

HEXTABLE HERITAGE SOCIETY



A SHORT HISTORY OF HEXTABLE

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The first mention of Hextable was when the Manor of Highlands was given to the Abbey of St. Peter Ghent by William de Ypres who was created Earl of Kent in 1141 by King Stephen. The first known written mention of Hextable, in a foot of fines, is in 1203 when the Abbey decided to sell the Manor. Although it has not been possible to discover the exact date when Hextable became an estate, there is documented evidence to suggest that the division from the Highlands Manor occurred in the second half of the 15th century between 1448 and 1474.

Roger Rothele is the first recorded owner of the newly formed Hextable Estate. This family were very important and well-known in the Dartford area in the late 15th century. They owned the Manor of Charles and were among the founders of Holy Trinity Hospital, Dartford. It is unlikely that they or their successor, Sir John Wiltshire, King Henry VII's and VIII's Comptroller of Calais from 1503 – 1519, who purchased the Estate, ever lived there.

From then until 1526 nothing very much is known about the land until George Killingworth bought the estate from Sir John Wiltshire. The land must have had a house on it. This was probably a timber residence with a jetted upper story, very similar to other Elizabethan manor houses.

The next family to own the estate were the Eggesfields when Elizabeth, the daughter of George Killingworth, married Christopher. The Eggesfield pedigree is recorded in a Herald's Visitation of Kent in 1574 when Christopher made a successful claim about his parentage that enabled him to bear a coat of arms. This is recorded at the Herald's Office at the College of Arms. The estate remained with this family for 124 years. It is thought that during this time the original timber house was replaced by a brick mansion house. This would have been the largest house in the area.

The planting of avenues of trees became popular during the Elizabethan period and it is probable that the Avenue of Limes was planted by one of the Eggesfields. Some of the trees have been replaced.

The estate was sold by George Killingsworth's great grandson, Francis Eggesfield in 1650 to a Mr. Christopher Searle of London. He probably did not live in the house, but his family owned the estate for 83 years. He was an important citizen of London and was, by all accounts, a strong supporter of Cromwell's government. He was made an Alderman for the Candlewick Ward in 1645.

The Hearth Tax records for 1664 give Christopher Searle and his wife living on their Hextable estate. He died in 1669 and left the estate to a kinsman, Nathaniel Searle, and his heirs thereafter. A third Christopher Searle inherited the estate in 1729 on the death of his mother, and four years later he sold it to Charles Egerton, a wealthy Fleet Street haberdasher.

The Egerton family owned the estate for 127 years before any of them actually came to live here. However, during this time the house was extended and a farmhouse built, probably about 1756. Both were let together with a number of fields.

The Reverend John Egerton, great grandson of Charles, inherited half the estate on the death of his father and the other half on the death of his uncle John in 1847. He and his family came to live in the house in 1860. About this time he gave £200 towards the building of St. Paul's Church, Swanley Village. He also had the front of Hextable House extended and remodelled. He lived on the estate until his death in 1876 and then it was split and sold.

The Tithe Map of 1842 showed that 13 acres of land in Hextable did not belong to the Egerton estate. It surrounded Barn Plot at The Crossways and had frontages along Main Road and Lower Road. In 1842 it had a house and land both belonging to Ann Muggeridge and was let to Edward Pointer who in 1840 paid 6/6d as Church rates on his holding.

The Muggeridge family sold it in 1879 to Jacob Emerson who had a theory that the sunny climate of Swanley would be favourable for glasshouses. Those he erected on the ground called Sparrow's Den his family claim were the first built in the district.

Soon after buying the house Jacob Emerson demolished it and in its place he built an attractive Victorian villa named 'The Haven'. The house well illustrates how the amenities came to Hextable.

The house had no water or sewerage. Water was obtained from a well protected by an old pear tree. Shortly after 1885 Jacob Emerson, Sir Edward Reed of Hextable House, and Mr. Gregory, Headmaster of the Boys' Homes, gave a seven year guarantee to the Water Company of Dartford to have the water laid on as far as 'The Haven' on Main Road and to Hextable House in College Road. A year later gas was applied for on the same terms and was taken as far as 'The Haven'.

