

Acknowledgements

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Belvedere Beach



*A brief history
of a local park*



Belvedere Enclosure

In medieval England there were large tracts of 'Common Land' usually consisting of heath, marsh or waste ground which was owned jointly by the commoners of the manor, who had each had the right to graze their animals and forage on the land.



Improved agricultural techniques made it possible to convert much of this land to growing crops, but for this to happen the land had to be enclosed, extinguishing the rights of the commoners who in return received a

share of the land as their exclusive property in proportion to their existing landholdings. The process was usually favoured by large landowners but opposed by some smallholders and by squatters who had previously lived on and enjoyed the use of the land without any formal legal title. Enclosure could be accomplished either by a buying out the Lord

of the Manor who owned the soil and mineral rights as well as all the commoners who could prove they had rights over the land or by passing a special act of parliament that enforced enclosure. From 1604 to 1914, 5,200 enclosure acts were passed. Enclosures increased during the Industrial Revolution as the growing population required a rise in food production.

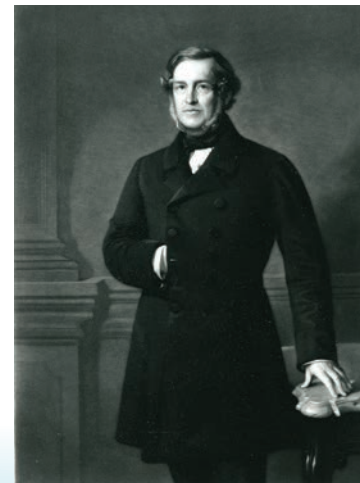


Lord Eardley of Belvedere House proposed a bill in parliament to enclose the commons of Erith. In 1815 the act came into effect and he obtained 32 acres of land on Lessness Heath. Nine acres of land were left as common ground and was used for grazing animals.



The Belvedere Estate

Belvedere derives its name from the great house that stood on Lessness Heath.



Before the English Civil War (1642-1645) the land had belonged to Spencer Compton, Earl of Northampton. The Earl, a Royalist general, met a heroic death on 19th March 1643

two houses and the land from the marshes to Lessness Heath. They were bought by Stephen Thomas for £100 in 1646 who sold them on to Thomas Cawstin, a wheelwright of Welling. Cawstin left the estate to his son Thomas around 1667. The younger Cawstin appears to have demolished one of the houses and in 1689 he sold the remaining house to Richard Turner.

In 1729 the estate was leased to John Bonnell for 49 years. The house was filled with many luxurious items, reflecting Bonnell's extravagant tastes. However in 1737 he was unable to keep up the payment on his mortgage and was forced to surrender the property to the mortgagee, Thomas Hayley. Hayley then paid a further £600 to purchase the freehold from William Turner, son of the deceased Richard. With full ownership, Hayley then demolished the old house and erected a new one on the hill overlooking the Thames.

whilst leading the Cavaliers to victory at the Battle of Hopton Heath. After the defeat of the King his leading supporters were forced to pay huge compounding fines for waging war on Parliament. Spencer's eldest son, James, was imprisoned in the Tower of London and fined the huge sum of £21,455. The new Earl was forced to sell off certain assets, including his



After changing hands multiple times, the estate was acquired in 1744 by Lord Baltimore, an Irish peer and British politician known for his close relationship to Frederick, Prince of Wales. Baltimore even named his son Frederick, in honour of the Prince of Wales. Lord Baltimore died in 1751, but instead of leaving the Lessness Heath estate to Frederick he bequeathed it to Jane Newton, a spinster, who sold to the wealthy Jewish merchant Sampson Gideon for £5,250. The house was rebuilt and turned into a grand country seat by the architect James "Athenian" Stuart who popularised the so called Greek revival on behalf of Sampson Gideon's son, Sir Sampson Gideon later Lord Eardley sometime after his father's death in 1762. The new house was named 'Belvedere' meaning beautiful view in Italian because of the prospect of the ships sailing down the Thames. Eardley died in 1824, leaving three daughters. The eldest Maria married Lord Saye and Sele and inherited the estate. The couple had a daughter who married Count von Gersdorff, Chamberlain to the King of Prussia in 1795 and a son William Eardley Fiennes, who inherited the estate and title of Baron Saye and Sele on his father's death in 1844. He did not

live long but died in 1847, leaving Belvedere to his cousin Sir Culling Eardley Smith.

