

Kingeast T. Seng - Black and Asian People in Victorian Bexley

Kingeast Seng was born in China in 1872.

In the 1881 census Kingeast is described as a scholar and British subject born in China living as a boarder at the Mill Road Cottages in Bexleyheath. Mill Road is now Mayplace Road West. The head of the house was a widow Elizabeth Carpenter and living at the house were two other boarders, Amhurst MaCartney and Bruce MaCartney. There was also a domestic servant called Mary Moore at the house in the 1881 Census

Bexleyheath During the 1880s

In 1880 the main road in Bexleyheath, the Broadway, remained unpaved. There was only one horse drawn omnibus plying between the Bexleyheath and Woolwich Arsenal station. There were no byelaws or regulations governing basic services such as street cleansing, building development or slaughter houses. However in the coming decades this was set to change as the Local Board under the chairmanship of Alfred Bean, landlord of the Danson Estate, instigated a number of developments in the rapidly growing town.

The rapid changes experienced by the town and its people did not go unnoticed. Commenting on Bexleyheath in 1883 the Victorian historian Edward Walford noted, "The district is a long straggling street of small shops and dwellings, fringing the main road across what was once open heath, with two smaller streets and lanes branching off at right angles. Of the "heath" itself all traces are fast disappearing under the hands of the builder."

When Kingeast lived in Mill Road he would have lived in a neighbourhood full of people who either worked as tradesmen or as gardeners. During the late 19th Century Bexleyheath was renowned for its market gardens and the 100s of huge green houses, growing strawberries, raspberries and tomatoes that littered the surrounding fields. Kingeast probably attended the school on Mill Road. Like his classmates he would have gone through a monotonous school curriculum that centred on the three Rs, reading, writing and arithmetic. However in contrast to his peers, it is perhaps unlikely that

Kingeast would have kept from school to help with the mid-summer fruit picking season.

Hussey Burgh MaCartney

One suggestion is that the MaCartney children (who were also born in China) may be related to the family of the missionary Hussey Burgh MaCartney Snr. (1799-1894) who was based in Melbourne, Australia and was involved in the Church Missionary Society, Victoria (CMSV) activities in Fujian Province, China. Hussey Burgh MaCartney Snr. was also involved in missionary work among the Aborigines and among the Chinese who had come to Victoria during the Australian Gold Rush.

Research by Cliff Pereira & Simon McKeon

References and further reading

Local Studies & Archive Collection:

- 1881 Census Return
- Photographs of Victorian Bexleyheath
- Victorian school log books, registers and photographs from local schools
- OS Maps of Bexleyheath, 1865 and 1897
- Celebrating Black and Asian History in Bexley Teacher's Pack