

The early history of Bexleyheath

Less than 200 years ago Bexleyheath was a tract of rough open land, unfit for cultivation and had a bad reputation as a haunt of Highwaymen.

Through it ran the Dover Road, the main route from London to Canterbury and the Channel ports, along which up to 70 stagecoaches trundled every day. It was a wild, deserted place.

At its western end stood the Golden Lion, a coaching inn, which had been built in about 1730 and was sometimes used by local magistrates for their petty sessions. The Golden Lion public house still occupies this site. Near its north eastern corner was the Bexleyheath windmill, where John Dann was miller for many years before his death in about 1836 although his mill, which was near the present TfL bus garage in Erith Road, was actually in Crayford Parish. Near its south eastern corner was Warren Farm, with its farmhouse at the end of a track from Gravel Hill, which is now Broomfield Road. This farmhouse was known locally as "Pest House", apparently because a victim of the Great Plague of London in 1665 died there after catching the disease on a trip to London.

In the later years of the 18th Century there was a sudden change on the Heath. People began to come and built shacks there to live in. Times were hard and there was much poverty. Bexley Heath was not far from London and lay astride the Dover Road. Some men who had no work and no prospect of finding any, took to the road with their families, and found on the Heath open land where they could settle. Evidently they were able to earn enough to keep themselves, presumably by labouring work and it is said that they made brushes from the broom plant which grew around their settlement and sold them in neighbouring villages. Hence the nickname "Broom-dashers" that was given to them.

Little is known about these people. They themselves naturally left no records and no one else wrote about them. The only clue as to the places they came from is a series of entries in the marriage register of the parish church, which at that time was St. Mary's, Bexley. Marriage registers give the names of the persons getting married and their home parishes. A typical entry in St. Mary's register will state that

John Smith of Erith married Mary Robinson "of this parish", or that William Brown and Jane Weight (or William Brown and Jane Wright) "both of this parish" were married. But in 1774 there is an entry of a marriage on October 16 between John Hare and Mary Lane, "both of this parish" but with the additional word "sojourner" by each of their names. This type of entry occurs many times in the following thirty years. Sometimes there is in addition to the word "sojourner" a note of the parish of origin, in such words as "Sojourner, of this parish but late of Woolwich". After 1800 the entries omit "sojourner" but state the parish of origin.

The most obvious explanation of "Sojourner" in this context is that the persons so described had no legal settlement in the parish and that they had no claim for the parish relied if they became destitute. Squatters on the Heath would be in this category although there could well be others in the parish who were also in it. Another noteworthy point is that the entries in the register that specify "Sojourner" were all made in time of one vicar, Rev William Green, beginning four years after his induction and ceasing after his death.

Now if some at least of these entries refer to squatters on Bexleyheath, which seems a reasonable assumption, they constitute the only evidence we have for the early settlement of the Heath. It is therefore important to examine them carefully. For although records of marriages by themselves cannot provide more than a partial and incomplete picture of the community they represent, they do provide some information which is better than no information at all.

Firstly we can consider the numbers of marriages involving sojourners. In 33 years there were 47 of them (out of a total of 227 weddings in that period). This is quite a large proportion and indicates a sizeable community of sojourners on the Heath, even allowing that some of the sojourners were in other parts of the parish. Furthermore, the frequency of such marriages increases during the 33 years; in the first eleven years there were six, in the next eleven years there were 14, and in the next there were 27. It looks as if the numbers squatting on the Heath were increasing steadily.

Next we can look at the places from which the sojourners originally came. Many of the entries in the register do not give the parish of origin of those persons designated as sojourners, but some do. The list is as follows.

Woolwich	13
Greenwich	3
Deptford	3
Plumstead	2
Stone	4
Meopham	2
Dartford	10
Crayford	3
Bromley	4
Chislehurst	2
Wilmington	4
Sutton	2
St. Paul's (Cray)	1
Darenth	2
Darn (? = Darenth)	1
St Martin in the Fields	1
Marylebone	2
Newington Butts	21
Grays, Essex	1
Not stated	25
	86

Eight others were shown as belonging to Bexley, though in three cases the wording is ambiguous and might refer to the spouse's parish. It is interesting to notice that most came from Woolwich, and that Dartford was the second commonest parish of origin. If we take the parishes by groups we find that Woolwich, Greenwich, Deptford and Plumstead provided 21 people, the rest of Kent 35, three London parishes 4, and Essex 1.

It is also possible to get some idea of the numbers who could read and write, or at least sign their own names. Of the 94 persons getting married, 49 signed their names, and 45 made marks. This compares with 226 signatories in all the weddings during the period and 228 marksmen. It look as if the sojourners were if anything slightly more literate than the parish as a whole.

