

The last village

A self-guided walk around Bexley



Discover how Bexley has developed over the last thousand years
Find out how the village looked in Saxon and medieval times
Learn how villagers have made a living over the centuries
Explore an ancient settlement embracing the twenty-first century

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discovered through walks**







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Cover image: Bexley High Street (c.1910) © Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre

The last village

Explore the fortunes of a historic settlement on the edge of London

In the Domesday survey of 1086 the village of Bexlea - meaning 'a settlement in a clearing in the woods' - had 41 inhabitants with 100 pigs and 10 ploughs. It was valued at £20.

Today, Bexley is virtually the last village on the edge of London and maintains a distinct feel and character. This walk explores how Bexley village has developed over more than a thousand years.



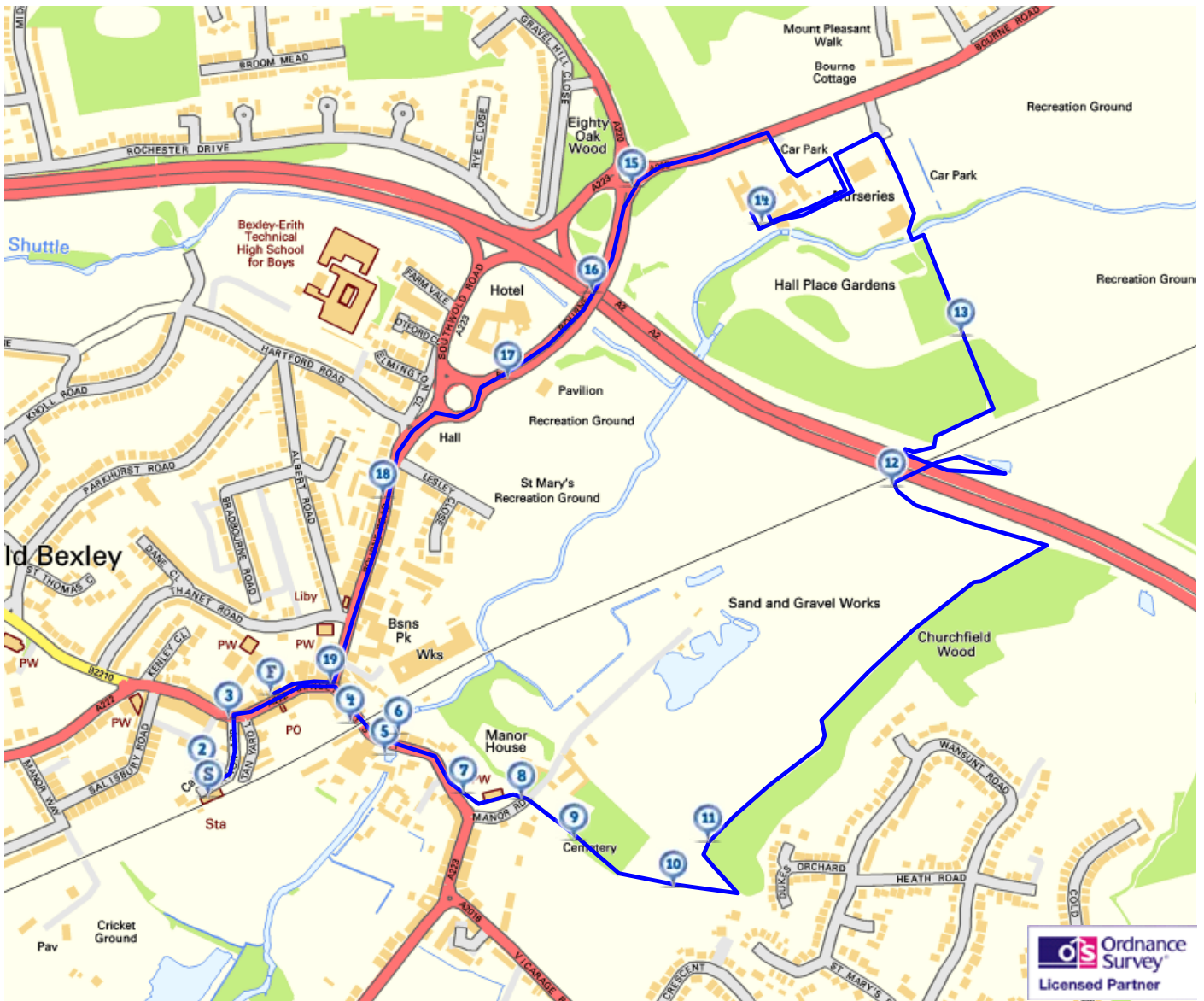
Bexley High Street (1910)
© Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre

We will discover evidence in the buildings and streets of how the village looked in Saxon and medieval times. We will find out how and why it changed in the Victorian and post-war eras. We will learn about the lives of villagers over the centuries and what they have done for a living. And will we also discover how Bexley's position on the banks of the River Cray has brought both advantages and disadvantages.



