

Crayford

Crayford has a long and interesting history.

Early times

Crayford was a Palaeolithic and Neolithic settlement, Roman station, Saxon village and fortress and Norman barony but it is first mentioned in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle when the Britons were defeated by Hengist, leader of the Jutes, at the Battle of Crecganford in 457 AD.

There have been many prehistoric finds, the earliest estimated to be about 200,000 years old. The first settlement, remains of which were discovered in different excavations in the area around the Norman church of St. Paulinus in 1936 and 1993, is believed to be from the Iron Age (between 30 BC and 40 AD).

It is often claimed that the site of the Roman town of Noviomagus was at Crayford. Crayford lay right on the Romans' main road from London (via Rochester and Canterbury) to Dover. Roman legions marched or drove in their chariots but there is little to show of Roman times beyond the old Roman road, known as Watling Street. Originally, Watling Street ran over the old ford of the river, up Crayford's steep hill, along Old Road and Crayford Road. In the 1790s, it was diverted along what is now London Road, which was constructed in 1840.

Crayford was also connected to London by means of the River Cray (a large, tidal river then), the Dartford Creek and the River Thames. The original stimulus for settlement in the area was the fact that the River Cray was fordable at this point.

In the 1850s, workmen unearthed a Roman galley from marshland near Evans' Printing Works. Unfortunately, after a short exposure to the air, it fell to pieces. In 1878, a Roman leaden coffin was dug up near the Iron Church, which was originally in Crayford where the Dell playground is situated today. Roman pottery, bricks, tiles, beads and coins have also been found. The Romans left in 410 AD.

St. Paulinus Church

St. Paulinus Church was built in 1100 but its foundations are probably much older. The Domesday Book of 1086 records that in Erhede (Crayford) "there is a church" and lists 27 villagers and 2 smallholders cultivating land of 4 sulungs (equivalent to about 480 acres). At that time, there were also three mills, 10 acres of meadow and enough woodland to feed 40 pigs. In medieval times, St. Paulinus was popular with pilgrims travelling to the shrine of St. Thomas À Becket at Canterbury. They would visit to pray for a safe journey across the notorious heath land between Crayford and London, and the income generated enabled the church to build a second nave and thus become one of only three churches to have twin naves in the country.

Crayford contained two manors within its borders, those of Howbury and Newbery. The first manor house was established in the 14th Century and located probably where Crayford Manor House still stands, to the north west of St. Paulinus Church. This Manor House was commissioned about 1818 by the Revd. Thomas Barne and built in the Italian style on the site of the original Newbery Manor House.

Large estates

Several large, impressive houses once stood in the area including Oakwood, Shenstone and May Place. Of these, little evidence now remains although the cellar of the last house called May Place is now incorporated into the clubhouse of Barnehurst Golf Course. The house was for many years the seat of the Lord of the Manor and between 1694 and 1707 was the home of Sir Cloudsley Shovel, Commander in Chief of the Navy, who was famously strangled by a fisherwoman after his ship the 'Association' had been wrecked off the Isles of Scilly. His body was recovered and buried in Westminster Abbey under a monument erected to his memory by Queen Anne. Shenstone was built by the inventor, Augustus Applegath, in the 1830s. Mr. David Evans, of the former silk-printing firm, bought the house in 1842 but, in 1947, the house was acquired by Crayford UDC and used for various purposes before being demolished. The grounds became a public open space and remain so today.

Industries

Iron working was one of the earliest industries in the area and Iron Mill Lane, just to the east of St. Paulinus Church, derives its name from an iron mill which stood in the area during the reign of Elizabeth I and

which produced plate for armour. Shortly after 1765, a saw-mill took its place and that was replaced, in 1819, by a flour-mill powered by what was then a more substantial River Cray.