But undoubtedly the most significant point to emerge from this marriage register is the number of sojourners who were married in Bexley Church. For if this number is to be considered side by side with the population of the whole parish some rough- very rough- idea of the number of squatters can be found. In 1801 the population of Bexley was 1441. In the ten years 1797 - 1806 there were 78 weddings of which 27 involved sojourners. These 27 included 17 in which both parties were sojourners and 10 in which one party belonged to Bexley. So that 112 persons were married who were normal parishioners and 44 were sojourners. (It can be assumed that the parties who belonged to other parishes - there were only 4 of them - were balanced by Bexley people who got married in other churches. 44, 40% of 112, which is a staggeringly large proportion, even when allowance has been made for the probability that the squatters had only a small number of elderly people. There must have been quite a shantytown on the Heath.

It is not surprising that the property owners of the parish took action. They followed the course popular at that time of getting Parliament to pass an Act authorising the enclosure of the Heath and its partition among local freeholders. In 1814 the Act of Parliament was passed and the Heath was shared out among those who could establish their rights to some of it by virtue of already owning property in the parish. This process took several years because the commissioner first appointed to carry out the Act died soon after beginning work and the man chosen to take his place was already engaged on the Crayford Inclosure. The final award was published in 1819.

While the commissioner was at work but some time before the end of it was in sight, the parish vestry resolved to have a survey and valuation made of the lands and buildings that had been erected on the Heath. This was done in September 1816 and the result was entered in the rate book. Thirty-four names were thus added to the list of ratepayers. It may seem strange that the vestry had ignored this source of additional revenue for so long but according to the law of that period anyone who paid rates automatically acquired a settlement in the parish. The vestry would therefore be reluctant to risk future heavy liabilities for the support of squatters who fell on hard times and no doubt decided to have the new properties on the Heath assessed only when it was certain that the Inclosure was well on the way to completion.

The rate books are an important source of information about the development of the Heath but they do not tell a simple or straightforward story. The survey of the Heath in 1816 was not the first occasion when property there was rated. As early as 1803 a small section of the list of property-owners had been headed "Bexley Heath" but there were only three names on it. These names can be found in earlier years, though put among the Upton residents. One of the three properties involved was the "Golden Lion", the predecessor of the public house with the same name still on the same site in Bexleyheath. Between 1803 and 1816 the number of ratepayers listed under the head "Bexleyheath" grew very slowly and by 1815 it had only increased to six. The new survey ordered in 1816 added over thirty more, though only a dozen of these were listed as having cottages or houses; the others had pieces of land and presumably lived elsewhere.

When the Inclosure Commissioner published his award in 1819, he allotted plots of land of varying sizes to no fewer than one hundred and seven recipients. The award included a map of the Heath showing separate plots and the names of their new owners. (This is, incidentally, the first large scale map of any part of the parish of Bexley known to us.)

We have then three possible sources for the names of the early settlers on the Heath. Firstly, the Bexley marriage register, which may refer to such people as "sojourners"; secondly, the local rate books, especially the survey done in 1816; and thirdly, the commissioner's award of 1819. The difficulty is that the marriage register entries are of people who actually lived on the Heath (if our hypothesis is correct); the rate books also give names of occupiers of houses and cottages but at a date from ten to forty years after weddings in the register (and many changes have taken place in that time) and the Inclosure Award gives names of those to whom land was allocated, many of whom could have had no intention of living there. So we cannot really expect to find any name occurring in all three documents. In fact no name occurs in all three.

However several names are found in two of the three documents. Two men who appeared in 1804 as "sojourners" in the marriage register were rated for property in 1816, and a third who was married in 1787 may have become the father of a man of the same surname in the 1816

survey. There are six persons in the marriage register whose surnames correspond to those of people mentioned in the award and so may be related to them. Finally, there are fourteen people whose names occur in both the 1816 survey and the 1819 award.

Although the Commissioner took five years to complete his work of distributing the land on the Heath, he did not wait until he had finished before making some of his allotments. Several instances are found of recipients of land selling part of their allotments as early as 1816. One man, the landlord of the Golden Lion, was bankrupt by 1820 after over-reaching himself in speculative buying and selling of such land.

Many of the purchasers of land on the Heath were hoping to make money by building houses for sale or rent. The rate assessments provide some interesting figures. The survey done in 1816 recorded that there were twelve cottages on the Heath. By 1820, when a new valuation of the whole parish was made, there were 18 cottages and 100 houses. (A house might be anything from a large cottage to a mansion such as West Lodge (1820) or Oak House (1817), familiar buildings on the Heath until recently.) Fifteen years later, in another valuation there were the same number of houses, but no fewer than 170 cottages. We may guess that the market for houses proved disappointing to the builders, who instead concentrated on building cottages.

