Changing Times:
The Broadway, Bexleyheath
1812-1912
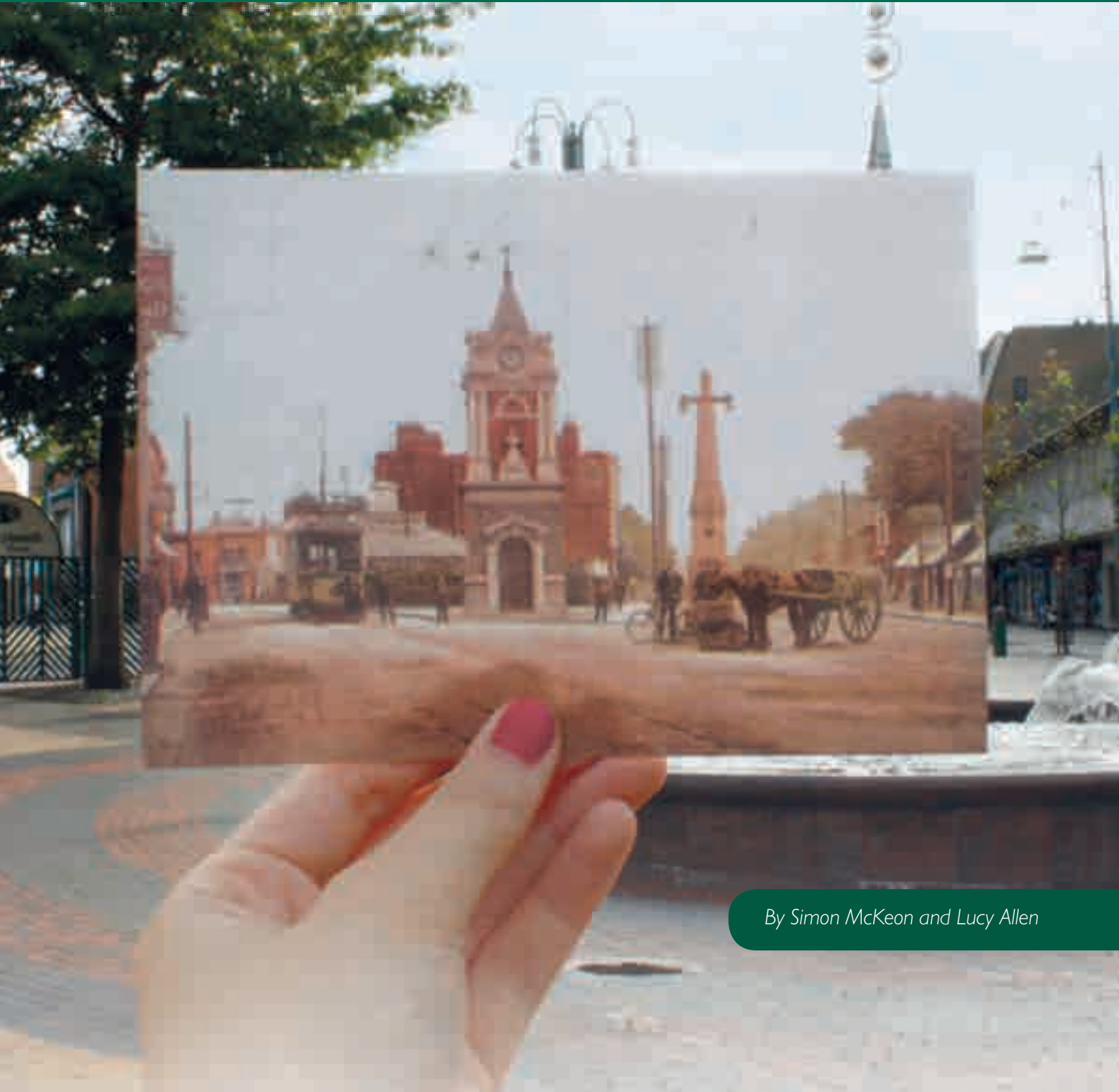
By Simon McKeon and Lucy Allen

Contents

Broomfield Road, Bexleyheath, 1898

Chapel of Ease, Bexley Heath, 1877

Main Road, Bexley Heath, 1891

Tram, Bexleyheath, 1903

Cover photograph: Sophie Gratwick

Introduction

A century ago the Bexleyheath Coronation Memorial Clock Tower, designed by architect and Bexleyheath resident, Walter Maxted Epps RIBA, was formally opened by Bexley Urban District member, Councillor Reid.

After a rendition of 'God of Our Fathers' sung by local school children Reid took to the stage. He said that the original idea of the clock tower had come from his friend and colleague William Smith and both men thought the building of a clock tower in the Market Place "would be the beginnings of better things to come in Bexleyheath."

Reid then produced a silver key, designed by Epps, and amid a fanfare of trumpets he opened the door of the clock tower. To the assembled audience of invited guests and the gathering crowd he proclaimed, "I now declare this Coronation Memorial Clock Tower open and may it stand as a memorial to the enterprise and loyalty of the inhabitants of Bexleyheath." The crowd then applauded loudly and the national anthem was played. Reid then pressed an electric button to start the clock and a 'temporary' bust of King George V was simultaneously unveiled. After Reid's loyal address it was Architect Epps' turn to mount the stage. He ended his speech with "I hope to see all the niches filled with busts of members of the Royal Family."