River Cray signpost / 1930s housing at Coldblow
© Rory Walsh

Route overview



Practical information

Location	Bexley, Greater London
Start point	Bexley railway station, DA5 1AQ
Finish point	The Freemantle Hall, High Street, DA5 1AA
Distance	3 miles
Getting there	<p>Train - From Kent there are usually 1-2 services an hour from Gravesend, Ebbsfleet and Ashford International stations.</p> <p>From London, 2-4 services every hour from Charing Cross, Cannon Street, London Victoria, London Bridge or Waterloo.</p> <p>Bus - Various services stop on Bourne Road, including routes 132, 229, 492 and B12.</p> <p>Car - Bexley is very close to the Black Prince Interchange of the A2 (exit signs towards Bexley and A322). You can also use the A224 exit on the A20. Car parking is available at Bexley station, Thanet Road and Bexley High Street (charges apply).</p>
Level	Gentle – A mostly flat route in the village and surrounding countryside.

Terrain	Pavements, footpaths and parkland. The path beside Churchfield Wood (Stop 10) can be muddy so take appropriate footwear.
Conditions	Traffic can be busy in the village centre . A small portion of the walk is beside the A2 road, so if you are with children make sure to keep a close eye on them. Hall Place Gardens (Stop 13) can become flooded in extreme weather.
Suitable for	Families – Children will enjoy exploring Hall Place Gardens.
Refreshments	Several cafés and pubs on the High Street plus the Riverside Café at Hall Place (Stop 14).
Toilets	Toilets available at Hall Place (Stop 14). There are no longer any public toilets in Bexley village.
Places to visit	Hall Place historic house is open 10am-5pm April-October, 10am-4pm November-March. The Gardens open 9am - dusk. www.bexleyheritagetrust.org.uk/hallplace Tel: 01322 526 574
Tourist information	Bexley Tourist Information, The Central Library, Townley Road, Bexleyheath DA6 7HJ (Tel: 020 8303 7777)

Start and end of the route



Stopping points

- Start.** Bexley railway station
- 2.** Bexley railway station
 - 3.** Corner of Station Approach and High Street
 - 4.** Maharajah Indian restaurant, 84 High Street
 - 5.** Bridge over the River Cray, High Street
 - 6.** 101 High Street
 - 7.** St Mary's Church grounds
 - 8.** Manor House, end of Manor Road
 - 9.** Cemetery off Manor Road
 - 10.** Footpath between graveyard and Churchfield Wood
 - 11.** Edge of Churchfield Wood
 - ...
 - 19.** Junction of Bourne Road and High Street
- Finish.** The Freemantle Hall, 51-75 High Street

Middle section of the route



Stopping points

- 12.** Floodplain by bridge under the A2
- 13.** Hall Place Gardens
- 14.** Hall Place
- 15.** Gravel Hill roundabout
- 16.** Bridge over the A2, Bourne Road
- 17.** Dartfordians Rugby Club, Bourne Road
- 18.** National School, Bourne Road

1. Welcome to Bexley

Bexley railway station

Old Bexley is an ancient settlement in southeast London. The village is situated on a crossing point of the River Cray, 13 miles from the centre of the capital. This walk charts the village's development, from its inclusion in the Domesday survey 1,000 years ago to its absorption into Greater London in 1965.

We will look at the village in Tudor, medieval and Victorian times, as well as the twentieth century. We will see how Bexley has adapted to physical and economic factors through the centuries. We will look at how transport links have influenced the village's development.



Bexley village in snow (2010)
© Raymond Molony

This walk was created by Raymond Molony, a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and long-standing resident of the village.



The Freemantle Hall, Bexley High Street
© Laura Shawyer

Raymond: "Welcome to Bexley! I have chosen this walk because it allows you to experience the exciting development of a small village over the centuries. There is a lot to experience, including an ancient church with a boulder grave, a former code station reputed to be haunted and a wildlife conservation area on a floodplain."

"Although we'll be looking at how the village has developed and changed through time, we won't necessarily do this in chronological order because of the location of different buildings. I hope you enjoy your walk around this last village on the edge of London."

Directions 1

Remain outside Bexley railway station.

2. The train of change

Bexley railway station

Two hundred years ago, Bexley was a small village in the countryside. Today it is a suburb in the outer London Borough of Bexley, having been absorbed by urban sprawl. Only the Green Belt restrictions limit its further expansion into the countryside. This is why you can think of it as the last village in London.

We are going to start exploring the village by considering the critical role of the railway, which changed the nature of Bexley for ever. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, you reached the village over a rutted road infested with marauding highwaymen. Access to Bexley was no easy matter.



The railway line between Bexley and Crayford
© Rory Walsh



A map of Bexley (1897) showing the railway line and the growing number of residential plots in the village
© Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre

The railway line was built in 1866 and connected this isolated village with the rest of London. No longer would this be a landscape dominated by country estates with a few large houses. Victorian villas could now be built near the station to allow the new middle class to commute on a daily basis to their jobs in the capital.

