

Croham Hurst history

After a three year struggle the Whitgift Foundation sold Croham Hurst in 1901 to Croydon Corporation. From the onset it appears that the hurst was a very popular open space. Edward Martin wrote in the year of its opening:

"Breakneck Hill is the popular side of the hurst. At its base are small isolated areas of parkland dotted about with clumps of bushes... Rising above these open areas, devoted in summer entirely to picnickers, young and old, is the hill itself. Up this, after their alfresco meal they delighted to clamber. It is no easy matter to climb in a straight line. It is less easy to descend with any degree of gracefulness and dignity."

However the history of this site goes back many thousands of years.

The high bare top of the hurst made a safe and convenient place for early man to settle. There is evidence of a late Mesolithic Settlement which would have been occupied 5-3000years B.C. In 1968 two hut sites were discovered on the top, they appeared to have low turf walls with one post set in a hole in the ground to hold the roof up. Mesolithic or Stone Age man, lived by hunting birds or fish, using tools and weapons of flint. The flint tools of Neolithic or New Stone Age man were also found on the hurst.

Around 2000 B.C. the Beaker Folk invaded Britain and soon after this the Bronze Age began. Bronze Age man was religious and he buried his dead in round barrows one of which was found on the top of Croham Hurst. Evidence of later occupation has not been found which suggests that once Primitive man became more sophisticated he changed from hunter to farmer and moved down from the unfertile hurst to the flat fertile lands below.

The top most point of Croham Hurst lies some 477 feet above sea level and geologically is quite interesting. The hill is formed of Thanet sand topped with a pebble bed and resting on an eroded surface of chalk. All around the the hill the sand has been eroded away and the pebbles have been washed lower down the slope. However, a natural cement binding the Blackheath Pebble Beds into conglomerate or pudding stone on the top of the hurst had slowed down the erosion process. The different subsoils present have led to the development of distinctive flora and fauna on the slopes of Croham Hurst. There is very acid soil on the Blackheath Pebbles and the flora and fauna is correspondingly impoverished, the stony soil and exposure to wind has produced some very stunted trees.

On the Thanet sand there are well grown Oak trees, Holly and Silver Birch. Foxes and badgers have taken advantage of the soft sands and excavated many earths and setts. The lower slopes having a chalk subsoil have a distinctive cover of Beech trees whose shallow roots will tolerate the shallow soil overlying the chalk.

Rocques Map of Surrey of 1765 shows the area covered in woodland which means that Croham hurst has been wooded for over two hundred years. There are however very few very old trees in the wood because until the days of the railways, when coal became readily available and cheap enough for most people to buy, the timber was used for fuel and probably for building.

Under the feudal system the lords estate became a Manor and one such Manor was Cronham (Croham) which was one of four manors in the Parish of Sanderstead. In later years the Manor became the property of a local man, Sir. Olliphe Leigh of Addington, who sold it to Archbishop Whitgift. On the Inclosure in 1797 claims were made (and allowed) for the Manor of Croham by the Warden and Poor of Whitgifts Hospital. A record of 1834 states that This Manor, called Croham, consists of a messuage and farm. It extends over Cromehurst. It receives Quiterents (rent paid by freeholders in lieu of service) from several houses and lands in the town of Croydon and forms part of the endowments of the Hospital of the Holy Trinity.

Croham Hurst became a very popular spot for people to visit in the late 19th century, however, few people realised that the facility they freely enjoyed was not public property. In 1898 it became known that the Whitgift Governors wished to dispose of the area, the lower slopes were to be developed and the remainder on the top offered to the Council.

This proposal would have resulted in half of the Hurst being built upon and the rest being enclosed behind a seven foot high fence. The people of Croydon were outraged and quickly formed a committee to fight the proposals. The campaign had strong backing from the papers who published a plan of the proposals which emphasised just how much of the area would be lost.

During February 1899 a memorial signed by a thousand local people was presented to the Council. On March 20th, a mass meeting took place in Croydons largest hall, and Croydon was moved out of her usual apathy. A letter appeared in one of the papers, We are not asking for a new pleasure ground, we only plead that what we have enjoyed for all our lifetime shall not now be taken from us.

On the 8th February 1901 the Whitgift Foundation finally sold the whole of Croham Hurst to Croydon Corporation and it has since continued as one of the most popular beauty spots for local people to visit.