Nearly one hundred years later on 4th June 2012, the Mayor of the London Borough of Bexley, Councillor Downing, unveiled a plaque commemorating the Clock Tower's centenary year. In line with Epps' wish to fill the empty niches with other members of the Royal Family, Deputy Lieutenant David Hewer launched an appeal to raise money, by public subscription, for a bust of Queen Elizabeth II to sit on the empty south-facing plinth, in order to mark her 60 years on the throne.

Over these one hundred years the Clock Tower has stood like a silent sentinel guarding the centre of the town and has witnessed many changes to its surroundings. Shops and buildings have either changed, or been demolished. Where there was once a road running by the Clock Tower, there is now a pedestrian walkway and where there were once trams rolling by there are now double-decker buses.

This education resource booklet brings together visual and documentary material, from Bexley's local studies and archive collections, that chart the changes to the Broadway, Bexleyheath in the hundred years before the Clock Tower was built, from 1812 to 1912. Some of these will be familiar to children today such as Bexleyheath Railway Station, constructed in 1895. Some will not be, like the Market House that stood beside the Clock Tower from 1830 to 1989. The cross curricular activities contained in this booklet are designed to engage children in key stage two with the fascinating history of the Broadway, Bexleyheath.

Simon McKeon
Local Studies & Archive Manager
October 2012

Early Bexley Heath

Two hundred years ago Bexley Heath (spelt using two separate words as it was then) was a tract of rough open land, unfit for cultivation. It had a bad reputation as a haunt for criminals including highwaymen and burglars. Through it ran the Dover Road, the main route from London to Canterbury and the Channel ports, along which up to 70 horse-pulled stagecoaches trundled every day.

It was a wild and deserted place, covered by scrubland. At its western end stood the Golden Lion coaching inn, which had been built in 1731. The Golden Lion public house now occupies this site. Near its north eastern corner was the Bexley Heath windmill, where John Dann was miller for many years before his death in about 1836.

Towards the end of the 18th century times were hard and there was much poverty. Some men who had no work, and no prospect of finding any, took to the road with their families, and found on the Heath open land where they could settle in shacks. Evidently they were able to earn enough money to keep themselves and their families, presumably by labouring work. It is said that they made brushes from the broom plant which grew around their settlement and sold them in neighbouring villages. This occupation gained the local inhabitants the nickname of 'Broom Dashers'.

Stage coach, c.1875

Bexley Heath painting by John Tennant, 1841

Illustration of an execution at Shooters Hill

Turnpike

The road across the heath remained in a state of disrepair until the New Cross Turnpike Trust was set up. The Trust agreed to repair roads in exchange for a toll. This toll was collected at a toll gate on the Dover Road where the main gates of Danson Park now stand. To cater for the traveller there were coaching inns like the Golden Lion and the Fox and Hounds as well as a small beer shop, Ye Olde Crook Log. The oldest of these inns is thought to be the Golden Lion which was recorded in a survey for the New Cross Turnpike in 1739.

Sketch of the old Toll Gate which stood at the junction of Danson Road and Crook Log as it may have appeared around 1840

The Broadway looking west towards Welling showing the Golden Lion Public House on the right with the corner of West Street, 1905

Bexley Heath Enclosure

The story of Bexley Heath began in the King's Head Public House in Bexley Village. A move was made by local landowners to prevent squatters settling and acquiring rights of possession on the area of heath to the north of Bexley Village. The landowners included John Johnstone of Danson, Neil Malcolm of Lamorbey and Viscount Sidney of Frognal in Sidcup. They secured, through Parliament in 1814, an Enclosure Act under which the Heath was surveyed and was shared out among those who could establish their rights to some of it by virtue of already owning property in the parish. This process took several years because the commissioner first appointed to carry out the Act died soon after beginning work, and the man chosen to take his place was already engaged on the Crayford Enclosure. The final award was published in 1819.

After the Enclosure Award of 1819 a settlement, at one time called Bexley New Town, grew up around the road junction which became the Market Place and a large number of fashionable houses were built along the road. The parts of the heath surrounding Bexley New Town were cultivated for the growing of cereals and fruit crops, especially soft fruits such as strawberries, and glass houses for growing flowers were established.

Bexley Heath Tithe Map, 1839

Poster advertising the Garden of England Lodge of Oddfellows 4th Anniversary Dinner on June 28th 1847

John Johnstone of Danson

Bexley Enclosure Act, 1814

The Market House

The Market House was built at a cost of £1000 (equivalent to £49,490 in 2011) by John Smith, a wealthy banker who lived at Blendon Hall. Smith received the land when it was enclosed in 1819. The Market House stood on a triangular piece of land, known as 'Market Place', in the centre of Bexley Heath, between what is now the Broadway and May Place Road. Originally the Market House had a turret, a clock and contained 14 stalls for merchandise. The market was held on Saturdays and sold meat, vegetables and cheap ornaments. By 1855 the market ceased to operate due to competition from a large general store, 'Penney, Son & Parker', that was built next to the Market House. However, the Market House continued to stand and was used for many different purposes including a carbonate water factory, a car show room and a tile shop before it was destroyed in a fire in 1989.

