

History and Heritage of Erith Marshes

Introduction

Doctor Tony Hare summed up the importance of the marshes in 1987. I cannot better this summary.

“If any part of this much-reduced portion of the original grazing marshes were developed it would be disastrous from a nature conservation point of view and would put still greater pressure on the remainder. The Thames Marshes are an important and threatened habitat. They are of value as a nature conservation resource, as a unique habitat, as open space and as a portion of the history of the Thames and of London. The further loss of what little is left, particularly of this excellent example at Erith, would be a very sad one.”

Source: Bexley Archives

Greater London Ecology Unit 1987

A nature Conservation Strategy for London Handbook 6 “Meadows and pastures” (Neutral Grasslands)

Tony’s background can be seen below.

Purpose of this document

This document gives a brief history of the last 150 years of Erith Marshes, covering the period in which the wider area transformed from farm land sourcing food for the growing population of London until the present.

This history is intertwined with that of the Gypsy community.

Back ground and history of the Marshes

Erith Marshes in Kent stretched from Erith to the boundary of Plumstead. This land was used for grazing and agriculture. It was open countryside for decades. The 1873 map shown in Appendix 1 below (fig.1), shows the full extent of the site. The land was used for farming and small holdings growing fruit. It was still prone to frequent flooding. By 1909, there is little change (Fig. 2). By 1946 (fig.3) open fields remain. Historically, it had been farmed by the monks of Lessness Abbey.

During World War I, moated munitions storage sites, “Tumps” scattered the site due to the useful proximity of Woolwich Arsenal. The open site was highly prized.

The earliest reference to gypsies on the marshes can be traced to 1896. The site became home to the largest winter population in Europe. Up until the 1960’s, travellers were not located in one place all year, in the spring and summer they moved from location to location seeking agricultural work. Erith marshes were well situated due to the excellent connections to the agriculture of Kent and local farms and small holdings in Erith, Bexleyheath and Sidcup. During winter, many returned to the marshes. The winter population in 1947 was estimated to be 17,000. The Romany language was still widely spoken and outsiders were viewed with suspicion. Many plots of land had been purchased by the gypsy families and others rented. Services were poor.

The numbers living in the marshes had been swelled by those returning from the war or from war time work in the countryside.

Councils were putting pressure on gypsy and traveller communities with many traditional locations being removed. An attempt to re-locate people to houses was underway. This was not always successful. To quote from archive material: “It was no good allocating prefab dwellings to the families who earned their livelihoods with horse drawn vehicles”

The history of the Gypsy and Traveller communities in this area is well documented, a good example can be accessed below.

The marshes were, despite these efforts, a thriving community until a major flood in 1953 succeeded where the Council had previously failed and many former residents moved in to Local Authority housing.

The motor car took over only gradually and there was still plenty of demand for horses. Many trades relied on a horse and cart until the 1960's. As a child living in Abbey Wood in 1961, horse drawn vehicles were regularly seen in the area. The rag and bone man and Mr Knapp the coal man frequently visited my street with their horse and cart.

The marshes still contained farms and small holding, sources of seasonal employment and of local food. We would go and buy black currents and other fruit for jam making and watch the grazing horses.

Sadly, as Thamesmead was developed, starting in 1966, many of these remaining businesses were forced out and the serious business of destroying the marshes began.

[REDACTED]

Until this building occurred, Erith marshes had still stretched from the Thames almost to the railway line with a scattering of river critical industries such as Bazalgette's Victorian sewage outfall, fertilizer production (Thames Fish Guano and Oil Works) and the Borax chemical works.

The maps below show that as late as 1965, the marshes are largely unaltered (fig.4). In less than 60 years almost all the marshes have been lost.

Despite the significant reduction of people in permanent residence on the marshes, grazing continued, to be much reduced as the later stages of Thamesmead were completed in the 1980's. Today it is gratifying to see this continue all be it on a small scale. As the Graziers stated in their interview with Cory, they have family links to grazing this land for 3 generations and do not wish to stop now.

