

Ecclesiastical History of Bexley

Today there are twenty-seven Church of England Parishes in the London Borough of Bexley.

Of these three come under the Diocese of Southwark, the Archdeaconry of Lewisham and the Rural Deanery of Greenwich Thameside. The other twenty-four parishes lie in the Diocese of Rochester, the Archdeaconry of Bromley and Bexley and the two Rural Deaneries of Erith and Sidcup. There are also an Orthodox Church, ten Catholic, fifteen Baptist, seven Methodist, three United Reformed and three Salvation Army Churches in the Borough.

Before 1840 there were only five Anglican Parishes in the area, St Mary, Bexley, St Paulinus, Crayford, St John, Erith, All Saints, Foots Cray and St James, North Cray, plus St Michael, East Wickham, a chapel attached to the Parish of St Nicholas, Plumstead. Three of the parishes belonged to the Diocese of Rochester, while Bexley and Crayford were under the peculiar jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Dean of Shoreham. This anomaly had arisen because in 814 Cenwulf King of Mercia had granted the Manor of Bexley to Wulfred, Archbishop of Canterbury in gratitude for his help in suppressing a rebellion in Kent. In 1537 the then Primate, Thomas Cranmer was obliged to exchange this estate with Henry VIII in return for less valuable lands scattered around Kent. However the King agreed that the Archbishop should retain ecclesiastical jurisdiction over his former Manor. The local people had already witnessed the dissolution of Lesnes Abbey, a monastery of Augustinian Canons. The Abbey had been established in 1178 by Richard De Lucy, Chief Justiciar to Henry II in penance for his part in the murder of Archbishop Thomas A Becket. In 1525 Cardinal Wolsey had it suppressed and its lands used to endow Cardinal College, Oxford. When Wolsey died in 1530 the Lesnes estates were seized by the King.

The Reformation had a profound effect on the administration of the Church. From 1538 the clergy were required to keep registers recording baptisms, marriages and burials. The Parishes were given responsibility for the care of the poor, maintaining the highways and even raising the Militia. From 1815 onwards they were also establishing schools in a battle for the hearts and minds of the young

against their Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Baptist opponents. These activities generated records in the form of Vestry Minutes, Rate Books, Churchwardens Accounts, Governors Minutes, Log Books and Admission Registers. The commutation of tithes in 1836 necessitated the creation of detailed tithe maps and tithe awards for each Parish giving the names of the owners of every piece of land and its agricultural or other use.

During the Victorian era new churches were built to provide for the growing population of the area. They included the Chapel of Holy Trinity, Lamorbey established in 1840, Christchurch, Bexleyheath and St John, Sidcup in 1844. They were followed by the Churches of All Saints, Belvedere in 1861, St John, Welling in 1869, Christchurch, Erith in 1871, Christchurch, Sidcup in 1879 and St John, Bexley in 1882. By the end of Queen Victoria's reign there were also two Catholic Churches St Mary of the Cray at Crayford and St Fidelis at Erith, to be joined by St Lawrence, Sidcup in 1902 and Our Lady of the Angels, Erith in 1903. There were also numerous non-conformist chapels, such as Belvedere Baptist, Bexley Baptist, Broadway Baptist, Crayford Baptist, Foots Cray Baptist, Queen Street Baptist, Sidcup Baptist, Trinity Baptist, Bexley Congregational, Erith Congregational, Bexleyheath Congregational, Sidcup Congregational, Welling Congregational, Bexleyheath Methodist, Erith Methodist, Queen Street Methodist, and Sidcup Methodist.

The growth of the established church continued into the twentieth century as the villages of Bexley, Crayford, Erith and Sidcup developed into suburbs of London. In 1906 St Paul Church was built on Northumberland Heath, while two Churches dedicated to St Augustine were founded at Belvedere in 1907 and Slade Green in 1911. Despite falling rates of religious observance the increase in the size of the population meant that new churches still had to be built. Rudimentary iron churches were often used while funds were raised for a more imposing construction. Thus a modern church like St Barnabas, Joydens Wood dates back to 1923. Holy Redeemer, Lamorbey was founded in 1932; St Andrew, Bostall Heath and St Mary, Welling in 1934; St Martin, Barnehurst in 1936; St James, Blendon in 1937 and St Andrew, Sidcup in 1938. This period also saw the establishment of Three Catholic Churches; St Stephen, Welling in 1923; St John Vianney in 1932; St John Fisher in 1935. After the Second World War development slowed considerably. St Peter's Anglican Church, Bexleyheath was constituted in 1947 to be joined by Bishop

Ridley, Falconwood in 1958. The Church of the Cross, a daughter church of St Paul's, Thamesmead (in the London Borough of Greenwich) was built in 1973.