View of the Market House and Congregational Chapel, 1853

Map of Bexley Heath, 1844

The Market House next to Penney, Son and Parker Ltd, c.1925

Christ Church

The first church to be built on the Heath was a Chapel of Ease (a church built for those living at a distance from the main parish church in Bexley Village), consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1836. It stood in what is now Oaklands Road and was run by a vicar from St Mary's, Bexley. In 1866 Bexley Heath became a separate parish under its first vicar, the Reverend W. H. Pincott. As the population grew it was felt that a new church was needed. The new Christ Church was built on the Broadway and the foundation stone was laid on 16 September 1872. It was consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury on 26 September 1877. A memorial was erected, by public subscription, to Reverend Pincott after his death and stood at Market Place. It took the form of a drinking fountain and horse trough and was subsequently moved to its present site by Christ Church.

The Chapel of Ease at Christ Church, Bexley Heath

The Pincott Memorial Fountain, c.1901

Building of Christ Church Bexley Heath, 1873

Coronation of Queen Victoria

Princess Victoria became Queen in June 1837 when she was only 18 years old, but her coronation was not held until 28th June the following year. Perhaps the people attending the Bexley Fair on Monday 25th June 1838 celebrated the forthcoming royal event?

The coronation of Queen Victoria happened around the same time that Bexley Heath grew from a hamlet into a village. It also coincided with with the end of a period of hardship for those living in Great Britain.

Poster advertising the Bexley Fair, 1838

Queen Victoria, 1837

Police

As Bexley Heath continued to grow and the population increased there was a need for a presence to make sure the residents behaved themselves. Until 1839, Bexley Heath had been policed by two unpaid constables, as well as early policemen known as 'Bow Street Runners'. The Bow Street Runners looked after the main roads and helped those travelling by foot. However, in 1840 policing Bexley Heath was taken over by the Metropolitan Police, who rented a house as their headquarters at what is now number 51 Broadway. There was now one sergeant (who rode a police horse) and eight constables in Bexley Heath. As there were more policemen, all the residents of Bexley Heath had to pay extra tax.

The new police officers wore noticeable clothes (a long blue coat and a top hat) and carried a truncheon. Despite there now being lots more police officers, they had to work long hours to look after Bexley Heath, working seven days a week for 12 hours a day. That's 84 hours a week altogether. Police officers today only have to work 37 hours a week.

By 1855 the Police Station at number 51 Broadway was not good enough anymore so the Police built a new station over the road at what became number 28 Broadway. This remained the police station for over 50 years, until 1907. By 1879 the police force in Bexley Heath had risen to three sergeants and 18 constables.

Police Officers, c.1897

View of the Broadway looking west towards the Market Place. The building of the left hand side of the road is the new Police Station built in 1907 standing on the corner of Highland Road

Broadway (east) Bexley Heath.

William Morris' Red House

The Red House, built in 1859, was designed by the architect Philip Webb for his friend the famous textile designer and artist William Morris. William Morris had asked for a house that looked medieval.

William Morris wanted his house to be built in open countryside and near a natural feature such as a river. He found some land in Upton which was perfect for his needs and bought it. The Ordnance Survey map of 1868 showed that at the time Upton was an isolated area. Nearby Bexley Heath however was beginning to grow as schools and churches were built.

The house was built using red brick, explaining why the house was named 'The Red House' and was in the shape of an L. The roof of the house had a weather vane which was designed just for William Morris, using his initials and a horse's head.

The Red House in 1984

Plaque on the Red House

William Morris himself decorated the inside of the house, with help from friends, and the inside of the house could be described as being a work of art. Once completed William Morris and his family would entertain their friends at the house.

In 1865 the family moved from Bexley Heath and William Morris was never to return to The Red House.

However, it is believed that his time at the Red House was some of the happiest of his life. The Red House is now owned by the National Trust.

Portrait of William Morris

The 1861 census for Bexley showing William Morris living at the Red House

Market Gardening and Farming

In the 1850s Bexley Heath was not a large town in a London borough as it is now. Instead Bexley Heath was in the countryside and a lot of the land surrounding Bexley Heath was agricultural. As London got bigger throughout the 18th century, areas which had been farmland became suburbs of London. As a result areas further away from London, such as Bexleyheath, had to increase the amount of farming they did to make up for this loss of land. The main industry within Bexley Heath became market gardening and farming. A market garden can be described a bit like an allotment today. Market gardening would have been performed by families with a small amount of spare land who were able to take advantage of fertile soil and proximity to London. Market gardeners mostly grew fruits and vegetables. It was called a market garden because the produce of this garden would be sold at market, unlike produce grown to feed a farmer and his family. A lot of fruit, such as strawberries, was grown and picked in Bexley Heath. In the summer when the fruit needed picking, lots of children would help in the fields rather than go to school. Once picked the fruit would either go by cart and train to London to be sold in the large markets there or it would be sold to local residents.

The Ladds family of Bexley Heath owned a large acreage of glasshouses which were probably used to grow tomatoes.

Old maps can show us how popular market gardening and farming was in Bexley Heath. There were many nurseries in Bexley Heath and the town was noted for being surrounded by farms, fields and orchards. Some farm land still exists today in North Cray.