The presence of a river in the town, for water power and transport, encouraged the growth of industries, such as tanning and silk printing. Linen was bleached by the sun in 120 acres of fields laid out during the 1670s and washed in the free-flowing, clear, fresh waters of the Cray. Though the tannery has long since gone, there was, until 2002, a silk-printing works in the town, David Evans Ltd, which was taken over in 1843 from Augustus Applegath and Swaislands, another long-established printing firm of 1812, which was later taken over by G.P. & J. Baker who only closed the works in 1961. The censuses of the 19th Century reveal a large number of the town's population as silk or calico printers and many had come from the traditional printing areas in the north.

In 1897, the huge armaments firm of Vickers moved into the area, the workforce growing from 300 to 14,000 in the few short years during the First World War. It took over the Maxim Nordenfeldt Gun and Ammunition Company set up by Hiram Maxim, the inventor of an automatic gun known as the 'Pom-Pom' and various flying machines. The company, originally from Sheffield, built the Barnes Cray estate to the east of the town for their workforce and the houses are still very much in evidence and sought after as homes today because of the quality of the building. This area was known as Barnes Cray, after a prominent local family (the Barnes), and borders on Dartford and the County of Kent. In 1903, Vickers had started producing the prestigious Wolseley Siddeley cars, which were tested on a motor track there. They also produced the 'Vickers Vimy' and 'Gunbus Fighter' aeroplanes and these were flown at the nearby Joyce Green airfield. All that remains of the works today is the workers' canteen built in 1915, which is now Crayford Town Hall.

Other industries in the area included barge building on Crayford Creek until the early 1920s and brick making which declined after World War 1 because of competition from machine-made bricks and the decreasing supply of brick earth. There was also a windmill in the Crayford area near the junction of Mayplace and Erith roads.

World War I

After the First World War, although the production of armaments was obviously somewhat reduced, industry in the area continued and the local community prospered on the trade brought to the area as a result of the influx of workers. The Princess Theatre on the riverside, which was opened on 26 July 1916 by Princess Christian, was built at enormous cost by Vickers specially to entertain these workers but, unfortunately, burned to the ground within six months. It was completely rebuilt and reopened by HRH Duke of York, later George VI, in 1919 to the same specifications but, presumably, with more fire protection measures! By the 1960s, the Theatre had been demolished and shops and flats were built on the site.

By 1920, when Crayford became an urban district, this prosperity had given way to the great depression felt nationwide. The 1930s, like most other local areas, saw a period of extensive house building though not perhaps as much in Crayford as elsewhere. Barnehurst had some large developments, mostly by local builders such as New Ideal Homesteads and W. H. Wedlock and also Ellingham of Barrow-in-Furness. However, the population in the urban district still nearly doubled from 15,896 in 1931 to 27,950 by 1951.

World War II

This period of house building was interrupted by the Second World War which affected Crayford badly, largely due to the presence of the Royal Arsenal nearby and also because of the armaments works in the town, which made it an obvious target for enemy bombers, as well as being in the direct line of air attacks on London. The official bombing figures for Crayford show that, during 1333 alerts, 11 flying bombs, 385 high-explosive bombs, 21 oil bombs, 5380 ordinary bombs and 4 mines dropped on Crayford. A V2 rocket destroyed the Boys County Modern School in Iron Mill Lane. This fortunately happened at night but one teacher (Miss Skelton) was killed as she slept there.

Temporary classrooms were set up in a large house further west in Iron Mill Lane called Eardemont. The primary school in Woodside Road was also destroyed by incendiary bombs. A window in St. Paulinus Church is in memory of three members of the W.V.S. who died in a V1 explosion in the High Street on July 14th 1944. In all, 66 people were killed and many injured and 184 properties were destroyed and nearly 7000 damaged.

Today

In 1965, Crayford combined with other local areas to form the London Borough of Bexley. The town of Crayford, today, revolves around the retail trade, with a large Sainsbury's supermarket at its centre, and the Tower Retail Park, which was opened in 1999 on part of what was the Vickers factory site. It also has a substantial commuter population, travelling to London and nearby business and retail centres such as Bexleyheath and the newly opened Bluewater shopping centre nearby.