The local population expanded from just 1,441 inhabitants in 1801 to 10,605 by 1891. During the 1920s and 1930s the villages around Bexley linked up due to the expansion of suburban housing. Now you can reach Charing Cross in central London in 50 minutes. Today the railway carries the commuters employed in the service economy of the twenty-first century.

Directions 2

Walk down Station Approach. Stop at the junction with the High Street.

3. Before the railway

Corner of Station Approach and High Street

Though we started by thinking about how the railway dramatically changed Bexley from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the village High Street is much older. This road has existed for centuries. In fact, what you see today is a medieval road pattern.

So let's go back to the days before the railway and think about what the village would have looked like...

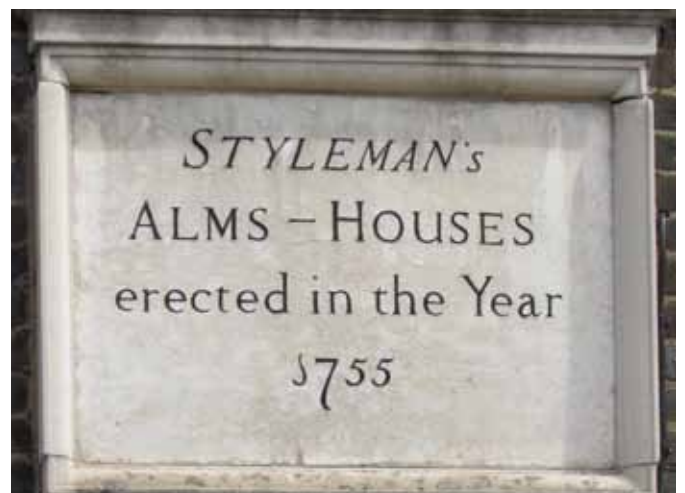
It is 1801. Our monarch is King George III. The roadway is unpaved. The building immediately on your right (now an estate agents and florists) is the poor house.



The former poor house, established in 1787
© Rory Walsh

It was established in 1787 and the parish is trying to look after those 40 inmates who have fallen on hard times. These facilities are administered by the local parish of St Mary's.

To the left and on the opposite side of the High Street, just set back from the road, are the almshouses paid for by the former governor of Madras, a Mr Styleman. They provide some housing for the poor and elderly. The well-off inhabitants of the village are now living in larger brick houses, built according to the latest Georgian style.



Styleman's almshouses
© Raymond Molony / Rory Walsh

Most of the villagers derive their income from farming, working in the mills or acting as servants to the many large country houses in the area. There are also some dirty industries such as leather tanning in Tan Yard Lane beside the poor house. There are skilled craftsmen too, like John Dann. He is a carpenter. By 1824 he is receiving the grand sum of £15.76 per year from the church for his work. But he supplements this income with a further £6.60 for burial work at St Mary's.

Workers – whether skilled or unskilled – receive no paid leave. But the 13th September fair, which has existed since the reign of Edward the II, allows the inhabitants of the village a day's celebration. At other times, villagers – both male and female – go to the Kings Head in the High Street to drink ale. It is popular because ale is considered safer to drink than water. The pub has already been there for over 150 years and is named after King Henry VIII who had a hunting lodge in the nearby town of Dartford.



The King's Head pub dates back to the fifteenth century
© Rory Walsh

Directions 3

Turn right and walk along the High Street. At the mini-roundabout keep right. When you reach a turning on the right leading to a car park (just before the railway bridge) look at the building on the corner, now an Indian restaurant.

4. Fire insurance

Maharajah Indian restaurant, 84 High Street

Along the High Street, take time to look beyond the modern shop fronts and signage to the buildings themselves. So often we fail to see beyond the façade, yet so many buildings have a long history and interesting stories to tell.

The Indian restaurant has a ground floor with a modern shop front typical of the twenty-first century. But the upper floor with its uneven wall shows a building from the late medieval period.

In those days fires were common because the main roofing materials – such as thatch – were flammable. If their owners paid insurance, a disc was put on the wall. This allowed fire-fighters to know whether the building was covered.

Failure to display the disc could lead to your building being allowed to burn down to the ground.



A modern shop front fixed onto a medieval building
© Rory Walsh



An example of a fire insurance plaque
© Rory Walsh

The disc has now disappeared from this building, as has the village's own fire service. However, this illustrates some of the services that an important local village like Bexley would require in the eighteenth century.

As we continue along the walk look out for more modern façades fixed onto much older buildings.

Directions 4

Continue along the High Street and under the railway bridge. Stop at the bridge over the River Cray.

5. A bridge over useful water

Bridge over the River Cray, High Street

Most settlements are built near a source of water. This is an essential resource for human populations, as well as for food production and power generation. Here the River Cray passes through Bexley village. The River Cray is a tributary of the River Thames.

