickers estate built in the Colyers Lane, Barnehurst Avenue and Northway area in 1916. These houses were in Crayford parish and so initially schoolchildren from them were refused permission to attend Erith schools, a situation that eventually required government intervention to resolve. Erith Urban District Council began the large housing estate on Bexley Road

in 1920. There was a further house building boom in the 1930s, as there was in the rest of the district, which included developments at Carlton Road, Hurst Road, Parsonage Manorway and Belmont Road. Slowly the market gardens and orchards were squeezed out.

St Pauls Church, Northumberland Heath was consecrated in 1901 as a chapel-of-ease for St Johns, Erith but in November 1905 it became a separate parish and a new church was built to house an enlarged congregation, having 500 seats. In 1933 Northumberland Heath Senior School at Brook Street was built and in 1935 trams in the area were replaced by trolleybuses. Much of the change and development stopped with the advent of war.

Although many other parts of Erith were very badly damaged by enemy action during the Second World War, Northumberland Heath escaped relatively lightly. There were air raid shelters at North Heath Senior School and Erith County School sports ground which could house 300 people between them. One major incident occurred at the junction of Hurst Road and Colyers Lane on 29 July 1944 when a flying bomb landed, damaging many houses, 9 of which had to be demolished. After the war work resumed on the residential estates begun in the late 1930s and Northumberland Heath gradually became the densely populated suburb it is today.

Northumberland Heath was well known for the variety and quality of its shops right up until the 1970s but gradually the advent of supermarkets meant that many of the original traders, such as butchers and greengrocers, went out of business. However, the area is still a shopping centre today and caters for a large and diverse local population. It still has a "village feel" about it although inevitably much of the open space has disappeared and there is little evidence of the Heath as it originally was. The area is classified as a shopping centre in the council's Unitary Development Plan [1997] and continues to serve the local community with convenience goods.