

London Borough of Lewisham Local History and Archives Centre

Info Byte Sheet No. 26

History of Forest Hill

Forest Hill was a wooded area with very few inhabitants until the mid-19th century. The Croydon Canal was cut through the area in 1809 but was not a commercial success, mainly because there were so many locks to go through.



The London and Croydon Railway Company bought the canal and constructed their railway along more or less the same route in 1839. In 1846 the Company experimented with a new form of power. Trains from London Bridge to Epsom were pulled along by vacuum power - it was called the Atmospheric Railway.

The principle was good but the materials of the time were not adequate for it - the valves on the tubes were leather and were eaten by rats. The experiment was abandoned after just over a year.

Many wealthy people had houses in Forest Hill, including the tea merchant Frederick Horniman. On his travels abroad he collected items relating to local cultures, and eventually his collection grew so large that he built a special museum for it. He donated this museum to the public in 1901.

One Tree Hill is now just outside the borough, but used to mark the boundary between Lewisham and Camberwell. Queen Elizabeth I picnicked here on May Day in 1602, reputedly by an oak tree which was then named the Oak of Honour - hence the names of Honor Oak Road and Park.

Jim Connell (1852-1929), author of 'The Red Flag', lived in Stondon Park Road. Annie Horniman (1860-1937), daughter of the Museum's founder, was herself a founder of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.

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