

Thamesmead

The area that Thamesmead Town now stands on was originally uninhabited marshland.

Although the area was inhospitable and unsuitable for housing, lack of space and the expansion of London meant that land was desperately needed and over the years various efforts have been made to drain the land and protect it from flooding. Before Thamesmead was built the area was known collectively as Erith Marshes and Plumstead Marshes. Augustinian monks from Lesnes Abbey were the first people known to have reclaimed and drained land in the area. Lesnes Abbey had been founded in the 12th century by Sir Richard de Lucy on slightly higher ground to the south of Thamesmead but the monks cultivated their own crops and reared domestic animals and for this they needed the ground to be more level and so began draining land in the area now occupied by Thamesmead. The River Thames originally came right up to Lesnes Abbey and it is said that the monks used to fish from the walls (and sharks teeth have been found in the Abbey Woods). Hasted in his "History of Kent" states that in 1279 the monks of Lesnes "enclosed a great part of their marsh near Plumstead". This type of small-scale cultivation and animal farming was also taken up by local people but in general the land was too wet and marshy to attempt any large scale farming.

In 1515 Henry VIII ordered the building of the warship, Henri Grace à Dieu, as part of an effort to improve and enlarge the British Navy and to this end he established a major dockyard at Woolwich which was very near to what is now Thamesmead. It was from this point onwards that the area became an important naval and military centre. The Thamesmead site, mostly on the Greenwich side of the boundary, was gradually given over to the Royal Arsenal and used for the making and testing of guns and ammunition. The land was ideal for this as there were still very few people living in the area and also the marshy ground deadened the impact of explosions and therefore was safer when testing ammunition. One of the new weapons tested on the marshes near Plumstead was one called Mallets Mortar which was meant to be portable but ended up weighing 42 tons! It was not a successful new invention and on the very first test firing in October 1857 a fracture appeared in the metal and the project was abandoned. However, the Arsenal itself brought much needed trade to the area as

people employed in the munitions factories came to live in the nearby towns and villages. The area became more and more important militarily throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as England was at war with many different countries including France and Spain. The Crimean War, which began in 1854, also placed big demands on the Arsenal. By the beginning of the First World War the Arsenal was operating at full capacity and obviously the demand for guns and ammunition was at its highest providing employment for 73,000 people.

However, partly due to isolated zeppelin raids on the Arsenal during the First World War, people became worried about the manufacture and testing of guns and ammunition so near to densely populated areas. The Arsenal was now surrounded by residential developments as London expanded further and further outwards. So from the 1920s onwards the site was scaled down as both the testing and manufacture of weapons moved to more remote and secret areas.

The Second World War merely confirmed the need to move the Arsenal elsewhere as it was so well-known that the Luftwaffe could target it easily for bombing raids and this meant that surrounding residential areas were also badly damaged. After the war the Arsenal became less and less used and by the late 1950s the London County Council (LCC) had earmarked part of the land together with about 500 acres of virgin marshland at Erith to form the site for a new riverside town development to help cope with the demand for housing in the area. The Erith marshland had been mostly unused but some was given over to allotments used by the residents of Abbey Wood. The site thus straddled the newly created London Boroughs of Bexley and Greenwich in the mid-1960s and Thamesmead was developed by the London County Council's successor, the Greater London Council (GLC), in conjunction with these two boroughs.

The release of 1,000 acres of marshland previously occupied by the Royal Arsenal by the Ministry of Defence to the LCC in the early 1960s gave impetus to the project. The initial idea of what was then called the Woolwich-Erith Project, was to build a series of villages on concrete platforms linked by bridges to keep the residential areas well above ground-level and therefore safe from the threat of flooding. However, the release of more land meant the project was completely rethought and the result is what you see today. Before any actual work on residential buildings could begin the engineers had to

ensure the site would be suitable for the builders. To this end a new central pumping station was provided, linked to canals and channels to ensure efficient drainage of what was still marshland and three miles of Thamesmead's riverbanks had to be raised and strengthened to prevent any future flooding.

These were all major engineering projects and in addition earlier building foundations had to be excavated (these were recycled for use in road construction) and transport networks set up before any building could start. Also, since about 1700, attempts to reclaim the land had mostly involved using convict labour to infill the marshland with various materials including, in later years, rubble from the bombing of London during the Second World War.

Obviously this type of labour could not be relied upon to have done an efficient job and no-one had any real idea of the type of material used to infill. So skilled engineers had to take samples and assess the capability of the land to support the building of a major residential area. Some areas had to be refilled or stabilised but in the end the site was declared ready for construction. The name was chosen by a Barnehurst resident, Mr Anthony Walton, who won £20 as first prize in a competition to find a name for the new development. Construction on the first "neighbourhood" (as the different areas were called) near Abbey Wood began in January 1967. Thamesmead was built in stages and even today these are still referred to as area 1 or area 3 depending on when they were built. The first two were built using concrete slabs, which were then fitted together, rather like giant Lego, with the main accommodation on the first and second floors to reduce the danger of flooding (Abbey Wood was badly flooded in 1953). Walkways connected the different buildings. This method of building was changed to more conventional, lower-level brick building after the river walls were raised and the danger of flooding subsequently reduced.

Unlike other outlying new towns, such as Milton Keynes, Thamesmead immediately benefited from its central location which meant people were more willing to move to it and, in addition, excellent transport facilities meant it was very easy to get to and from. Surveys have revealed that 47% of residents in the town work in central London emphasising this point. The plan for Thamesmead was that it should be a self-contained, balanced community with facilities for such things as recreation, housing and education fully provided for within

the town itself. Thamesmead also has its own nature reserve called Tump 53 which is on reclaimed Royal Arsenal ground (tump refers to a hillock or mound).

Up until its abolition in 1986, Thamesmead had been developed and managed by the GLC. A referendum was held (in October 1985) to find out how local residents wanted Thamesmead to be run after the abolition. The majority of voters wanted the area to be run by a private company run by residents so in March 1986 Thamesmead became the first residential estate in the country to be run by a private company controlled entirely by the residents of Thamesmead. Thamesmead Town is a company limited by guarantee; it has no share capital and is non-profit distributing. The Board of 12 manages not only the residential development but also the commercial areas, open spaces, recreational facilities and industrial estates. There are ambitious plans for the development of a proper town centre and also riverside housing development. Thamesmead Town now has about 45,000 residents.

Crossness

At the northern tip of Thamesmead, right beside the river, in an area now occupied by the Thames Water Authority Sewage Treatment works is the Crossness Pumping Station. This was opened by the Prince of Wales in 1865 and was built by Sir Joseph Bazalgette who was at that time the Chief Engineer of the Metropolitan Board of Works. In those days sewage from the nearby area was pumped untreated into the River Thames. The engines at the works picked up the effluent from the sewage outfall works and held it until after each high tide so that when it was pumped out into the River Thames the tide would carry it out to sea.

The station and its engines are slowly being restored by the Crossness Engines Trust and the engine house is one of the few Grade I listed industrial buildings in the Greater London area. The engines were last working in 1953 and are the largest surviving rotary beam engines in the country and probably in the world. The site is open to visitors on selected dates – see: www.crossness.org.uk/.