

London Borough of Lewisham Local History and Archives Centre

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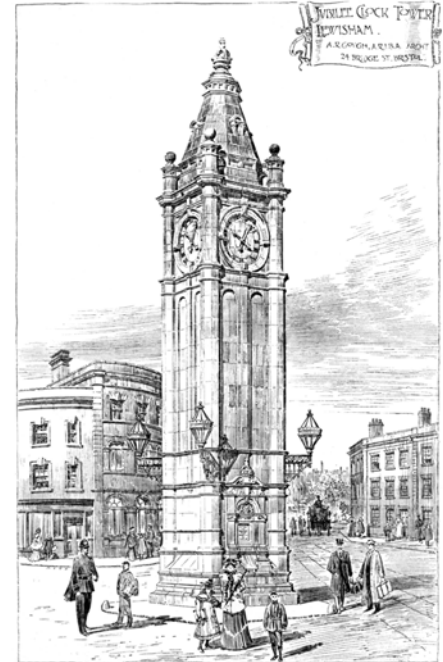
History of Lewisham

The parish of Lewisham included Hither Green, Sydenham, Catford and Forest Hill, but the village of Lewisham stretched along Lewisham High Street from the present railway station to the ancient parish church of St Mary. King James I, impressed with the length of the High Street, remarked 'On my soul, I will be king of Lusen'. This spelling suggests that the name was then pronounced Loos-am, whereas now it is Loo-ish-am. The name derives from Old English 'ham', a village, and the name of a person, probably Leof or Leofsa - Leofsa's village.

In the Middle Ages the manor of Lewisham belonged to the Abbey of Ghent. It used to be thought that King Alfred's daughter had granted it to them, but the document saying this is now known to be a forgery. At the time of the Domesday Book (1086) there were eleven mills along the River Ravensbourne. Before the Industrial Revolution these mills were used for grinding steel for weapons and for tanning leather, as well as for grinding corn. Abraham Colfe, Vicar of Lewisham from 1610 to 1657, founded a grammar school, a reading (primary) school and six almshouses for the inhabitants of Lewisham.

The first railway through Lewisham, the North Kent line to Dartford, opened in 1849. The present station opened in 1857, when the Mid Kent line was added; these railways encouraged the building of new houses for commuters to live in. Trams as well as trains and buses brought shoppers into Lewisham, and by 1900 there were a number of large shops in the town centre. In that year the Clock Tower was completed, to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897. The town centre was devastated by a flying bomb in 1944, but had recovered by the late 1950s. In 1977 the shopping centre was built, and in 1994 the High Street in the town centre was pedestrianised giving a traffic-free street market and an open space.

The poet James Elroy Flecker (1884-1915) was born at nine Gilmore Road. The poet and novelist Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) lived in Brookbank Road in the 1880s. Frederick Lanchester (1868-1946), the pioneering car manufacturer, was born in Lewisham Road.



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