

East Wickham Hutments

In January 1916 the building works department of the Royal Arsenal began erecting "hutments", what we might today call prefabs, on a site adjacent to Monks Farm, to the south of Wickham Street, near the junction with Upper Wickham Lane.

These dwellings, together with similar ones nearby, were built to house the hundreds of workers drafted into the Arsenal from all over the country in response to the massive demands for armaments brought on by the First World War. Certainly housing in the area now covered by the London Borough of Bexley had been stretched to breaking point by the arrival of workers at the many armaments factories in the local area, which also included Vickers who had factories at both Erith and Crayford. Vickers had begun building their own estate at Barnes Cray to the east of Crayford but these were proper houses, which took longer to build, and in any case were meant for Vickers workers only. The problem was also increased by the arrival of refugees from Europe, particularly Belgians who formed a significant minority group in the Bexley area at this time.

The hutments at East Wickham were made of the most basic materials, as the aim was to get them up and inhabited in the shortest possible time period. They had a wood exterior with asbestos sheets for the interior partition walls, basic sanitation was provided and each had its own small plot for a garden. The fact that they were being built at all seemed to take Bexley Urban District Council by surprise but during conditions of war central government, and so therefore the Royal Arsenal, could unilaterally decide anything which would help towards the war effort and didn't have to bother with official channels such as planning permission. However, it did mean that plans for water supply and sanitation had to be done retrospectively and as a result drainage for the hutments deteriorated over time as the drains were bedded straight on to the soil which made them far more likely to rupture and leak.

As far as can be told from the records there were 400 hutments built and the community was also given a picture theatre on Upper Wickham Lane. Apart from the problems with the drainage mentioned earlier, the hutments suffered a number of problems because of the cheap building materials used and the fact that they were built so

quickly. The main problem, and one much commented upon by former residents, was the condensation that occurred because of the asbestos sheeting which tended to hold moisture and take a long time to dry out. There are of course far more serious problems associated with using asbestos as a building material, which only came to light after the hutments were removed. The houses were frequently visited by the health inspector for the borough and were notorious for being rife with bed bugs, which thrived on the damp conditions. When the hutments were taken down in the late 1950s a contractor was employed to demolish and burn them on site. The residents were moved into council housing but their property, furniture and bedding was firstly put into lorries and taken away for defumigation with cyanide gas before they could have it back!

The various problems encountered by the residents were not surprising considering this type of housing was always meant to be a "quick fix" solution in lieu of better housing being put up in later years. However, some of the hutments at East Wickham lasted right through until a new housing scheme was finally approved in 1958 and became a well-remembered part of the community. This scheme cost Bexley Council £250,000 and aimed to offer "a fine house at an average building cost of £1360" and meant the end of the hutments.

Appendix: Names of the roads at East Wickham Hutments

Apple Avenue
Ashkirk Avenue
Berwick Road
Bruce Road
Cherry Road
Clover Road
Commondale Road
Cramond Avenue
Crocus Road
Daffodil Road
Douglas Road
Firth Street
Gordon Avenue
Kay Street
Kirklea Street
Largo Avenue
Rustic Avenue

St. Abb's Street
Snowdrop Road
Stuart Road
Teviot Road