Under the ownership of Sir Culling Eardley as he now became, the township grew quickly and began to encroach on the estate. Streets were laid down on Lessness Heath and a railway station was built on the North Kent line. In 1858 Sir Culling left Belvedere to live in Hertfordshire following the publication of plans to build the Crossness Outflow Works. He died in April 1863. Sir Culling disinherited his son and the estate passed in trust to his daughters. His son Sir Eardley Gideon Culling Eardley had married a Virginian lady in 1859 just before the American Civil War. In June 1869 he fled England amid allegations of bigamy. During this time the Belvedere Estate had been sold for the asking price of £12,148 to the Shipwrecked Mariners Society, which turned the house into a home for retired sailors. This house was finally demolished in 1959 and replaced with a modern home, which was closed in 1975 and the land redeveloped for housing.



Development of Belvedere

Belvedere consists of two distinctive areas: Upper Belvedere and Lower Belvedere. Before the opening of the North Kent Railway in 1848 Upper Belvedere was known as Lessness Heath. The barren waste land contained few houses until Sir Culling Eardley inherited the estate in 1847 and began construction of streets comprising of fashionable villas built for middle-class families to enjoy the view over the River Thames.

Upper Belvedere became a suburb of large Victorian and Edwardian houses, inhabited by affluent families, who were able to enjoy the many civic amenities provided by a progressive Erith council including the open-air paddling pool and a large public park. At the same time the North Kent Railway gave residents' access to both London for work and business and to the countryside for holidays.

Lower Belvedere is situated on the Erith Marshes. Houses are much smaller, usually terraced housing, where working-class families lived and worked in the industries that lay on the Thames' flood plain. The isolation of the marshes made it a suitable location for manufacturing certain dangerous or noxious products, while the river provided excellent transport links.



Villas on Woolwich Road



Woolwich Road c1900

Today, there is still a difference between Upper and Lower Belvedere. Lower Belvedere is a mix of social housing and industrial, as there is heavy industry present with Crossness Sewage Treatment Plant, a small industrial park, a methane incinerator and other factories. However, Upper Belvedere is mainly residential – with the exception of Nuxley Village which has numerous retail outlets.

Upper Belvedere was relatively unspoilt during the two World Wars. Most of the large Victorian villas have been divided into flats and smaller houses, some of which are owner occupied while others are rented out.



Villas on Woolwich Road



Belvedere Recreation Ground

As Belvedere developed into a suburb the common land was used as a venue for fairs and amusements. In 1877 Erith Local Board considered plans to compulsorily purchase the land but concluded that it would be easier to ban the amusements by means of a by-law.

By 1888 the land had become a more serious problem. In that year The Erith, Belvedere and Abbey Wood Times reported that activities on the Heath had gotten out of control, there was "reoccurring... musical roundabouts, shooting galleries and such like gipsy amusements being allowed to settle on the Heath to the annoyance of residents near it; the heath being without any apparent control over it." The Local Board demanded that something must be done.

After much debate, Erith Urban District Council bought the remaining 9 acres of common land for £5.1s in 1896 to use as a recreation ground. Initially the north side of the park was kept as a wilderness. An ornamental lake was dug in the centre of the wilderness in about 1910. In 1902 toilets were built opposite the Eardley Arms.



In the years after the First World War lidos became fashionable and the lake was adapted to become a paddling pool.