A boy strawberry picker, c.1895

Woman picking strawberries, c.1895

An example of a bill from Philip Ladds Nursery, 1889

Greenhouses in a market garden, c.1900

Bexley Heath Windmill

John Dann's windmill occupied an area of land near the present bus garage in Erith Road. It was actually situated in the neighbouring parish of Crayford and the road leading from the Market Place to the windmill was named Mill Road. With Enclosure the land around Bexley Heath was given over from corn to cultivate vegetables, fruit and flowers instead. By the 1860s the mill was no longer used and it was later demolished. By this time market gardening had become a booming business in Bexley Heath.

Bexley Mills Invoice, 1888

Disused Bexley Heath Windmill, c.1860s

View from The Warren looking towards St John's Church in Bexley Village, 1900

Harvesters in a wheat field, c.1850s

Fire Brigade

Before 1869 the only fire engine, or 'the Parish Squirt' as it became known, available to residents and businesses on Bexley Heath was situated in Bexley Village. It took the destruction by fire of the Eagle Public House and a cottage adjoining it for the Dartford District Highways Board to agree to Bexley Heath's request to purchase a fire engine for the town. Through public donations enough money was raised to buy a fire engine at £62 and equipment costing £48, 4 shillings and 10 pence. On 14th April 1869 Bexley Heath formed its very own Fire Brigade consisting of 18 men, all of whom were volunteers. The engine was a two-wheeled vehicle pulled by horses. It could seat four men, including the driver, with the others having to run alongside side it. Phillip Ladds was particularly pleased to have the fire engine available in June 1874 when his house caught fire. Although the house was destroyed the Bexley Heath Fire Brigade were able to prevent the fire spreading to his nursery sheds and glasshouses. The first engine was used for about seven years and was replaced by a more 'modern' one in 1877.

Bexley Heath Fire Brigade, c.1905

The Fire Brigade, Bexley Heath, 1898

Schools and Education

Before 1826 children living in Bexley Heath would have been educated at home by a tutor and only children whose family had lots of money would have been educated in this way. The first public school in Bexley Heath was opened in 1826. At this point education was not compulsory. Nobody had to go to school. School was also not free and the fees cost 2d. (That's 2 pennies in old money which would be 35 pence in current money – this may not sound like a lot of money, but the average wage in the 1820s was 8 shillings and 4 pence [8s 4d] per week). Most school pupils would have been under the age of nine as anyone over the age of nine was thought able to do work. Between 1826 and the 1870s new schools opened in Bexley Heath to admit girls and older boys. Most of these schools were linked to religions.

In 1870 an Education Act was passed by Parliament. This was the very first Act to deal with education. The government had realised that education was important for Great Britain to create new ideas.

*Bexley Heath Board Infant School Class Photograph, c.1905*

The Act aimed to make education available to all through the creation of non-denominational schools. These schools were designed to fill in gaps where schools did not already exist. However, going to school was still not compulsory or free.

In 1880 a further Education Act was passed which made attendance at school compulsory for children aged between five and ten years. The introduction of compulsory attendance at school was to try and stop child labour - if children had to go to school, they could not be forced to do work. However, some families could not afford to lose the extra money brought in by a working child and so many children continued to work outside of school hours and sometimes missed school as well.

Even though going to school was now compulsory it was still not free, although help could be given to those who were poorest.

In 1891 another Education Act finally made education free for all. Going to school was now compulsory and free!

In 1893 the compulsory age for attendance at school was increased to 11 and in 1899 this was increased again to 12. Nowadays it is compulsory to stay in education until you are 16. This is soon to be raised to 18.

Bexley Heath Board School Building, c.1896. This was later known as Uplands School
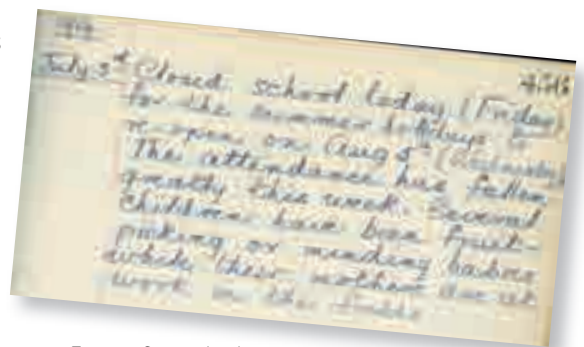
Extract from school log book, 3rd July 1914

Omnibuses

Omnibuses, which were passenger coaches drawn by horses, started in Bexley Heath in the 1850s and would carry people, usually workers, between Bexley Heath and local train stations such as Woolwich Arsenal, Dartford and Abbey Wood. It would take the omnibus half an hour to travel the three miles to Abbey Wood station and the omnibuses would run several times a day. From these stations the workers were able to catch the train to London.

Omnibuses proved to be a popular means of transport, as they made journeys from Bexley Heath to London quicker and easier. As they were so popular there were many rival omnibus owners who would try to win more customers by cutting their prices or making their omnibus run a minute before their rivals.

The omnibus fare to Bexley railway station cost six pence (or £1.50 in today's money). However, wealthier travellers could order a cab from Mr T. Allen, Bexley Heath's 'Fly and Cab Proprietor' to take them with their luggage to the station at the cost of one shilling and sixpence (or £4.50 today).

With the opening of the trams in Bexley Heath in 1903, the omnibuses faced new competition. Omnibus owners lowered their fares to appeal to those workers who found the new trams too expensive. However, by 1909 omnibus services had to be stopped as they could no longer compete against the trams.