By the end of the 20th Century, commercial industry fought over these scraps of open land. As now, local people have fought (fruitlessly) to save the habitats, river views and the heritage of the marshes.

The map below "1864 map of Erith Marshes with overlay of open land" (Fig.4), shows the position in 2006.

Modern day marshes

You will see from the map (fig.5) below that three sites on the marshes were used for land fill.

Cory moved into the area of waste management in the 1980's. By 1983 they were containerising and removing much of Greater London's rubbish. I wonder how much of it ended up here?

Two waste incinerators have been allowed to gobble up marsh land together with many warehouses and a business park.

Much can be made of bio diversity enhancement but the overall open land area has decreased to an almost insignificant level. This plain fact is skirted round at every opportunity.

Previous battles to save the marshes

By way of an examples of the many fruitless battles by local people to save the open land and culture of the marshes, I have pasted below some news paper headlines from various local papers showing the threats, campaigns and losses over the last 40 years. The actual articles can be accessed via Bexley Archives.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

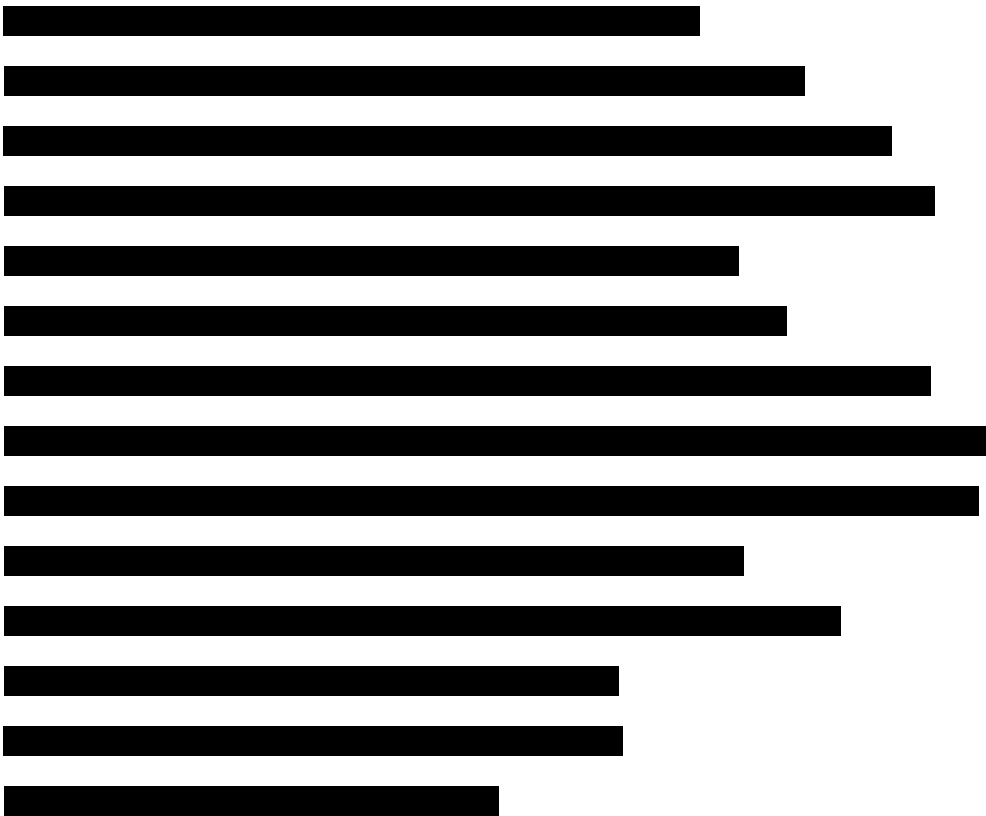
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Conclusion

It is clear that Erith Marshes, a historic part of the area, has been pushed by commercial interests from an important open space, rare and thriving wildlife habitat and refuge for a historic way of life to being almost entirely industrialised in less than 60 years. This can be seen clearly in the Google Earth photo of the area below (Fig.6) compared with that in 1965 (Fig.5).

