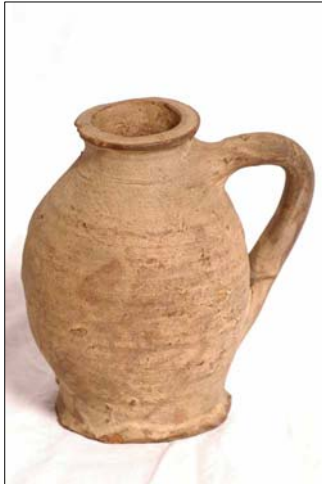


A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRAINTREE

SETTLEMENT AND COMMERCE



The history of Braintree begins at least 4,000 years ago, the earliest concentrated settlements being near the River Brain in the Skitts Hill area, and around the present crossroads at the junction of the A120. This latter area became the focus of the Roman Town, and Saxon development and medieval pilgrim routes influenced the shaping of Braintree over the following centuries.

In 1199 the Bishop of London obtained a Market Charter for Braintree, and with its weekly market and annual fair the town thrived as an important commercial site.

Braintree quickly developed into a significant location for the wool trade, which had probably existed in the area from as early as 1300, with fulling mills at the rivers Brain, Pant and Blackwater. By 1452 the Braintree Bailiffs certified that “the Art of Mystery of weaving woollen cloth” was exercised at the town.

The weaving skills of Flemish immigrants brought a further boost to Braintree’s prosperity in the 16th century, with many settling in empty pilgrim hostelries in Bradford Street. A fine new cloth called ‘Bays and Says’ was introduced by the Flemish weavers, which brought fame to the Braintree and Bocking area.

EMIGRATION AND CHANGE

As religious intolerance and financial hardship took its toll, many people emigrated from Essex to the New World, including a group from Braintree who sailed on ‘The Lyon’ in 1632 and founded Braintree, Massachusetts and Hartford, Connecticut.



The Great Plague of 1665-6 further depleted Braintree’s population, claiming 865 local lives out of the 2,300 remaining. The quality and quantity of cloth from the Braintree area nonetheless brought renewed prosperity and growth until the end of the eighteenth century, when the rise of the cotton trade and revolutionary new production methods finally spelled decline for the wool trade.



In the wake of this change, silk manufacture gained paramount importance, and the establishment of Samuel Courtauld's factory in the 19th century ushered in Braintree's greatest period of prosperity. Agriculture was also flourishing, and with the building of the Corn Exchange in 1839 and the railway link to London in 1848, the industrial boom continued.

Engineering also grew in importance, and during the 20th century the local firms Lake and Elliot and Crittall Ltd became world famous.

Crittall's innovative metal-framed windows led to Braintree people starting factories in America, Canada, Australia and South Africa, and the firm remains one of the District's most important employers.



WARTIME BRAINTREE

Braintree played an important role in the war efforts of 1914-18 and 1939-45. Many Braintree people served in the armed forces, and a great portion of the town's industry was dedicated to wartime production; Braintree District Museum possesses a particularly evocative collection of photographs showing women factory workers producing artillery shells, for example. The town of Braintree also 'adopted' the Royal Navy sloop HMS Kite on 7th March 1942 as part of a scheme called 'Warship Week' (although no crew members are known to have come from Braintree). HMS Kite was tragically sunk by a German U-boat in 1944; a plaque commemorating her adoption can be seen in the Museum today (*illustrated right*).