A horse drawn omnibus heading towards Woolwich, 1897

A bill from Mr T. Allen, Fly and Cab proprietor, Bexley Heath, 1886

Omnibus timetable, 1884

Name Change for the Town

In 1894 it was suggested that the name Bexley Heath be changed to become just one word: Bexleyheath. This was to prevent confusion between Bexley Village and Bexley Heath, especially for postmen who were often delivering letters to the wrong places! So Bexley Heath became Bexleyheath. 1894 was a year of big changes for Bexleyheath as it was also during this year that the Main Road in Bexleyheath was renamed and the houses renumbered (there had been 27 houses on the Main Road that were numbered '1') and so the Broadway was born.

A Bexley Heath post bus, 1880

Local postmen, c.1900

A Royal Mail cart, c.1895

Bexleyheath Railway

During the 1880s and 1890s Bexleyheath was still a rural area and its residents had to travel to nearby towns if they needed to catch a train. Travelling to a nearby town could take a long time and cost money, so local campaigners decided that Bexleyheath needed its own railway line. In 1883 an Act of Parliament agreed that existing railway lines could be extended to Bexleyheath. However, arguments between the railway company, South Eastern Railway, and the local campaigners meant that the plans for the railway changed and a second Act of Parliament was passed in 1887. Work to build the railway finally started in 1891.

Poster advertising the opening of the Bexleyheath railway, 1895

It took three years before the railway was completed in 1894. The opening of the railway was delayed even further due to a huge earth slip. The railway finally opened on 1st May 1895. Altogether it took twelve years between the passing of the first Act of Parliament and the opening of the railway.

A steam train at Bexleyheath railway station, 1899

Building the Bexleyheath railway line, 1893

Cars

The first practical cars with petrol-powered internal combustion engines were invented in Germany in the 1880s. Within a decade cars were being manufactured not only in Germany but also in France, the USA and in England. The first four-wheeled petrol-driven automobiles in Britain were built in Birmingham in 1895 by Frederick William Lanchester.

Arthur Boswell, 1908

A stage coach outside the Lord Bexley, 1880

A Bexleyheath coachbuilder, Arthur Boswell, took a keen interest in this new invention and he used his coach building skills to make car bodies which he mounted on pre-made chassis. Boswell would also meet with other car enthusiasts and could be seen driving around the Bexleyheath district. His cars must have made an unusual sight at a time when people were used to horses as the main form of transport.

Mr Whomes in a car outside Boswell's shop, 1898

Mr Whomes and his car, 1899

Bexleyheath Gala Parade on the Broadway, 1897

Children celebrating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in Bexleyheath, 1897

Queen Victoria Jubilee Gala

In 1897 Queen Victoria had been on the throne for 60 years and to celebrate she held her Diamond Jubilee. Queen Victoria was the first British monarch to celebrate a Diamond Jubilee, so the celebrations were extra special. Although the official jubilee day was Tuesday 22nd June 1897, there were no official celebrations in Bexleyheath on that day as it was expected that most residents would travel to see the celebrations in central London. Instead, Bexleyheath celebrated the Jubilee with the first Bexleyheath Gala which was held on 7th July 1897 at Danson Park. As well as a funfair and other entertainment, a procession made its way to Danson Park passing along the Broadway. The Gala drew to a close with a huge display of fireworks, which included a giant portrait of Queen Victoria herself! After the Jubilee celebration, Galas were held in Bexleyheath annually until the First World War.

A beacon for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee on Oaklands Road, Bexleyheath, 1897

Trams

In 1901 Bexley Urban District Council promoted the Bexley Electric Light and Traction Bill in an effort to provide not only electricity but also tramways to the district. The Bexley Tramways Bill received Royal Assent in July 1901 and the tramway was opened on 1st October 1903 by Mr Will Crooks, MP for Woolwich. The route ran from the 'Plume of Feathers', Plumstead, through Welling and Bexleyheath to the Erith boundary at Northumberland Heath, with a short branch to the west side of the junction of Gravel Hill and Erith Road. The return fare for a workmen travelling from Bexleyheath to Plumstead cost one and a half pence.

On 26th August 1905 Erith Council opened their line from Abbey Wood through Erith to Northumberland Heath to connect with Bexley Council, although no through-running was undertaken, so passengers had to change trams at the boundary. On 14th February 1906 Dartford Council opened their line from Horns Cross through Dartford and Crayford to the east side of the Gravel Hill/ Erith Road junction with no physical connection. Bexley, although allowing Erith tracks to meet head-on, refused this concession to Dartford. Dartford laid their tracks as near as they could, artfully making sure that the tracks were in line in case Bexley changed their mind. This did indeed come about after complaints from passengers who, having to change cars at the boundary in the wet and cold, saw their destination of Bexleyheath Market Place 500 yards away. On 27th August 1906 Dartford cars ran through to the Market Place.

The cars of Bexley Council Tramways were open-top four wheelers. A large oil lamp with parabolic reflector was hung from the front dash at night and a smaller one showing red at the rear in case of power failure. No indicator boxes were carried at first;

A tram, 1905

destinations were shown on a white board affixed to the canopy. But in 1911 all cars were fitted with one-line indicators attached just below the upper deck rail. There were two long inward-facing seats for 22 passengers inside the cars, while the upper deck had turn-over 'garden' type seats for 30 passengers.