At the back of 'The Haven' Jacob Emerson built a detached room as a billiard room for his sons. As Hextable grew, the need for a community centre arose and this room seemed suitable. Among the first uses 'Emerson Hall' as it was quickly named, was to hold the children's Christmas party every year. Following this the hall was used for concerts, meetings, etc. The Hextable and Swanley Village Women's Institute opened at Emerson Hall when it was founded in March, 1917.

It was 1926 before the whole of Hextable had gas. Up until then candles were the main source of lighting, and cooking was done on the coal kitchener or on paraffin stoves. There were four gas lamps in Main Road one of which was at the orchard planted on Squires Field, which was owned by the Knapp family in 1911. Each year local councillors were allowed to have one more street lamp, and these were placed at the corner of every road off Main Road or College Road. These were lit by the lamplighter on his cycle with his pole at lighting up time and put out at midnight. Electricity did not come to the village until 1932.

In 1932 the Emersons sold 'The Haven' to the Coomber family whose tenure was tragic. At 11.45 pm on 14th March, 1945 the house was completely demolished by a V2 rocket while Pilot Officer J. Coomber was home on seven days leave. He escaped, but his father, mother and younger brother were all killed. Also lost at this time were some of the terraced houses and two shops. Since 1945 another 'Haven House' has been built on the site.

The mansion, the Avenue of Limes and a few fields retained the name Hextable House and, in 1879 were acquired by Sir Edward Reed, Secretary of the Institute of Naval Architects. The remainder of the estate, Hextable Farm, was sold in plots to speculative builders, the first of whom had ambitious plans for Hextable. These failed after the development of just four villas, but their construction marked the birth of the village which rapidly began to take shape.

The first four large villas were built along Rowhill Road. One of these became the home of Arthur Mee, the well-known journalist who wrote "The Children's Encyclopedia". Following the sale of his house in 1915 to Miss Jessie Hogbin, it became a school known as St. David's. The house has since been divided into two – St. David's and Ivanhoe. The other three houses are now called the Vicarage, 'Ellesmere' and the 'Lodge' on the corner of College Road and St. David's Road.

About this time a corner of Pickle Field was cut off by the construction of a new Road – Rollo Road, and this corner was divided into 76 building plots with three reserved pieces. The plot at Crossways was earmarked for a public house and the three other corners were to be used for the erection of shops.

The house on the corner of College Road and Rollo Road now known as "The Bakery" was built for Arthur Mee and was to have been a Post Office and tea-room as he disliked having to go to the office to buy stamps. Opposite "The Bakery" is what was Martin's Bank but now used as offices.

'The Homes for Little Boys' was built in 1883 as an extension to their home in Farningham. It was opened by the Prince of Wales and Princess Alexandra. It is now called 'Furness School'. Further information about the School can be obtained from them.

Also amongst the earliest houses built and still identifiable were Northbank in Rowhill Road, now called "The Sycamores" and converted into flats. 'The Lodge', built in 1887, on the corner of College Road and St. David's Road was occupied by Mr. & Mrs. John Todd. He was an ardent supporter of the Temperance Movement and it is he who is responsible for to-day's absence of a public house in the village. He bought up all the corner plots and had a covenant inserted in the deeds so that alcohol could not be sold.

Southbank, another large house, was also built at this time together with Newbank. Unfortunately Southbank in College Road was demolished to make way for houses and flats.

Sir Edward James Reed made an interesting change to Hextable House when he added the saloon from the SS 'Bessemer'. This had been built on gimbals so as to remain horizontal despite the rolling of the ship. However, it was so heavy that the vessel was unable to stop without hitting the docks at Calais. This caused quite a stir in the neighbourhood, but in the interwar period of 1918 – 1939, this proved to be a pleasant and unusual hall for lectures and concerts. Prior to the demolition of the house in 1946 some of the local residents rescued part of the saloon's beautiful panelling.

