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INVESTIGATIONS AND EXCAVATIONS DURING THE YEAR

REPORTS FROM LOCAL SECRETARIES AND GROUPS

Bexley London Borough. Mr P.J. Tester, F.S.A., reports:

The seventeenth-century brick barn adjoining Hall Place, Bexley, is in process of being converted (September 1990) into a 'Beefeater Steak-house' and licenced restaurant by Whitbreads, who have obtained a 99-year lease of the building from the owners, Bexley Council. The scheme was put forward as long ago as 1983 and has been the subject of bitter local controversy ever since. Strong opposition came from conservationists who considered that the barn, standing at the entrance to the gardens of Hall Place, was unsuitable for the proposed use and would be detrimental in that form to the amenity of the site. After a long struggle, commercial considerations apparently overcame all objections, but the opposition voiced has fortunately resulted in modification of some of the more undesirable features of the original plan.

At the rear of no. 112 North Cray Road, the eighteenth-century bath-house has recently been restored. This interesting little 'Gothick' building, originally associated with the neighbouring house, Vale Mascal, was admirably recorded by our late Member, John E. Caiger, in *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxii (1967), 227-34, and it is pleasing to note that care is being taken to ensure its preservation.

At Bexleyheath, a fire on 20th February, 1990, severely damaged the Market House, which was the last surviving building associated with the settlement of the Heath in the early nineteenth century. A rectangular, stock-brick structure with a slate roof, it has little architectural or aesthetic value, but it had interesting connections with the ancestors of the present Royal Family. *Bradshaw's Directory* for 1847 credits Oswald Smith of Blendon Hall with building the Market House (or Place) at the cost of £1,000. His uncle, John Smith, a wealthy banker, obtained land by the enclosing of the Heath, and the Rate Book for 1838 records him as being the owner of the Market

House. In the Rev. F. de P. Castell's *Bexley Heath and Welling* (1910), it is stated that the building had accommodation for 14 stalls. An illustration in the same work shows that it had a clock on the summit of its low, pyramid-shaped roof. Apparently, it failed to fulfil its intended trade purpose and, in 1844, was bought by a grocer, William Clark, who used it as an extension of his business premises on a site immediately adjoining. Later, it passed through a succession of uses until finally it became a DIY store, in which a quantity of inflammable spirit contributed to the fierceness of the final blaze. The ruined shell of the building stood for over a year while the possibility of restoration was considered. At last, on 3rd July, 1990, the owners, Bexley Council, decided on demolition, which was carried out early on the morning of Sunday, 15th July, 1990, 'to prevent disruption of traffic'.

Oswald Smith had a daughter, Francis Dora, who married Lt. Claude Bowes-Lyon in St. Mary's Church, Bexley, on 28th September, 1853, as recorded in the Register. The couple succeeded to the title of Earl and Countess of Strathmore and were the grandparents of the present Queen Mother and so great-grandparents of our reigning Queen Elizabeth II. It is ironical that this association of the Royal Family with the early days of Bexleyheath should have been broken in the year (1990) when there has been widespread celebration of the Queen Mother's 90th birthday.