

Bromley Town Centre Conservation Area

Heritage Walks

No 2 – From Market Square to Church Road, Martin's Hill, Church House & Library Gardens

Market Square is described in detail in our Walk 1 leaflet. It is the centre of the Old Town which until the coming of the railway in 1858 comprised a single street. The Market Charter was Granted to Bishop Gandalf by King John in 1205. The limits of the town are still marked by existing buildings – Bromley College in the Upper High Street and Tweed Cottage, now Barclays bank in the Lower High Street.

Turn into Church Road beside the HSBC Bank :

CHURCH ROAD

The Parish Church of St Peter and St Paul was destroyed in WWII but the tower dating from around 1400 survived as did the Lych Gate designed by architect James Piers St Aubyn 1854. The old Church was sited adjacent to the road which accounts for the kink in its layout. The new Church was consecrated in the early 1950s and set back to the other side of the tower. There a number of interesting gravestones including that of Elizabeth (Tetty) Johnson wife of the famous Doctor Johnson. The pink granite obelisk is the tomb of the Lord of the Manor Coles Child, who bought the Palace (Civic Centre) and Manor from the Diocese of Rochester in 1842. For the amusement of the more observant the new church has fragments of the old church embedded in its exterior walls such as cross sections of columns, decorative foliage and a fragment of an ancient Green Man.

Kingston Cottages is the name of the terrace of cottages opposite the church which date from around the early 1870s and like those in South Street give a clue to the modest character of the town before the Victorian expansion following the coming of the railway.

St Pauls Square is a late 1960s housing development on the site of the old Vicarage and a pair of quaint cottages.



CHURCH HOUSE GARDENS

The gardens are the former private grounds of Church House built in 1829 on the site of what may have been the original manor house with its commanding views over the Shortlands Valley. Church House was destroyed in WWII but the charming lodge, ornamental gates, oval lawn and drive and the terrace overlooking the Gardens all survive. The ornamental planting with its specimen trees was started by the leaseholder Abel Moysey in the mid 19th century and continued by the local authority when the area was acquired as a public park in 1926. The lake is a combination of two ancient spring fed fishponds (originally four are shown on the old maps) probably providing fish for the Bishop of Rochester's table. The amphitheatre was constructed as a job creation scheme in the 1930s using granite cobblestones or 'sets' for the edgings taken from Market Square which was being converted to asphalt at the time. The redundant band platform on the opposite side of the lake replaced a beautiful rustic, thatched bandstand in the water destroyed by vandals in the late 1960s. More recently a dais has been added to the front of the

amphitheatre for use as a stage and concert platform. The sand play area was formerly a model boating lake disused in the 1980s.



MARTINS HILL

The Hill was purchased by public subscription in 1878 when housing development threatened its destruction. An anonymous poem appeared in the local paper of the day which rallied action: *On this, the people's piece of land, may builder never ply his skill. May never innovating hand, deprive the town of Martin's Hill.* The same sense of outrage was revived in 1984 when a Council committee proposed a dry ski slope on the hill which drew sackfuls of objections !

Although privately owned by the Bishop of Rochester the Hill had always been used by townsfolk for picnics and special occasions. In 1858, for instance, the whole town turned out to witness the first train to London leaving what is now Shortlands Station, then the Bromley terminus. The Hill is an example of surviving acid grassland rare in Greater London and the result of centuries of sheep grazing. It has its own special flora not least being the native habitat of the shrub broom from which the town takes its name and which still flowers on the hillside in abundance in April and May.

The Lodge Is a charming late Victorian Park Keeper's House in the Arts & Crafts Style sadly sold off by the Council and now in a vulnerable state.

The War Memorial is a fine Grade II listed structure with beautiful sculpture and dates from 1926. It replaced the

Victorian Drinking Fountain which was relocated to Queens Mead.

From the memorial either walk down the diagonal path or along the top and then down through Glebe Wood. Both routes lead to the children's play area.

Glebe Wood contains some specimen trees including a coastal redwood which are remnants of when the woods were leased to the adjacent 18th c house, Pixfield which can still be seen from Queens Mead and Beckenham Lane. **The Drove Road** is one of three old pathways beside and through the wood all of which offer a remarkable reminder of rural Bromley so close to the busy town centre.

The Spring Line & Hop Field A pathway divides the upper slopes of the hill from the more gentle lower slope which had once been a Hop Field. The path follows a contour upon which springs appear in winter where the pervious sand and gravel soil meet a layer of clay. It is on this same contour that the spring which feed the lake in Church House Gardens also rise.

View of Pixfield from the corner of the Valley School Field just beyond the children's play area is the historic view of the old farmhouse 'Pixfield' the setting of which is



unchanged from when the house was built in 1774.

QUEEN'S MEAD

The Mead is separated from Martin's Hill by the River Ravensbourne now cruelly confined to an ugly concrete channel. As the name suggests this was meadowland regularly flooded by the river. It was acquired by the town council in 1887 for public recreation. Like Norman Park today Queen's Mead was the main gathering place for the town for fairs, fetes and 'Broom Day' where contemporary newspaper reports says 'once again the townspeople will gather on Queens Mead wearing their sprigs of the shrub from which the town takes its name etc.

Queen Victoria's Drinking Fountain The year of Queen Victoria's Jubilee and the acquisition of Queen's Mead as a public park is marked in an inscription on the drinking fountain which was transferred to here in 1926 from the site of what is now the War Memorial on Martins Hill.

View of the Church from the far side of the Mead towards the Church Tower on the hill is unchanged since the 15th century.

Views of the Pumping Stations The rag stone 'new' pumping station is Grade II listed and is still used to draw water from the chalk layer below. The 'old' pumping station is equally attractive and now converted as dwellings. It is also Grade II Listed and can best be viewed from the railway footbridge.

THE MILLPOND

The Millpond can be reached either from Glassmill Lane by following the line of the river (underground for a short distance) or from the bottom of Church House/ Library Gardens. A water mill on the Ravensbourne was recorded here in the Domesday book of 1087.

In the middle ages the mill was converted to paper making and in the 18thc to grinding and polishing concave and convex mirrors for scientific use. It was then



used for felt making before reverting back to producing ornamental glass items before closure in the early 19th c. The pond was reconfigured in the early 1950s as part of a Ravensbourne flood prevention scheme. The pond is home to various breeds of duck, coots and moorhens. A kingfisher is regularly sighted as is the grey Heron.

19 Glassmill Lane beside the millpond is a picturesque 18th c Kentish weatherboarded cottage (originally two cottages now combined). It is rightly Grade II Listed. It was not associated with the mill which was sited on the opposite bank.



LIBRARY GARDENS 1967 B226130

LIBRARY GARDENS

The Gardens occupy the level strip adjacent to Church House Gardens and were created as a public park in 1900 originally called Neelgheries Gardens taking its name from the house fronting the High Street. The house and land were the gift of Emily Dowling for public recreation and education.

The house was demolished

to build the first Central Library and the back garden laid out with flower beds and a floral clock the hands of which were set to closing time each day. With the building of the original Library the name Neelgherries Gardens was dropped. This name had derived from Emily Dowlings first husband's time as a JP in the Indian hill province of Nilgiris in Madras. On his return from India, he bought the house and renamed it Neelgheries. At the far end of the Gardens before the land drops away stands an Indian Deodar Cedar tree which GS is thought to have planted. every day from his garden in Bromley.

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