As the open land has diminished, the tradition of grazing the marshes has been squeezed leaving just the small sites under threat from this new development. An entire way of life forced close to extinction in only 80 years.

The small amounts of open space left is predominately that in the control of Thames Water (Bexley Archives tell me that this was land ear marked in case sewage treatment required a larger foot print) and former land fill with a little land protected by former Section 106 agreements.

We are past the point of furtive squabbles as to why “just this little bit more” should fall to industrial development. It is time to say no more to the destruction of open spaces and habitats.

Sources

- National Library of Edinburgh Historic Maps
- Bexley Archives (hard copy maps)
- Book by Norman N. Dodds MP for Dartford - Gypsies, Didikois and other travellers
- Transcript of talk by Simon McKeon, Bexley archivist (some source material Beverly Nunns, local historian)
- Arcgis landfill database
- My own memories of growing up 2 miles from the Thames

Appendix 1. Marsh maps

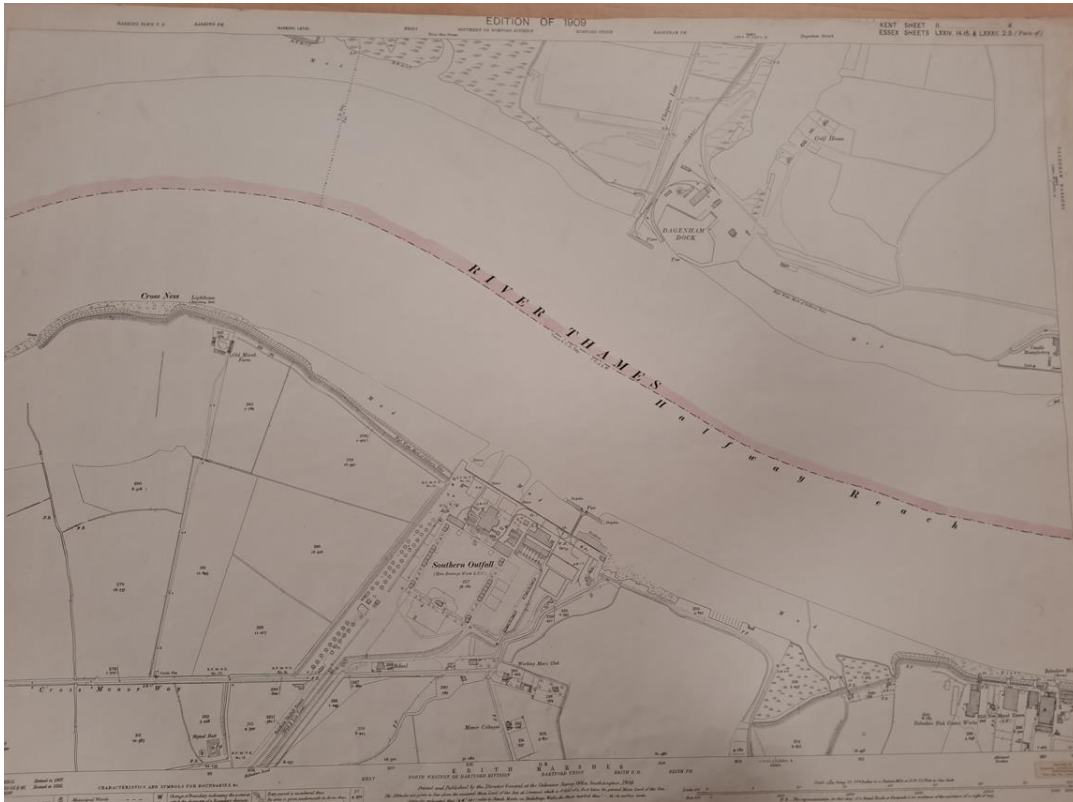
Fig 1.



