

The site of old Erith Police Station

There is a piece of land on Erith High Street near the Causeway, roughly triangular in shape, on which now stands the old police station – now converted into flats - and some old cottages.

It has a frontage on the river, and in earlier times must have been a valuable commercial site. Little has hitherto been known of its history. A similar lack of knowledge has hindered our efforts to trace the history of other parts of the centre of Erith.

With the transcription of the Erith Manor Court Rolls, however, we are able to follow the changing ownership and use of this and other locations in Erith. One of the functions of the manor court was to record the deaths of owners of property and transactions between owners, for the lord of the manor claimed a small fine on these occasions. From a study of these rolls the following story emerges.

In 1664 there was a large house on the site, which had been divided into four, and also a wharf or yard (the term wharf did not necessarily mean a place for tying up ships). James Snow and his wife, Sarah, acquired the property at that time. Snow was a colourful character. He had another house in West Street and was involved in a number of business ventures. He was originally a waterman but he eventually had a public house (he was fined for allowing illegal games on licensed premises in 1672) and got into trouble over what we would call building without planning permission. Finally he rashly let the High Street property on a 21 year lease without license from the lord of the manor and actually attempted to sell the property to another person, although since it was 'copyhold' property he was not legally able to do so. He therefore forfeited it and it was assigned to his wife's brother, Brian Russell.

It next appears in the rolls in 1700, when a list of copyholders shows Brian Russell and John Buckle (possibly the original Buckle of Buckle's Farm) as joint tenants. In 1713 the two infant grandsons of Brian Russell inherited half of the property. In 1717 the court warned that the premises must be repaired or forfeited. Then a man of Crayford, Stephen Perry acquired the property from the Russells and Buckles. From the Perry family it then passed in 1768 to James Fachon, of

Wilmington, who sold it in 1804 to Jeremiah Heath, a shopkeeper of Erith.

Jeremiah Heath had married Martha Payne, who inherited some properties in Crayford from her father, a local builder. He also bought other houses in Erith and was awarded some land on Northumberland Heath at the Inclosure in 1815. He died in about 1836 and his son, George, is probably the George Heath who founded the firm of Heath and Co., scientific instrument makers, which moved to Crayford in 1849, and built up an enviable reputation for its products (see article on the Heath family of Erith and Crayford). In 1872 George died and the property in Erith High Street was inherited by one of his sons, also called George. The site was then occupied by three newly built houses and shops and a slaughter house, tenanted by Smith, Ladd and Stone, with yards, wharf and landing place and six other houses, one of which had been converted into a stable.

This brings us to relatively modern times. From 1874 the Erith rate books provide a continuous record of ownership and it would be fairly simple matter to follow the history from there. The value of the old Court Rolls can be seen from this example taken from them of the history of one well-known location in the High Street.