In 1933 Erith Council became increasingly concerned about the danger to children crossing the main road from the north to the south side of the recreation ground in search of drinking water. The Metropolitan Drinking Fountain Association agreed to provide a new drinking fountain in the northern section of the park. The drinking fountain by the entrance to the 'Beach' dates from the late 19th century and is believed to have originated from Chelmsford in Essex. The fountain is dedicated to the wealthy Reardon family who lived in Islington in north London. A small plaque situated beneath the bowl of the fountain states, "Miss Ellen Reardon's bequest in memory of her father, mother and sister, Daniel, Elizabeth and Margaret Reardon,

1880." The proposal to install the drinking fountain was approved by Erith's Works Committee on 14th June 1933 and by 13th September the new fountain had been placed in the park by the Council Surveyor.

As a popular local amenity the recreation ground remained largely unchanged for many years. It survived the bombing of nearby Albert Road in April 1941. It also avoided incursions from post war developments.

In 2005 the Recreation Ground was renovated and re-opened as Belvedere Splash Park. Later plans were drawn up to create a themed playground. Opened in July 2017 the 'beach playground' includes sensory and educational play areas and in keeping with the area's maritime history there is also an interactive water play area. Funding for the 'Belvedere Beach' came from the Cory Environmental Trust in Britain.





People's Memories of Belvedere Park



Belvedere Park has always been a place for the entire community of Belvedere and beyond to relax and enjoy a family day out. Through social media and reminiscence sessions at Belvedere Library, local people have been able to share their stories and pictures of the park and have shown the love they have for it.



Here are some wonderful memories of the Park from the residents, old and new:

"I used the paddling pool a lot. The shallow water was cleaned

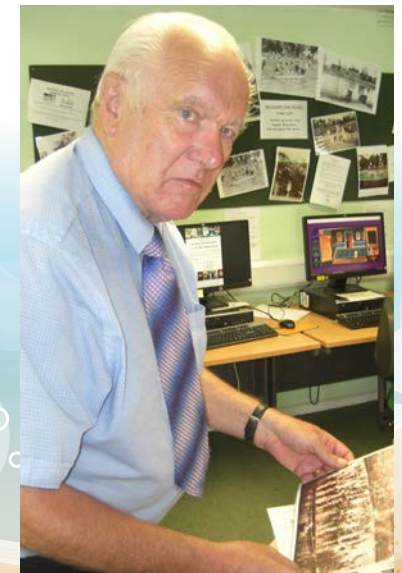
periodically but I do remember it as often being full of floating islands of sweet and crisp packets!...I still loved going there, though. We used to jump off the fountain base into the water... One summer, I went alone, and some young girls found my clothes and threw them into the water. I went home soaked, but it didn't put me off...I loved going there"

Desiree

"I can remember going to the park with my grandparents when I was 5 years old, couldn't get swimming trunks so my nan would sew up my underpants at the front!...Those were some of the happiest times of my life. (I am now 72 years old). Happy days" **Anthony**

"Spent a lot of my 1970's childhood there. I remember drinking from the water fountain on my way to and from school" **Lorraine**

"Mostly played in the woods near 'the view', particularly in the bomb craters which we used to sit round in a circle in our cub uniforms. I have happy memories of the place, like watching the old blacksmith at his forge, and the old mobile library – a converted furniture van!" **Peter**





"I remember seeing ladies pushing huge heavy prams, I thought just like Mary Poppins!...I wonder if they were nannies?...And looking at your photos makes me realize how it's been like that all down the ages"

Belvedere Park, now known as Belvedere Beach, has and hopefully always will be a great landmark of Belvedere and of Bexley with so many memories and stories, from children paddling in the fountain to children playing in the sensory and educational beach. In many ways, the Park has stayed the same as a place full of laughter and lovely heart-warming memories.

Belvedere Beach is free and open to the public all year around. Families will be able to make use of the vast space, have picnics and enjoy the view as other families have done for many decades. Many of the facilities have been refurbished, the picnic tables, the paths and the steps.

