

THE HISTORY OF ASHTEAD Up to 600AD

The parish of Ashtead is about 3 miles long and 1.5 miles wide and has an area of 2,650 acres, about 4 square miles. The perimeter is about 9 miles. The low-lying northern end bounded by Chessington is of heavy London clay and consists of woodland and common. The south is bounded by Headley and consists of chalk covered with light soil. In between there is a narrow belt of mixed sands and clay. Ashtead is the ninth parish of a series of twenty between Croydon and Guildford, all of Saxon origin. All twenty parishes are shown on a map of south east England drawn in 1575. The street is 250ft above sea level, Ryebrook 150ft and the southern borders with Headley 400ft.

There are very few written records prior to the Norman Conquest but archaeologists have found evidence that occupation started around 2,000BC.

In early times before agricultural implements were available, early settlers chose the chalky downlands with light soils where small areas of scrubland could be cleared with primitive stone tools and cultivated. Settlements were not usually permanent at this time, probably because the soil became exhausted. A Mesolithic tranche axe found in 1919 during excavations in Ottways Lane is ascribed to this period.

No definite sites for pre-Roman settlements have been found in the Ashtead area. However, evidence of Mesolithic clusters have been found at Abinger. During the next 1,500 years the population of Ashtead is thought to have remained static. Although light wooden ploughs were introduced, no great progress could be made to open up the heavy clay soils in the low-lying northern areas.

With the coming of the Iron Age around 600BC the south east of England gradually opened up and trackways were created as a means of communication. The Harroway crossed the ford at Leatherhead and passed over the downland to the south of Ashtead towards Banstead, providing a route for travelling throughout the year. A second route running parallel to the north was known as the summer route as it was not always negotiable in the winter. These trackways were well established, when an influx of Belgic tribes, fleeing from the Roman incursions into Gaul, resulted in an expansion in the Ashtead area. These people introduced their superior tools and iron ploughs and were able to clear trees and cultivate the richer clay soil in the northern district.

It was during the subsequent period to 100BC that a settlement in the grounds of Inward Shaw in Park Lane would seem to have been established. This site was discovered in 1930 and lies midway between the winter and summer trackway routes. Evidence of grain storage pits, timber huts with corn drying ovens, pieces of chalk and clay "cob", millstone grit quernstones for corn grinding and many calcined flints known to be used with a corn-parching process were found. Other items discovered were clay loom weights and pottery covering the period from late Iron Age to the late Roman period.

The Romans successfully invaded Britain in 43AD and left about 430AD.
Their stay in Ashted is well documented and could be a separate project for
a later meeting.

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