The Cray has been a source of power for the grinding of grain since the early Middle Ages. The mill that you see today is actually a modern reproduction of the original building which burned down in 1966.

The arches under the mill were restructured at that time to alleviate the risk of flooding, which occurs in this area when debris is caught under the mill.

In recent years, the building itself has changed use from a pub and restaurant to office and apartments. This is typical of many older buildings in villages like Bexley that have adapted and changed their use.



Today's mill is a reproduction of the original
© Rory Walsh



Mill stream (c.1910)
© Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre

The bridge here over the Cray has also been changed and widened from its original humped-back structure to allow for modern vehicles, but it still retains the original route of the medieval roadway.

Directions 5

Turn away from the mill and look at the opposite side of the road at the houses behind the railings.

6. Houses within houses

101 High Street

Look at the footpath at this point – it is notably lower than the modern road. This shows how much lower the medieval road was in former times.

Now look at the house numbered 101. Like the restaurant we saw earlier, here are houses whose present façades disguise structures from earlier ages. There are three circular and two long metal screw plates. These screws were used to bolt a Queen Anne façade on to an earlier fifteenth-century house. Putting on a new frontage was an easy way of updating an earlier structure.



101 High Street
© Rory Walsh

Further along the row, the last three houses have been heavily changed over the centuries. Can you spot where a carriage might have entered in earlier times? The three houses from 1666 were still reputed to possess their original thatched roofing under the more modern tiling up to the 1970s. Can you think of a reason for houses replacing their thatched roofing?



Look for the iron bolts holding on the façade
© Rory Walsh

Walk a little further along and look across the road at High Street House with its blue plaque. This commemorates the residence of John Thorpe, a famous historian from the eighteenth century. The iron railing around the house is one of the few pieces of iron which were not scrapped for the war effort in 1940.

The main façade of the house is from John Thorpe's time, but again hides features which date from earlier centuries at the back of the house. Note the positioning of the main floor at a higher level to allow for the possibility of flooding from the nearby River Cray.

Directions 6

Continue along the High Street. Cross over at a safe point and enter into St Mary's Church grounds.

7. Bare bones and grave robbery

St Mary's Church grounds

The Church of St Mary's takes us further into the history of the village. This church dates from the twelfth century. At that time, the church was at the centre of village life. The building was re-modelled in the nineteenth century with additional extensions and an unusual triangular spire.

The church grounds tell us much about the development of the village. The small shed near the gate where you came in would have contained the charnel house where the church authorities stored dug up bones to make room in the graveyard.



St Mary's Church (1846)
© Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre



The charnel house, St Mary's churchyard
© Rory Walsh

Grave robbery of fresh bodies for medical purposes was also a constant problem. Gangs came all the way from distant London at the dead of night for this gruesome purpose. John Thorpe himself had a massive boulder placed on the grave of his wife Catherine when she died in 1789 to discourage grave robbers. You can find this grave just along the Tudor brick wall the churchyard shares with his house.

As you walk through the church grounds, note the more ornate graves from the eighteenth century. These reflect the growing wealth in the village, among those earning an increased income from industrialisation and overseas colonies.

Directions 7

Leave the churchyard by the main gate then turn left into Manor Road. Keep the church on your left turn left and stop at the entrance to the Manor House.

8. The former seat of power

Manor House, end of Manor Road

This is Manor House. Today it is divided into apartments. There was an older Saxon structure here, but it was replaced in the twelfth century. In Saxon times, the Manor House and the church were at the centre of the village.

In 1066, after the Norman Conquest, ownership of the village would have passed to new Norman overlords. But ordinary life for the common folk would have carried on as before – tilling the land, planting and harvesting the grain.



The Manor House (c.1910)
© Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre

The Domesday survey reveals that in 1086 the settlement had a population of 41 villagers, 15 small holdings, 10 ploughs, 100 pigs, a church and three mills. This survey valued the entire village at £20. Grain crops were grown on the surrounding fields of the floodplain to be processed in the three mills. Chalk from the Dene Holes in nearby Joydens Wood provided an essential mineral for these farms.

By the fifteenth century, a small industry was established making bricks in Tile Kiln Lane. Even King Henry VIII was a customer. In 1540 he bought 3,000 bricks for 75p to construct a manor house in nearby Dartford.

By the nineteenth century, the role of both the manor and the church in the village had diminished. After 1838, the inmates of the workhouse were sent to the larger Dartford Union institution as the government encouraged smaller village poorhouses to amalgamate for economic reasons following the Poor Law Act of 1834.

Directions 8

Go through the gateway that lies between the entrance to Manor Farm Cottages and Manor Cottage into the cemetery. Follow the track to the big tree, stop at the information board round the corner.

9. Final resting place

Cemetery off Manor Road

As the village population grew, the church graveyard became full and so this cemetery was opened in the middle of the eighteenth century.