Ordnance survey Map 1873



Fig.2



Ordnance Survey 1909 (Bexley Archives)

Fig.3



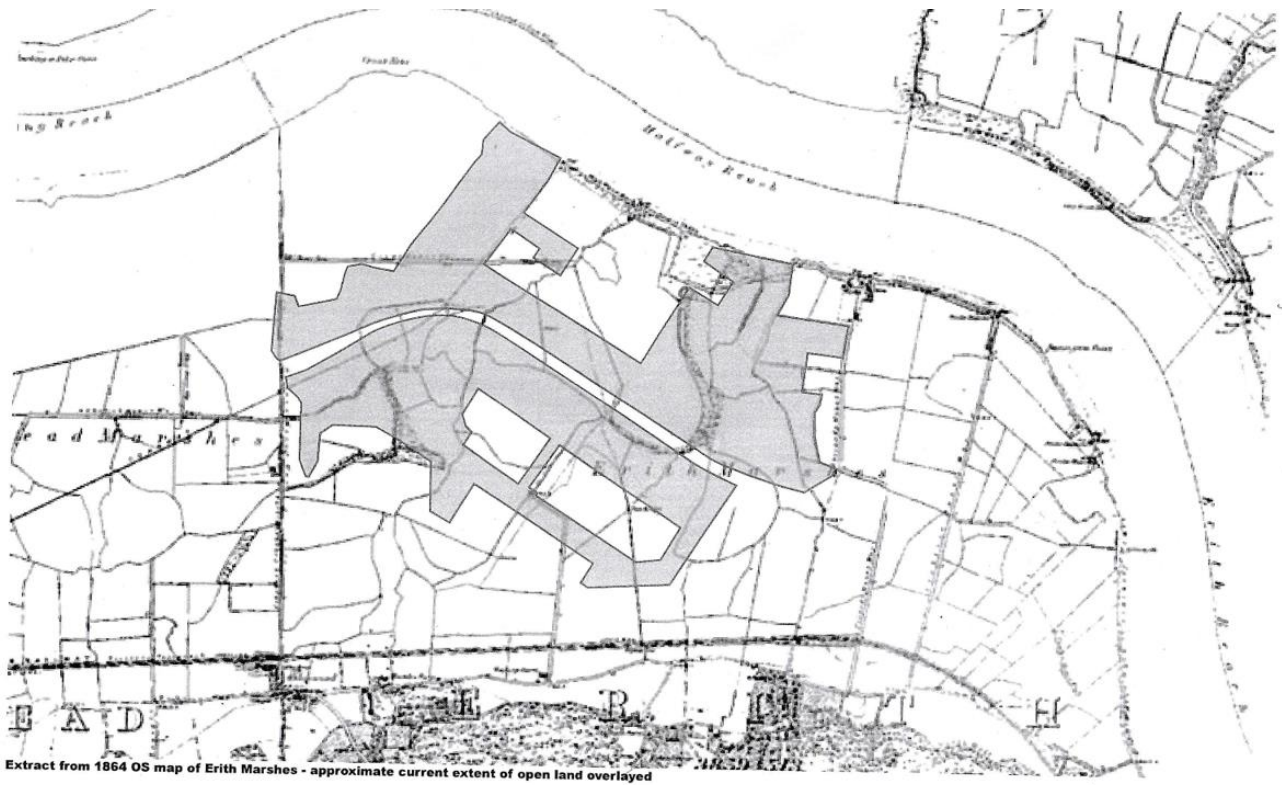
Ordnance Survey map published 1946

Figure 4.