A decorated tram to celebrate the opening of the tramways, 1903

Trams in the Broadway, 1905

A tram passing the Market Place, Bexleyheath, c.1908

Electricity

Bexley Council built an electricity generating station in Bourne Road, in Bexley Village. This allowed, for the first time, electricity to provide heating and lighting to people's homes. Before the provision of electricity, homes and streets were lit by gas. With the opening of the tramways in 1903 came electric lighting. The Council at first only intended to provide electricity to six streets in the district including the Broadway and Crook Log. However the demand for electricity was so great that the Council promised to provide the new power source to more roads in the district. By 1906 there was reported to be 235 consumers of electricity. By 1914 there were 518.

Workmen laying electricity cable in the Broadway Bexleyheath, early 20th Century

Lamp lighter outside Bridgen School, c.1901

Early Cinema

In 1909 the Cinematograph Act was passed. Many new purpose-built cinemas were erected and a number of the old public halls were converted to sole cinema use. By 1913 the cinema was firmly established as a popular entertainment and a spate of cinema building and conversion took place in Bexley. During 1909 the Bexleyheath Public Hall near the Clock Tower became "Pease's Perfect Pictures" and also featured variety artists. One of these, the comedy singer Harry Quinton, took over the hall in December 1913 and within a year it had become the "Picture Palace". An imposing stone-faced facade was built in 1929 and, despite being gutted by fire in 1934, the rebuilt Palace continued to show films (later as "The Astor") until 1967, when it became a bingo hall. The building has since been demolished.

Bexleyheath Picture Palace, c.1914

Children at the Picture Palace, Bexleyheath, c.1914

Shops

There have been shops situated near the Broadway from almost the moment that Bexley Heath became a village. In 1830 the Market House was built and the area around it was christened 'the market place.' The Market House building stood until 1989 when it was destroyed by a fire, but the area surrounding it has remained as a shopping hub in Bexleyheath. Originally there would have been lots of stalls selling produce grown in market gardens, but over time this changed.

By the time the Clock Tower was being built, new shops started to appear around the Market Place and in the Broadway. These shops were able to sell the same items as the local traders but at a lower price. The local traders were afraid that they would be unable to compete with the new stores and be driven out of business.

Some of the businesses trading on the Broadway in 1911 included a baker, a builder, a fishmonger, a butcher, a dairy, a grocer, an artificial teeth maker, a shoe maker and a chimney sweep.

The inside of Hide's ladieswear shop, 1909

George Mence Smith's shop front, Market Place Bexleyheath, 1900

A bill from A. J. Mason, Chemist and Dentist, Bexleyheath, 1888

J. H. Matthews general stores shop front, c.1890

Hide's Emporium shop front, c.1890

Death of King Edward VII

King Edward VII died on Friday 6th May 1910 and his son George, the Prince of Wales, was proclaimed King three days later. The official proclamation was announced by the Duke of Norfolk, the Earl Marshal of England, from the balcony of St James's Palace. With trumpets blazing he proclaimed "by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India."

In parish churches all over the district memorial services were said for the King. The local authorities which then covered this area, Erith Urban District Council, Bexley Urban District Council and Foots Cray Urban District Council, recorded the passing of the old and the coming of the new King. "The King is Dead, Long Live the King."

The Observer, 13th May 1910 reports the death of King Edward VII

Coronation of King George V

The coronation of King George V and his wife, Queen Mary, took place at Westminster Abbey on Thursday 22nd June 1911. Festivities to celebrate the Coronation were arranged for Wednesday 28th June 1911 at the Grove, situated on the corner of Bean and Danson roads. Some 1700 Bexleyheath school children were given the day off to attend the town's 'Coronation Treat' where they were given mugs of tea, served in Coronation mugs, and chocolate. Competitions and games were organised such as skipping races, three-legged races and the 100 yard dash. This long day that started at noon ended at 8.30 pm with the singing of 'God Save the King' led by the band.

King George V Coronation Bonfire in Bexleyheath, 1911

The Bexleyheath Coronation Memorial Clock Tower

Market Place, c.1890

'A Great Want'

The first mention of a public clock in the centre of Bexleyheath is contained in the 'Local Notes and Comment' column of the Bexleyheath, Erith and Sidcup Observer. This column was probably written by the newspaper's editor or publisher, who went by the nom de plume 'Roamer'.

Writing on 17th February 1911, Roamer notes, "Undoubtedly a great want in Bexleyheath is a public clock, for preference near the tram terminus. Some time since the Council purchased the apex of the triangular island near the market place and there have been suggestions that the land should be utilised for the site of a shelter, with a clock over and a convenience."

The tram terminus was built next to the Market House which was the historic centre of Bexleyheath. In a matter of months plans for a coronation memorial that included a public clock on the Market Place site were well in advance. On 15th May 1911 members of the Council representing Christchurch ward met with 65 ratepayers at the Council Offices to discuss "alternative methods" of celebrating the coronation of King George V in their ward, which included three proposals:

1. Provision of a permanent memorial

2. Provision of entertainment to tea for children

3. Combination of both.

At this meeting an Executive Committee was formed consisting of Christchurch ward councillors and prominent Bexleyheath businessmen including the pianoforte dealer, Edmund Whomes; Albert Hide, the owner of Hide's the draper and clothing store; Charles Wilson, Manager of Martins Bank; and Thomas Jenkins, the book publisher and postcard printer.