Here you can find the graves of a few famous individuals, such as William Stanhope Lovell, who fought as a Midshipman at the Battle of Trafalgar and later rose to be Vice Admiral of the Fleet. His ornate grave includes anchors and fish carved in stone.

But there are also the graves of more ordinary individuals. Look around and compare the life expectancy between those who died in the 1800s and 1900s.



St Mary's Cemetery and Nature Conservation Area
© Rory Walsh



The elaborate tomb of William Stanhope Lovell
© Rory Walsh

You will see that very few people lived to what we now consider as old age and many died in infancy.

Since 1981 this cemetery has been a wildlife conservation area. Look out in particular for birds such as dunnock, wrens and wood pigeons.

Directions 9

Follow the footpath straight up through the cemetery and leave through a small gateway. Turn left onto a tarmac path. Stop after about 50 metres.

10. To bypass or not to bypass

Footpath between graveyard and Churchfield Wood

Living in Bexley means living with traffic on a constant basis. The old medieval route which we saw in the High Street is not suitable for the volumes of traffic which pass through the modern village. It's a route used by many vehicles that have no business in the village and it regularly becomes very congested.

Many villages and towns have bypasses to alleviate such problems and here in Bexley there have been proposals to build a bypass across this open land to the east of the village. It would only be a mile or so long but it would eat into the Green Belt, particularly here between the railway line and Churchfield Wood. It would also damage a rich ecosystem which resembles the regeneration of ancient woodland.

The bypass has been proposed for a very long time. It appears on street maps in the late 1990s as a proposed route but disappears again from subsequent versions.

The bypass was included the Borough's 2012 Core Strategy and has been a subject for debate since. To date there has been no action and the current status of the proposal is unknown.



The proposed route of the Bexley bypass in the Master Atlas of Greater London (8th Edition, 1998) SABRE <http://www.sabre-roads.org.uk>

Directions 10

Continue up the path. Just before the houses, turn left onto the footpath (number 127) into Churchfield Wood. Follow the footpath on the edge of the wood. After a short distance, the path bends slightly to the right and there are four electrical junction boxes. Go about ten metres further and stop at a spot with a clear view of the gravel heaps.

11. A new town

Edge of Churchfield Wood

The village of Old Bexley that we have come from is now a part of the London Borough of Bexley. The main administrative centre of the area is Bexleyheath. This was a new town established in 1815 on the heath along the line of the old Roman road. It also benefitted from its own railway line in 1895 and rapidly became suburbanised. You can see some of modern Bexleyheath on the ridge in the distance.

In the 1920s, the area here to the east of the village was saved from development by its location next to a floodplain. Then in 1938 this land was included in the London Green Belt. A Green Belt is an area of protected land where development and building is restricted.

Through the trees on the right of the path you may glimpse some houses which are part of the post-war development of Coldblow. This is a small extension to Bexley village that replaced some large Victorian villas.

People moved here from inner London to get away from the smoke and grime of the city. Those who had prospered in the post-war boom wanted to experience the convenience of the city next to the countryside. The transport infrastructure that linked Bexley to the capital allowed suburbanites to live at the edge and work in the service sector of the city.

The housing in Coldblow is now made up of Victorian buildings converted into apartments, some 1930s modernist houses and a mix of estates from the 1970s.



Coldblow housing - Victorian (top),
1930s modernist (centre) and 1970s (bottom)
© Rory Walsh

Directions 11

Continue along the footpath on the edge of the wood. At the end, go over the stile and turn left down the tarmac footpath with the embankment and road on your right. Stop where the path meets the railway line.

12. Soil and gravel

Floodplain by bridge under the A2

We noted earlier that settlements are frequently located beside rivers. People depend on water for their survival and use water and its kinetic power for their industries and economic activities. The River Cray has had 14 mills from source to sea which have made use of this energy facility over the centuries, including the one we saw earlier in Bexley village.

However, living beside rivers can also pose a risk. Notice that the land here is absolutely flat. You will often find such level areas of land at the side of a river. They are known as a floodplains.



Gravel pits on the floodplain at Bexley
© Rory Walsh

These areas of land periodically flood when river water levels increase after particularly heavy rains. Floodplains offer both advantages and disadvantages. Let's think first about all the positive benefits. For one thing, the flat land provides ample space for urban expansion. Secondly, a river at times of flood deposits sediments on the floodplain called alluvium. These sediments create a rich type of soil, which is good for farming and food production.

What's more, the materials deposited on the floodplain can also be used for building roads. Just to the left of the railway line here is a gravel pit where materials were extracted for building the main road beside you. You may be able to see piles of gravel there today as this is still used as a depot for construction materials.

We will find out about some of the disadvantages of floodplains at our next stop.

Directions 12

Follow the footpath under the road bridge. Follow the footpath to a fork. Turn right up the slope to the main road. Turn right onto the road bridge over the railway. Take great care here because the traffic is very busy. Immediately after the bridge, take the steps down to the right. At the bottom, go through the gate into Hall Place Gardens. Keep the hedge on your left, even when it makes a left turn. Stop at the first break in the hedge where there is a wooden bridge over a ditch.

