

History of Bexley's roads

Today the Borough is a densely populated zone criss-crossed with roads by which motor vehicles travel within its boundaries and beyond them but this was not always the case.

Introduction

We take it for granted that most people need transport to get to work and that many of them go by car or bus on the roads. We grumble about our roads, sometimes because they are inadequate for the traffic they carry, sometimes because they despoil the countryside and communities; but we find it hard to imagine the borough with almost no transport and with only a few ill-made roads.

Roads 150 years ago

Yet this was the situation until fairly recent times. Apart from the two main highways, the Dover Road and the Maidstone Road, there were only country lanes between the villages and hamlets and these small communities generated little traffic. Take the old parish of Footscray, for example. It covered a narrow strip of land from the bridge in Footscray High Street to a line just short of Avery Hill Road and included about half of modern Sidcup and Footscray. In 1831 its total population was only 308. The main road from London to Maidstone ran down the middle of the parish along the line of the present Footscray Road-Main Road, Sidcup-High-Street-Sidcup Hill-Footscray High Street. But there were hardly any other roads. One led towards St. Paul's Cray, one to Chislehurst, the Rectory Lane-Church Road loop had a branch leading to Bexley and there was a lane joining Sidcup to Halfway Street. Other parts of the borough had equally meagre road layouts.

Road maintenance

Every parish was obliged by law to repair its roads. Parishioners elected one of their number to serve unpaid for a year as a surveyor of the highway and he could call on all able-bodied men to work on road repairs, again without pay, on six days in the year. As can be imagined, this was an unpopular and inefficient system. By the middle of the 18th century there was a growing tendency for parish officers to

accept "composition money" in place of statute labour and road mending was then done by paid workmen. However all that was done was minor drainage and pothole filling.

The Turnpikes

Long distance roads ran through many parishes. It seemed inequitable to parishioners that they should have to maintain a road for the benefit of others and the volume of traffic often made the burden of repairs more than they could cope with. So Turnpike Trusts were authorised by Parliament to charge tolls on certain roads, which they then repaired and maintained. In our area the New Cross Turnpike Trust was responsible for the Dover Road and the Maidstone Road. The parish of Bexley contributed £11 annually at the beginning of the 19th century to the New Cross Trustees as composition money in place of statute labour that would otherwise have been required on the Dover Road. By this method the main trunk roads were kept in better repair than others, although as readers of Dickens will remember travel was still not without discomfort and delays.

Traffic on Turnpikes

In 1834 up to sixteen stagecoaches were advertised as calling at one of the Foots Cray inns every day and there were regular services of vans and wagons as well. The Dover Road was busier. Forty coaches rumbled along it daily, some of them in the small hours, for they left Dartford at 3 or 4 a.m. There were also some vans and wagons as well as the carriages of the wealthy who did not need public transport.

Transition to modern times

With the coming of the railways the turnpikes lost money. Attempts by Parliament to put the burden of road maintenance on the parishes provoked resentment but it was many years before effective action was taken. A Highways Act of 1862 led to the formation of the Dartford Highways Board, which took over the roads in twenty parishes in the area, including Bexley and Erith. The parishes elected members of the board and it raised money by a precept on the parish rates. However it was a remote and unwieldy body, greatly disliked in fast-growing districts such as Erith and Bexleyheath, which in the 1870s began to demand local self-government, largely on the grounds of their dissatisfaction with the state of the roads. Erith got its Local

Board (the forerunner of the Urban District Council) in 1876 and Bexley in 1880. These bodies took over responsibility for the roads in their areas, though after 1888 the County Council had charge of certain main roads. This arrangement has not been changed materially since then and it has been reasonably successful in a period in which there has been an enormous expansion of traffic on the roads as a result of the introduction of the motorcar.

The Twentieth century

The market gardens that occupied most of the land round Bexley Heath in the 19th century required transport to take their produce to London. As late as 1894 the then Medical Officer of Health wrote: "On summer evenings may be seen a constant procession of huge vans, laden with every description of flowers, fruit and vegetable, slowly wending their way along the Dover Road towards the London markets". A year later the Bexleyheath Railway took most of that traffic but it was not long before the petrol engine became the cause of a vast increase in the number of vehicles on the roads. At first there were only the private cars of the enterprising well to do but gradually the petrol-driven lorry appeared on the scene and by 1911 the motor omnibus had reached Sidcup. Meanwhile in other parts of the borough electric tramways had been introduced and many roads were widened and otherwise improved to accommodate them. The trams had a relatively short existence of only thirty years. They were replaced in 1935 by trolley buses, which in turn gave way to motorbuses in 1959.