In April, 1889 Hextable House was sold for the last time. It was bought by Mr. Arthur Harper Bond for £5,000 in order to experiment in horticulture and so became "The Horticultural College and Produce Company". This private venture was probably the first horticultural college in the world.

By June, 1889 there were 13 male students who paid fees of £80 per annum. There were then financial difficulties, so assistance was sought from the Agricultural Department of the Privy Council and Kent County Council. As public funds could not be granted to an institution run for private profit, a new arrangement was made. In 1891 the company was wound up and the new Swanley Horticultural College was licensed by the Board of Trade as a non-profit making company.

KCC later awarded the College twenty scholarships of £60 per annum to young men of the county, the first of these arriving in January, 1892.

The concept of a men only college altered in 1890 when women were appointed to the board of governors. Miss Emma Cons and Miss Everest started the women's branch in June, 1891 with five young ladies lodging at Southbank under the watchful eye of Mrs. Watson, the lady Superintendent. She acted as their chaperone and, as the number of ladies grew, rented the house adjoining hers.

The College grew steadily and by 1899 there were 84 students in residence, the majority of them being women. Due to housing problems it was decided not to take any more male students, and thus the College effectively became the "Swanley Horticultural College for Women". The men's branch moved to Northbank for its final year.

From 1902 until 1944 the College was a very important training centre for women in horticulture, and they also opened the Colonial Branch based at Northbank in Rowhill Road. Between 1902 and 1918 some two hundred and fifty women were trained to "maintain beyond the seas the best traditions of English home life".

In 1910 the College came under the Board of Trade rather than of Education – the only College for women considered important enough to come under this scheme – and by 1911 over 806 students had passed through the College.

During the 1914 – 1918 war the College trained a large number of women to work on the land. Dr. Kate Barrett, CBE, was appointed Principal in 1923. She had a huge influence on the development of the College and was well respected by staff and students alike.

The College expanded, buying Hextable Farmhouse in 1922, building "Meadowbank" in 1926, and the Botany Laboratory two years later. A dairy and preserving kitchen were added in 1929 and in 1930 Newbank was bought and linked to Southbank by the addition of a new dining hall and kitchen.

In 1939 the College celebrated its Golden Jubilee, and on the outbreak of World War II it took on the training of Women's Land Army recruits who were housed at Northbank. In 1940 staff and students were evacuated to the Midlands Agricultural College at Sutton Bonnington, but due to a difference of opinion between the two colleges, the evacuees returned in September, 1942.

Sadly, on the night of 1st March, 1944 four bombs were dropped on the site. The house was badly damaged, one student died and another was seriously injured. The College was again evacuated – this time to Ripley in Surrey.

In 1945 the decision was taken to unite the College with the South Eastern Agricultural College at Wye. After this the old College site was sold to Kent County Council and became the Kent Horticultural Institute.

Hextable House was demolished in 1946. The farm buildings and glasshouses were usable and new staff offices were installed.

The Horticultural Institute was used as a training centre for ex-service personnel under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture. In 1949 the Education Committee took possession and the Institute was developed and ran on parallel lines to the Farm Institute at Tunstall, near Sittingbourne. In 1959 these two Institutes were combined and in the spring of 1960, six hundred acres of land were purchased at Hadlow for the establishment of the combined Institutes. The Horticultural Department started its move to Hadlow in the summer of 1967, finally vacating the site in 1970 when the Institute was renamed Hadlow College of Agriculture and Horticulture.

The site in Hextable was divided and sold off – the staff offices being used as the North West Kent Teacher's Training Centre and the Botany Laboratory as an "overflow" lab for Hextable School. Finally, Swanley Town Council acquired the by now derelict site in 1990.

When Rollo Road was divided into plots the Rev. Michael Edgell, the Vicar of Swanley, bought five plots on College Road for £150 for the provision of a Mission Room and school. On this ground an iron building was erected. Most of it was used as an infant school and the east end was a small chancel which, during the week was cut off and on Sundays the whole building was used for services.