13. No swimming

Hall Place Gardens

We heard at the last stop that the floodplain has had a positive effect on the development and growth of Bexley village. But there are also negatives that come with a riverside location. Floodplains – by their very nature – are prone to flooding. Indeed, Bexley village has suffered from periodic floods. For example, there was severe rainfall on September 5th 1958 – over 50mm fell in two hours. The Cray overflowed here at Hall Place.

There have been a series of works since the 1960s designed to protect Bexley. These have included redesigning the mill that we saw earlier and limiting building around the village.



A water gauge on the River Cray at Hall Place Gardens
© Rory Walsh

Here in Hall Place Gardens, this ditch has been created as an overflow in times of high water. Excess water from the river, which we shall reach in a few moments, is diverted along this channel, taking it away from houses and roads. It might seem quite amusing to see the signs for no swimming and strong currents when the ditch is completely dry but this is a vital attempt at alleviating flood risks.



Drainage channels in Hall Place Gardens are designed to take overflow water if the river floods
© Rory Walsh

And the risk of flooding is set to continue. Towns and villages are full of impermeable surfaces – tarmac, pavements, driveways, buildings. These materials do not absorb rain water so it runs on the surfaces and down drains. Sometimes there is too much for the drains to cope with and they overflow. This is known as flash flooding. It's a dilemma that many settlements face – to what extent should we intervene in natural processes to protect our land and buildings?



Flooding in Crayford High Street, September 1968
© Richard Hoare, Geograph (CCL)

Directions 13

Continue following the path beside the hedge. Cross over the river using the footbridge to the left. Follow the footpath beside the brick wall through the car park. Turn left, still with the brick wall on your left. After a short distance, turn left into Hall Place Gardens. It is open daily from 9am to dusk.

Go into the gardens and turn right down the central path following signs for the Visitor Centre and Historic House. At the Visitor Centre, you may want to use the toilets or have a break in the café. When you are ready go through the far side of the Visitor Centre and stop in the gardens outside to look at Hall Place house.

14. Ghosts and secret codes

Hall Place



Hall Place has two distinctive styles: the Tudor part from the sixteenth century (left) and the red brick section from the seventeenth century (right)

© Rory Walsh

This is Hall Place, built from 1540. It replaced an earlier manor from 1241 with a newer building style which was fashionable at the time. Building stones were taken from Lessness Abbey, which had been dissolved under Henry VIII.

Hall Place was built for Sir John Champenys, a former Lord Mayor of London. Sir John lived quite a different life to his neighbours in Bexley village. He would have had a luxurious lifestyle dining on such fine foods as roast peacock, while the villagers would have dined on the more humble pottage stew. The extensive gardens on this 65 hectare site would have provided space for formal gardens as well as supplying the big house with produce.

The building was extended between 1649 and 1666 in brick by Sir Robert Austin, who managed to keep his head and prosper under both the Roundheads and the Royalists during the turbulent times of the English Civil War.

During the eighteenth century, the house was inherited by Sir Francis Dashwood, a notorious rake and member of the Hellfire Club. His family leased the hall as a school for a considerable period before renting it to a number of tenants who required a country mansion near to London.

The last tenant was Lady Limerick who died in 1943. She hosted famous social events at Hall Place. Guests included both Edward the Prince of Wales (who was to become Edward VIII) and his brother George (who was to become George VI). In the gardens look out for a topiary, a row of hedge sculptures, called the Queen's Beasts. They were installed in 1953 to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and depict animals from royal coats of arms.



The wood panelled Parlour and the plaster ceiling of the Great Chamber
© Laura Shawyer

In 1944 and 1945 a US Army Signal Unit was stationed at the house. The unit intercepted Luftwaffe coded communications, which were then forwarded to Bletchley Park for decoding.



The ornamental gates at Hall Place
© Rory Walsh

With such an eclectic history of owners, it's no surprise that many ghosts and legends are associated with the house. It is reputed that a white lady wanders the building seeking her lover who died while out hunting.

When you leave, look out for the Black Iron Gates on Bourne Road. Legend has it that Dick Turpin and his horse Black Bess jumped over them.

Today Hall Place and Gardens are open to the public and run by the Bexley Heritage Trust.