The rapid development of the Heath is shown on Greenwood's map of Kent published in 1821. On it "Bexley Heath New Town" is shown, with houses dotted along the Dover Road and in clusters near the Golden Lion and the market place. Another reference to it was seen by Castells in Cobbett's "Rural Rides" but he may have been mistaken. Cobbett did not name the place he spoke so contemptuously of and he may have been referring to Crayford. For the location was "just before we came to Dartford" and he ascribed its growth to the vast expenditure that had been made upon defence during "the war for the Bourbons". Now there is no evidence at all for this in the case of Bexleyheath but he did at least have a building called The Barracks, and Crayford is just before one comes to Dartford. So perhaps Castells misinterpreted Cobbett. Until we know more about the history of Crayford at this period the question will remain uncertain.

The earliest directory that we have, Pigot's for 1832, says of Bexley Heath that "a great number of good houses have recently been erected here; and the situation is considered one of the most healthy, as it is one of the most pleasing, in this part of the country". Seven inhabitants were classed as gentry. There were two private boarding and day schools, 6 bakers, 3 blacksmiths, 5 bootmakers, 1 brazier, 3 bricklayers, 4 butchers, 2 carpenters, 1 clothes dealer, 2 greengrocers, 4 grocers, 1 ironmonger, 4 market gardeners, 1 miller, 2 plumbers, 7 general dealers, 2 surgeons, 6 publicans, 2 clockmakers, 2 wheelwrights, 1 druggist and 1 charcoal burner. Two men were described as pattern designers and another as a landscape painter; they may have worked for Crayford fabric printers.

This list inevitably suggests that the Heath had become a flourishing community. The list mentions only some of the inhabitants - the skilled workers and tradesmen; labourers and domestic servants are not found in it. There was poverty as well as prosperity on the Heath. In 1832 the vicar of Bexley arranged a series of Sunday evening services on the Heath, at which loaves of bread were given to poor people who came regularly. In 1835 a report on certain people who received weekly pensions from the parish named 43 individuals and families, of whom 12 lived on the Heath. These were either aged and infirm, or children without parents. There would have been many more cases of less extreme poverty.

One interesting feature of this report is that it contains some reference to work "at the factory", by which is meant the textile printing works at Crayford. It seems that these works provided employment for many of the people of Bexleyheath. Perhaps it was the availability of jobs in the local textile industry that drew people to the Heath in such large numbers.

For a detailed analysis of the population of the Heath we have to wait until 1851. The census enumerators' records give number, ages, occupations and places of birth, and from these facts much interesting information emerges. The total population of Bexley Heath was then 20,987. This includes those living in Crook Log, which is just outside the boundaries of the area we are concerned with. So we should reduce this figure to about 2000. The number of persons whose occupations were given was 730, (including a 90-year-old laundress and a six year old chimney sweep; this boy was one of three employed by a sweep aged 70. Since Charles Kingsley lived for a

time in Bexley Heath he could have conceivably been the inspiration for the hero of the Water Babies.)

The biggest single type of work was in the fabric printing industry at Crayford involving about 1 in 8 of the work force. There were 10 artists and designers, 10 block cutters, 34 silk or calico printers, 10 printers' assistants, 2 dyers, and 23 others. Some others described in the Census enumerators' book as printers or labourers may also have worked in textiles. Next in numbers were domestic servants, of whom there were 80, besides 16 laundresses and 4 charwomen. The development of fruit growing and market gardening in the district is indicated by the fact that 19 people gave one of these as their occupations, besides the 9 who were farmers. Most of the usual skills were represented and it is interesting to see that one man described himself as a brazier and elder in the Mormon Church.

The Census also gives information about birth places. Of the 730 occupations, 37 were born in Bexley Heath, 72 in Crayford, 126 in Bexley, 194 in other parts of Kent, 82 in London or Middlesex, 203 in other countries, 10 in Scotland, 4 in Ireland and 2 in Wales. Bexleyheath was therefore still very much a 'New Town': after forty years official existence more than two thirds of the working population came from further afield than Bexley and Crayford. It had begun to rival these neighbours in size: its 2000 was no mean figure to set against 2500 of Old Bexley and the 2900 of Crayford. In the years following 1851 it was to outgrow both of them.

The rapid growth of Bexley Heath from its rather unpropitious beginnings into the flourishing community of 1851 has always been rather a puzzle. We now have some additional information on the basis of which it is possible to build an outline picture of the development, but much remains obscure.