From Bexley Archives Ordnance survey maps 1965

Fig. 4



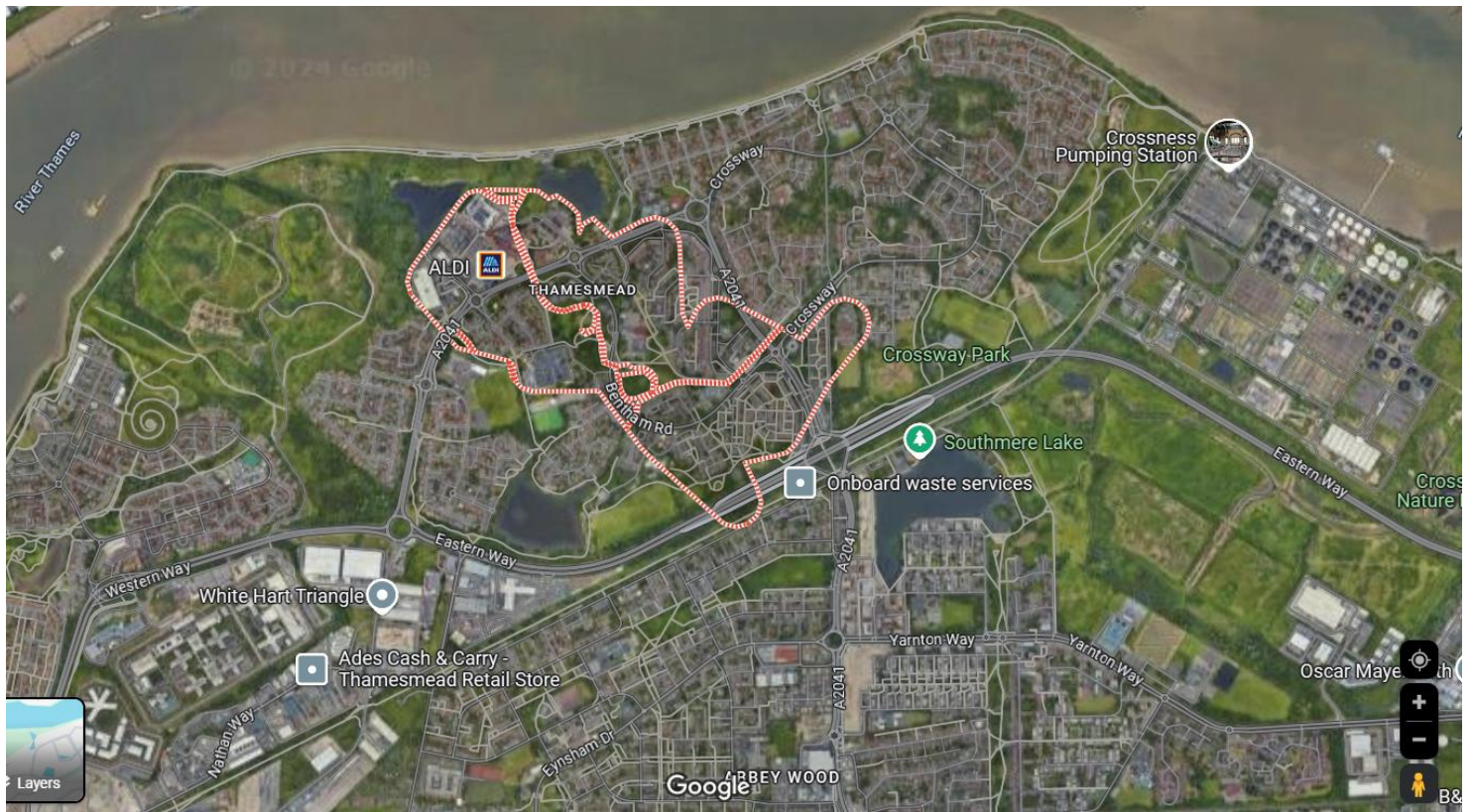
1864 map of Erith Marshes with overlay of open land

Fig 5.



Historic land fill sites

Fig.6



The marshes today Google Maps – Thamesmead outlined