Directions 14

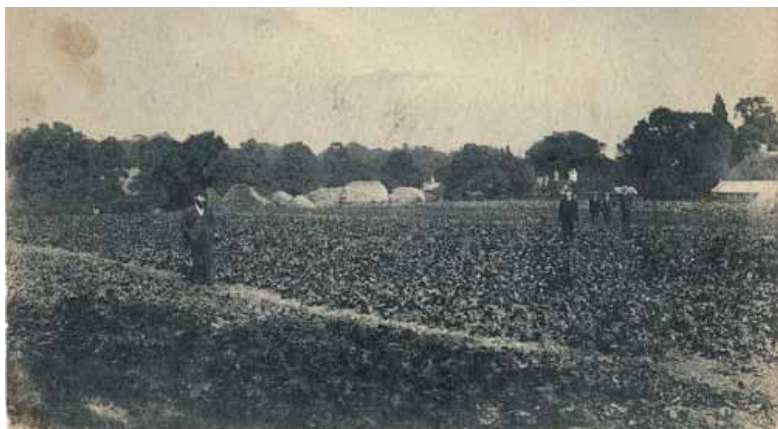
Do go inside the house if you are interested. It is open daily from 10am to 4pm but there is an entrance charge. When you are ready, retrace your steps through the Visitor Centre and the garden. At the exit, turn left and follow the perimeter wall of Hall Place through the car park and on to Bourne Road. Stop at the main gates of the house for a fine view of the other side of the building. Continue a short way along the pavement and stop in a safe place at the roundabout.

15. The strawberry train

Gravel Hill roundabout

This busy roundabout would be unrecognisable to an inhabitant of Bexley village over a hundred years ago. In 1912, Gravel Hill on the other side of the roundabout was a small lane which wound its way up the slope to Bexleyheath.

This area between Bexley and Bexleyheath was full of small-holdings and plant nurseries. The agricultural produce supplied local markets as well as the main London markets.



Bourne Farm (c.1910)
© Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre

Mr Albert James Franklin of Bourne Farm earned his income in 1907 from growing soft fruit on his holding which was located on the site of today's Black Prince, which we shall see from the next stop.

At harvest time, hundreds of women migrated to the area to collect the fruit. They put the produce in baskets called 'pecks', which weighed between 12 and 14 pounds each. The baskets were then transported by train to Covent Garden fruit market in central London. It is hardly a surprise that the train earned the nickname 'the Strawberry Train'.



The Strawberry Train at Bexley station (c.1905)
© Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre

Meanwhile, on the other side of Gravel Hill were farms such as Warren Farm, which grew wheat. Men worked the fields, tilling and reaping, while horses were used on its undulating slope. Potatoes were grown in Pincott Fields. Groups of local woman were employed to pick them. The potatoes were sent to Mandrews Limited, a new potato crisp factory at the top of Gravel Hill, established in the early 1930s.

This rural scene changed dramatically between 1934 and 1938 with the rapid expansion of suburbia in the fields to the west of Gravel Hill. Smallholders were bought out by builders erecting new suburbs at a fantastic rate. A semi-detached house could be built in six weeks and sold for as little as £650. In turn, the growing population had other demands such as improved road access - hence the development of the road layout that you see today. By the late 1930s, Bexley's agriculture and Strawberry Train were obsolete.



The Parkhurst Road area of Bexley (1929) -
note the number of allotments and smallholdings in the village
Courtesy of www.britainfromabove.org.uk © English Heritage

Directions 15

Keep left at the roundabout, following the signs for Bexley. Stop on the bridge over the A2, or if you prefer, find a quieter place a little further on.

16. Ancient and modern roads

Bridge over the A2, Bourne Road

This is the busy A2, the road linking London with the southeast coast at Dover.

Car ownership grew after the First World War and this placed pressure on the existing road network which had often followed Roman or medieval road patterns. So the A2 was built in 1928 to try and deal with these modern changes.

Gravel from the gravel pit on the floodplain here in Bexley provided some of the material for the new roadway. Motorists also needed refreshment, so the Black Prince Hotel was built in 1935 on the site of Bourne Farm.



The A2 near the Black Prince Interchange
© Rory Walsh

Much of the A2 follows the route of the Roman Road, Watling Street. This part of southeast England was important to the Romans as it was located between London and the coast. But this was not the first time that settlers had made use of this particular area. Evidence has been found of earlier habitation – an Iron Age dwelling was discovered at Coldblow.

Road construction and house building also decreased the amount of land available for market gardening and farming between Bexley and Bexleyheath. But Lady Limerick at Hall Place was probably pleased because it would allow her friends from central London easier access to her parties.

Both the road and the bridge have been improved in more recent times to cope with the ever-increasing traffic between London and the coast. The Black Prince has also recently been extended as part of a global hotel chain.

Directions 16

Once over the bridge, continue along the left hand side of Bourne Road. Stop at the entrance to the sports ground on the left.

17. Playing on a floodplain

Entrance to Dartfordians Rugby Club, Bourne Road

Earlier we discovered the various advantages and disadvantages of a floodplain. Here is another advantage. The flat ground is ideal for sports pitches.

The Dartfordians Rugby Club was founded in 1924 as a rugby club for old boys of Dartford Grammar School. They acquired this site in Bourne Road in 1952 and built a sports pavilion, as well as a memorial to old boys who had died during the two World Wars.



