

A Brief History of Crawley

Although Crawley was designated as a New Town until the middle of the last century (1947), the history of settlements in the area far precedes the developments of the last 60 years.

Before AD1000

The first suspected settlement in the area now known as Crawley is thought to have been in around **500BC**. Some 400 years later, the first simple furnaces began to be used in the area. This was to be the beginning of a long-held tradition in this area of Sussex, remembered in the naming of one of Crawley's neighbourhoods; Furnace Green. By **AD100** the Romans had settled in Crawley and began to extend and improve the furnaces.

Relatively little is known about the intervening years, however, in the **9th Century** the building of Worth Church, in the west of what is now the New Town area created what is now thought to be one of the oldest buildings of its kind in the UK. Some years later, it is thought that the fleeing armies of King Harold may have rested here, after their defeat at Hastings.

The Second Millennium

When the Domesday Records were taken twenty years later in **1086**, no mention was made of the hamlet of Crawley, however, other nearby communities Ifield and Worth were both mentioned. Valued by William's recorders as being worth 20 shillings each.

The first known written mention of Crawley dates from **1203**, when a Michael de Poynings was awarded to licence to hold a weekly market in the High Street. Less than 50 years later, the nearby village of Ifield saw the establishment of the Church of St Margaret. The 13th Century church can still be seen today in the Ifield Village Conservation Area

In **1450**, the increase in traffic through Crawley led to the opening of the George Hotel in the High Street. The hotel opened with Stables and room for Carriages to allow horsemen and their passengers to stay overnight in the town, before they continued with their journeys.

Life in Crawley saw very few major changes over the next 400 years, although the importance of Iron Works in the area increased quite dramatically, particularly in the **1600s**. However, in **1848** an extension of the railway line from London to Brighton was fed through Crawley, en route to Horsham. This new method of transportation brought a new lease of life to the town. It was around this time that the original 'New Town' area of Crawley was built. A development of housing was built to cater for the increasing population of the town. Most of these houses can still be seen along the southern side of the railway line through the town, in the Southgate neighbourhood.

The Twentieth Century

In 1900, Crawley had a population of around 9000 people; it is unlikely that any resident of the town could have envisaged that this would increase ten-fold over the next 100 years. For much of the first part of the 1900s, Crawley continued its life as a small but thriving town. 1930 saw the opening of the Gatwick Aerodrome nearby (the first airport in the UK to have its own railway station). By 1938, the town had reached such a size that it was decided to build a by-pass around it to ease traffic flow in the town itself. This decision was to feature in the selection of localities for New Towns in later years.

During the Second World War years of 1939-1945, Crawley suffered, much like any other town of its size. During the 6 years period, aerial bombing destroyed some 24 houses. However, it was after the war that the town was to see its most dramatic changes in its history. On 9th January, 1947 Lewis Silkin MP announced that the area around Crawley, Three Bridges and Ifield had been chosen as one of the locations for a New Town. These satellite towns were built in response to the need for additional housing in the south east of England.

Later that year the Master Plan for Crawley New Town was produced, and under the leadership of Sir Thomas Bennett and the Crawley Development Corporation, work began on the development. The plan provided for nine neighbourhoods around the old communities, an area covering some 6000 acres and providing for a population of around 50,000 people. This was reached surpassed by 1962, by which time an additional neighbourhood had already been added (Furnace Green), with the town housing a population of 60,000. However, development continued; by 1983 the area of the town increased to 7800 acres. Current figures suggest that by 2006, the population of Crawley is expected to reach 100,000, double the original intended size. There are also plans for further developments in various areas of the town - including a possible new neighbourhood in the North East of the town.