

London Borough of Lewisham Local History and Archives Centre

Info Byte Sheet No. 21

History of Lee

Old English 'Leah' means 'the clearing in the wood'. Lee was a separate parish, much smaller than its neighbour Lewisham. In 1086 it had about 70 inhabitants. The village lay along Lee High Road, with a side road (Brandram Road) leading to the church. Lee Green was a separate hamlet. South of Lee Green was all agricultural land. As well as farms there were plant nurseries in Lee, and watercress was grown along the banks of the River Quaggy.



Lee was a popular place for wealthy London merchants to live, and a number of large country houses were built here in the 17th and 18th centuries. The three that survive are Manor House (now a library), Pentland House (a hall of residence for Goldsmiths College), both in Old Road, and The Cedars, Belmont Hill, now part of a housing development. The Manor House was built about 1772, and sold in 1796 to Sir Francis Baring, founder of Baring Brothers bank. In the 1880s and 1890s it was occupied by a military tutorial college, preparing young men for the entrance examinations for the Army.

In 1866 Lee station was opened, which meant that people who worked in central London could live in Lee and travel by train. Houses were built for them on what had been the farmland, and most of the area was built up by 1914.

The poet Ernest Dowson (1867-1900) was born in Belmont Grove. The publisher Stanley Unwin lived in Handen Road. He took the risk of publishing J.R.R. Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings' when it was not expected to be a commercial success.

Address: 199-201 Lewisham High Street London SE13 6LG
Tel: 020 8297 0682 Fax: 020 8297 1169
Email: local.studies@lewisham.gov.uk