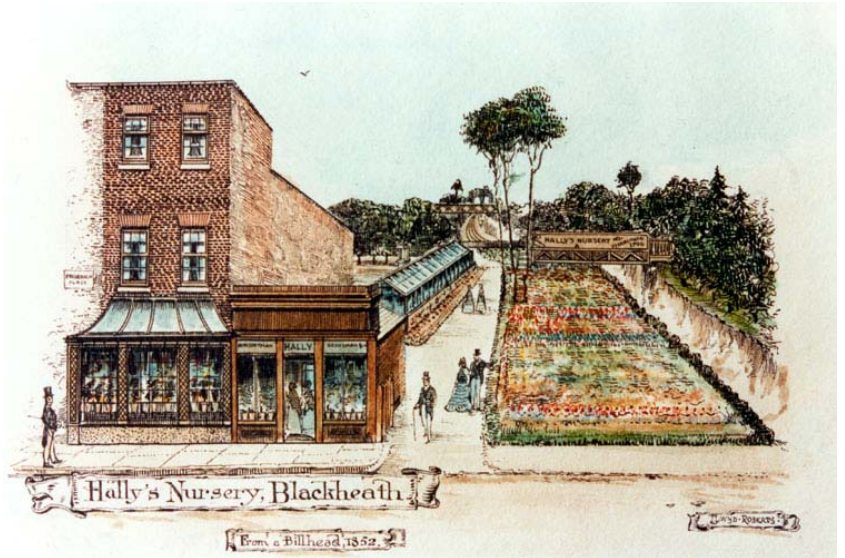


# London Borough of Lewisham Local History and Archives Centre

Info Byte Sheet No. 22

## History of Blackheath

Blackheath was so called because it appeared a darker colour than the green fields beside the Thames which it overlooked - the soil was dark and so were the plants which grew there. (Contrary to local belief, the name has nothing to do with the plague or Black Death.) The soil was poor and was not cultivated, but chalk, gravel and larger pebbles for ballast were dug out of it. This left the deep pits all over the Heath. Some are now ponds and some were filled in with rubble from bomb sites in the Second World War.



In both the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and Jack Cade's rebellion of 1450, the rebels camped on the Heath (a convenient high point overlooking London). The Cornish rebellion of 1497 was defeated in a battle on Blackheath.

The Heath was a lonely place where travellers along the London to Dover road (now the A2) were in danger from highwaymen. But it was also a place for recreation. Fairs were (and are) held here, and many sports were played. In recent years it has been the starting point for the London Marathon.

The Heath became a public open space in 1871, and is now administered by Lewisham and Greenwich Councils since it falls within both boroughs.

There were hardly any houses on the Heath until about 1700. A few were built in the 18th century, but the main development of Blackheath Village took place after 1803 when John Cator began building the houses now called the Cator Estate. Nowadays Blackheath Village is known for high quality shops and restaurants.

James Callaghan, Prime Minister 1976-1979, lived at Blackheath in the 1950s and 1960s. His daughter Margaret, now Baroness Jay, attended Blackheath High School. Terry Waite, who was taken hostage while trying to arrange the release of other hostages, lived with his family in Blackheath. He was made a Freeman of the Borough of Lewisham in 1992. The pioneer of weather forecasting James Glaisher (1809-1903) lived in Dartmouth Row.

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