Unsurprisingly then, this committee consisting of businessmen whose shops and bank fronted the Broadway also wanted the Council to make "a general improvement of the area and vacant land in Market Place."

This included:

1. Removal of the drinking trough and fountain obelisk from the Market Place site

2. Removal of the existing electricity transformer, built for the trams

3. Widening of the carriage way in Market Place by reducing the width of the path

4. Improving the curve of Woolwich Road to the eastern end of Broadway

5. Widening the road at the north side of Market Place to 36ft and allowing space for future construction of a tramway loop.

The Christchurch ward councillors and Bexleyheath businessmen wanted to bring Bexleyheath into the 20th century. They repeated that the fountain obelisk "that was first erected when motor traffic did not exist" should be "erected elsewhere." In sum the businessmen wanted to make Bexleyheath a prominent shopping centre that had good transport links to neighbouring towns. They did not want relics from the past to obstruct either public trams or the 'new' motor car.

The Executive Committee reported to the Council on 28th June 1911, a week after the coronation, that they had also selected a local architect, Mr W. M. Epps, by way of a competition with two other architects who also resided in Christchurch ward. Epps' winning design featured a tower including a clock with four faces and space for an electric substation at the base and a shelter totalling £454. The money to build the clock tower was to be raised by public subscription and they had already been promised or received £110.

Despite a couple of dissenting voices who wanted to keep the fountain obelisk in its original place, the Coronation Memorial Committee's proposal was passed and the Council agreed that it would approve the use of part of its land for the erection of the clock tower.

The original plans for the Clock Tower showing the design of the tower and its position near the Market Place, 1911
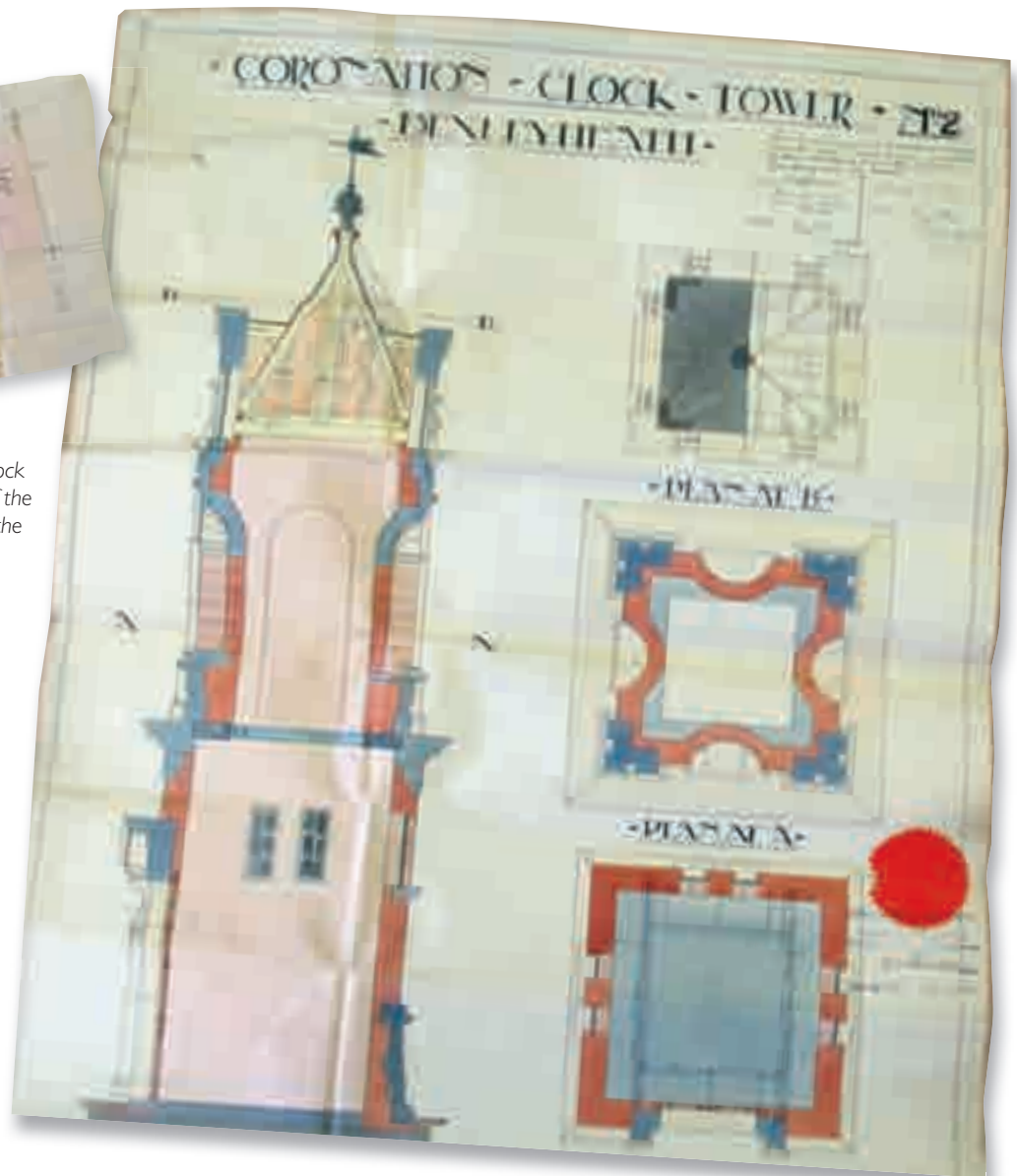
Building the Clock Tower