The rapid growth of Hextable after 1890 rendered the iron church quite inadequate. The Vicar, the Rev. Leonard Savill, decided to replace the iron building with a substantial brick building capable of taking a school and a church. The estimated cost was £1,700 – a considerable sum for that time. However, the money was raised and on 25th October, 1905 the Bishop of Rochester granted a licence to the Rev. Leonard Savill and his successors to officiate in the new Hextable Mission Church.

In 1953 the church was extended. A new chancel was added and dedicated on 22nd November and the church became St. Peter's.

In 1980 the church was again extended as the church had become overcrowded, and yet more building went on in 1988 to bring the church to where it is to-day.

In the early 20th century Great Embrakes Field was purchased by a syndicate headed by James Dean, and six north to south roads were laid out. These were named Princes, Plantation, Bower, Maude, Mabel, and Herbert. These last three were the names of James Dean's children. Over time this whole area has been developed by a number of local builders, including Brazier who, for many years, ran the business from "The Lodge" right in the centre of the village.

Additionally, Dartford Rural District Council developed an estate of houses adjoining Lower Road - Fens Way and Midfield Avenue. The whole area is now totally covered in houses and bungalows – some gaps only being filled in the last couple of years.

The village stood the war years very well, only Rollo Road houses losing their railings to the war effort.

Hextable was well served by local shops and other businesses. Around 1935 the following were trading:-

Top Dartford Road.

S. Archer, Firewood merchant & Chimney Sweep.
George Carter, General Shop, Cigarettes & Sweets.
Abi Parson. General Shop including groceries.
F. G. Atkins, Haulage Contractor & Petrol.
Rose Stores Cycle Shop, Sundries, etc.
Griffin's Stores, Groceries, Haberdashery, Wool, etc.

F. Vinall, Plumber,
F. Sawyer, Insurance Broker,
Walter Griffin, Signwriter with Sweet & Cigarette Shop.
R. A. Wood, Painter and Decorator.
Yeomanson Hand Laundry.
Dartford Co-operative Society, Groceries.
Frank J. Hyde, Haulage Contractor and Petrol.

Main Road.

Penny, Son & Parker, Groceries, Methylated Spirits & Paraffin.
G. Wood, Newsagent, Sweets & Tobacco.
Canty, Butcher.
Perry, Bootmaker, boot & shoe repairs.
Follet, Baker & pastrycook.
C. A. Smallbone, Groceries, Wines & spirits.
A. J. Buckingham, General Builder, Hardware shop.
C. A. Casstine, Photographer, Camera sales & film.
W. E. Shewell-Cooper, Advisory Service on Plant Growing.

Rollo Road.

Arthur Cooper, Chimney sweep.
Seed Tray manufacturer.
Clout, Schoth & Hawkes, Taxi service.
Larke Mitchell, General builder.

College Road.

Post Office, Sweets, Tobacco, Needles, Cottons, Pins, etc.
Twelvetrees Hand Laundry.
Charlie Robinson, Tinsmith.
Harry Munday, Horticultural Builder.

Part-timers.

Charlie Turner, Gents Hairdresser.
E. W. Mills, Printer.

There were 38 individual nurserymen, large and small, making a total of 68 businessmen in Hextable in approximately one square mile.

After the war the village began to grow quite quickly. Houses were built in Lower Road in 1950, the main road across Furness School playing field was cut in 1961, and by the 1970's we had lost quite a few of our nurseries. Houses and bungalows were built in Stuart Close and Millbro. Claremont Road continued to develop from 1974.

Sheltered housing was needed for the village elderly and eventually Panters was built for them.

The village continued to expand during the 1980's and 1990's with the building of Dawson Drive, Emersons Avenue and Squires Field.

Finally, in 2008 the village became a parish in its own right when it separated from Swanley and there are now nine councillors who are responsible for the village.

Bibliography:-

- Leaflets from Hextable Parish Council.
- Chapters in *The History of Swanley Village and Hextable* by H. J. Balls
- Booklets produced by Mr. E. W. Mills.