Old Dartfordians Association sports field
© Rory Walsh



The route of the proposed bypass from Bourne Road roundabout
© Rory Walsh

The pitch had to be moved and the original clubhouse demolished in 1968 when the roundabout and flyover were constructed. Now the club is no longer only for old boys, but open to the wider community.

Continue a few metres further to the next roundabout. This would be the exit point for the proposed Bexley bypass that we heard about earlier. That's why there has been no recent building on this land, even though it would be desirable for housing.

Directions 17

Keep left around the roundabout and continue down Bourne Road towards Bexley village. Stop opposite the National School.

18. Victorian Bexley

National School, Bourne Road

As we discovered earlier, Bexley expanded dramatically after 1866 when the railway linked the village to London. As the population grew, more houses were needed. Here we can see the expansion of housing on the floodplain to the north of the village, which was developed from the 1890s.

Either side of Bourne Road from here to the High Street are Victorian houses. Look out for those with original red and yellow brickwork. Also look out for the construction dates inscribed on the front of each block.



Victorian terraced housing in Bourne Road (c.1925)
© Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre



Bexley National School (1906)
© Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre

Across the road is the National School, established in 1834 to educate local children. Its curriculum would have allowed people to cope with the new technology brought about by the Industrial Revolution.

Slightly further along, on the same side as the school, are Victorian almshouses dating from 1837. These served to care for a population with an increasing life expectancy compared to previous inhabitants of Bexley village. They are still functioning as almshouses even today.

As you continue along Bourne Road, look out for other Victorian and Edwardian era buildings including a chapel (1846) and the post office. Further down on the left hand side is the entrance to a former Victorian industry – a brewery. There were once three in the village. One of these, Reffells, was established in 1874 and closed in 1956. Older locals can still remember the strong smell!

Directions 18

Continue along Bourne Road to the the junction with the High Street where there is a mini roundabout. Stop at a safe place by the roundabout.

19. The modern village

Junction of Bourne Road and High Street

We are now back in the High Street where we started the walk. We can finish by thinking about contemporary Bexley.

The London Borough of Bexley was set up in 1965 to reflect the growth of the capital. As we heard earlier, the administrative centre for the borough is Bexleyheath which has since become the centre of the borough's political and economic power. This has left Bexley village largely as a leisure location. Look at the shops – independent cafes, restaurants and bars.



Bexley Stores on the High Street (1915)
© Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre



Tempus fugit - 'Time flies' - in Bexley village
© Rory Walsh

Businesses that used to fill the High Street, providing essential goods and services, have nowadays mostly moved to shopping malls and out-of-town shopping centres. Today the side streets of Bexley village are populated by small service companies which repair the technologies of a modern society.

Some ancient buildings have had a change of use from previous ages – the eighteenth century poor house that we saw earlier is divided into a florist and an estate agent. The former brewery in Bourne Road was replaced by a pharmaceutical factory. That has now closed down as production was moved abroad to a cheaper facility. The village has adapted to the twenty-first century, just as it has adapted to change throughout its history.

Directions 19

Continue into the High Street. Stop just past The King's Head pub outside The Freemantle Hall.

20. On the edge in the twenty-first century

The Freemantle Hall, 51-75 High Street

Our walk around Bexley has revealed the ancient roots of this village and a history filled with a variety of characters.

Think of the peasant farmer cutting down the native forest in the eighth century to create a clearing among the woods for a settlement. The Norman official recording the details of Bexley's 41 inhabitants in 1087.

The eighteenth century grave robber complaining about how far he has to travel now to find fresh bodies for the medical schools in London.



Bexley High Street (1910) showing how much has changed in the last 100 years

© Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre

The child who watched the first train pull into Bexley Station in 1866 and could dream of the possibilities offered by Victorian Britain. The market gardener loading his produce onto the Strawberry Train. Now fast-forward to the twenty-first century and the stressed commuter dashing to the station to get the 7.22 train on a Monday morning.

The village has changed and adapted over the centuries in response to different challenges and pressures. Farming, which was once the mainstay of the village, has largely disappeared, being replaced first by industry and then by the service sector. The relative isolation of the village was ended by the coming of the railway, which brought new possibilities to this ancient settlement. House styles have changed in response to fashion and technology over the centuries.

But the village still retains a core of buildings modernised for the requirements of the twenty-first century. Suburban sprawl nibbles at the village's greenery. The proposed bypass might alleviate traffic on the High Street but destroy a lush, green floodplain and rich ecosystem. Bexley still remains The Last Village at the edge of London.

Directions 20

You may like to explore the village further. To return to Bexley railway station, cross over the High Street and continue along the left hand side. Turn left at the red telephone box into Station Approach.

Further information

Bexley Historical Society

www.bexleyhistoricalsociety.co.uk

Hall Place and Gardens

www.bexleyheritagetrust.org.uk/hallplace

The King's Head

www.kingsheadbexley.co.uk

St Mary's Church

www.stmarysbexley.co.uk

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