By 21st July 1911 total subscriptions sat at £185-16-0, which left a considerable sum still to be raised by private subscription. Inevitably public money was needed to ensure that the project could get off the ground. At a Council meeting on 20th September 1911 it was decided that the Council's Electricity Lighting and Traction Committee should contribute £92-10-0 towards the cost of the clock tower because they wanted to use the base of the tower as a substation for the trams.

The following month the tender for building the clock tower was awarded to local firm Messrs Friday and Ling who offered the best price of £454. However, even with the contribution from the Council's Electric Lighting Committee this still left the project short of £100. It was therefore decided to continue the appeal for subscriptions from the public through the sale of postcards, which was presumably arranged by Thomas Jenkins, executive member of the Coronation Memorial Committee and postcard printer!

In November the Silent Clock Company won the tender for supplying the clock at a cost of £59-17-6 with an annual running cost of £12-12-6. Incidentally, the Council opted for Roman numerals for the four faces of the clock. Costs continued to spiral as Epps decided to put in a fee of £15.

After nearly a year of planning the foundation stone for the clock tower was laid on 8th January 1912. It read: "This tower was erected by Public Subscription (in part) as a loyal tribute from the inhabitants of Bexleyheath to commemorate the coronation of his Majesty King George V, 1911." The names of the Chairman of Bexley Urban District Council, G. Sheldon JP, the Clerk Thomas G. Baynes, and Walter Epps the architect were inscribed beneath the loyal tribute. A jar was also placed under the foundation stone to explain to any future explorer 'when Bexleyheath was in ruins' what had been done in Bexleyheath to celebrate the coronation of King George V.

The finished clock tower stood at 46ft with a 13ft base. The electrically controlled clock was correct to 30 seconds. Its four dials measured 3ft 4 inches and were lit up at night.

The building of the clock tower, 1912

The Market Place and clock tower, 1930

Opening ceremony of the clock tower, 1912

The Opening Ceremony

The inaugural ceremony for unveiling the clock tower was set for Bexleyheath Gala day on Wednesday 17th July 1912. At the request of the Trader's Association local business and shops decorated their premises with bunting and festoons. 'God Save the King' banners were hung outside buildings.

The proceedings began with members of the Executive Committee, members of the Council, religious bodies and the Bexleyheath Fire Brigade meeting at the Council Offices at 12.30pm.

The distinguished group, led by W. F. Triton, Captain of the Fire Brigade, marched to the clock tower, where they were met by the Boy Scouts, 14th West Kent Boy's Brigade, local school children and the wives of the councillors and other guests.

In the absence through ill health of Councillor Sheldon, the Chair of the Clock Tower Committee, Councillor Reid led the proceedings. After a rendition of 'God of Our Fathers' by local school children Reid took to the stage. He said that the original idea of the clock tower had come from his friend and colleague William Smith and both men thought the building of a clock tower in the Market Place "would be the beginnings of better things to come in Bexleyheath."

Reid then produced a silver key, designed by Epps, and amid a fanfare of trumpets he opened the door of the clock tower. To the assembled audience of invited guests and the gathering crowd he proclaimed, "I now declare this Coronation Memorial Clock Tower open and may it stand as a memorial to the enterprise and loyalty of the inhabitants of Bexleyheath." The crowd applauded loudly and the national anthem was played. Reid then pressed an electric button to start the clock and a 'temporary' bust of King George V was simultaneously unveiled. After Reid's loyal address it was Architect Epps' turn to mount the stage. He ended his speech with "I hope to see all the niches filled with busts of members of the Royal Family." The whole event, including the gala at Danson Park, was filmed by Harry Pease at the Public Hall on May Place Road. The films were shown at the Pictures on the following weekend.

Opening ceremony of the clock tower, 1912

The Clock Tower After 1912

Barely three months after the official opening of the tower there were complaints of poor lighting on three of the four dials, which had to be increased so that passers-by could see the clock at night.

By February 1913 the project was in deficit to the tune of £40-10-0. Despite this, the Council decided to purchase a bell for the tower from All Saints Church, Canterbury. The bell which was made by Joseph Hatch in 1627 weighed approximately 50 kilograms and measured 30 inches in diameter. The bell was installed on 17th June 1913 ready for Gala Day in the following month. However the bell did not toll for long. In August 1914 the Defence of the Realm Act, which was introduced at the beginning of the First World War, banned the ringing of bells for fear that they might be used by German spies to convey secret messages. The bell did not ring again until the year 2000.

In 1935 the bust of King George was removed for cleaning. However, being made only of plaster the bust disintegrated when it was scrubbed with water. A new bust of the King George was commissioned by the London Borough of Bexley and in 1997 a second bust, that of the poet, socialist, designer and Bexleyheath resident William Morris was added to mark the centenary of his death.

Bexley
Historical Society
Est. 1951