

Celebrating Mortlake's Rich Historical Past

Mortlake's identity has been shaped over the centuries by its location on the banks of the Thames. Bulky raw materials for use in local industries were transported by river and finished goods were sent to London by barge.

Mortlake village lost its heart when the shops on the ancient high street were demolished and the brewery expanded in the early 1970s. However, the proposed redevelopment of the brewery site offers an opportunity to restore that heart in what is still a tight-knit community. The planning brief for the site emphasises that aim by calling the development "Mortlake Village" and envisaging that community facilities will be integral to the project. This would distinguish Mortlake from many of the recent housing developments along the banks of the Thames which lack any historic link or identity.



Mortlake Manor and its Manor House

The extensive and historically important Manor of Mortlake, with the Manor House at its centre, was well established by the Domesday survey of 1086. The Manor House lay east of Ship Lane where the brewery malthouse building now stands. It was the country home of the archbishops of Canterbury until 1536 when Thomas Cromwell was gifted the Manor by Henry VIII. Many archbishops and English monarchs visited the Manor House – it was a useful stopping-off point for those travelling to and from the palaces at Richmond and Hampton Court – but by the 18th century it was in ruins. However, there is much archaeological and original documentary evidence that illustrates the importance and magnificence of the building.

John Dee

Perhaps the most famous past resident of Mortlake was Dr John Dee. He was a mathematician, navigator, alchemist and astrologer. Queen Elizabeth I would ride to Mortlake from Richmond Palace to consult him on important affairs of state. Dee is now regarded as one of the foremost scholars of the Renaissance and the extensive library, which he built up in Mortlake, attracted scholars from all over Europe. Dee's house was situated by the river, with his garden adjoining St Mary's churchyard; part of that garden wall exists today.

Tapestry Works

The Mortlake tapestry works were established in 1619 under the patronage of James I and run by Sir Francis Crane. Many highly skilled Huguenot silk workers came to Mortlake to weave the tapestries. They settled in the village and became an important part of Mortlake's Dissenter heritage. The works lay next to the river as the humidity was essential in the weaving process. The tapestries produced in Mortlake were of very high quality and many can be found in museums and stately homes around the world. The works closed in 1703 and Suthrey House is the last remaining building of the Tapestry Works.

Mortlake Pottery

Two notable potteries were located in Mortlake between the 1740s and 1843. John Sanders, who already had a pottery in Lambeth, started the Mortlake tradition and Joseph Kishere opened the more famous pottery works in 1797. His pottery, with its range of rustic sprigged motifs, has been described as the most decorative of the London stonewares; hunting jugs were his invention. These examples of stoneware are greatly sought after and now command high prices.



Brewing

Beer has been brewed in Mortlake for many centuries but the first record of commercial brewing was in 1765. Over the following 200 years the brewery expanded so that it eventually covered an 18 acre site. The brewery was Mortlake's most significant employer from the mid 19th century, often employing whole families and several generations in its various departments. Watneys was a paternalistic employer for almost 100 years and the brewery, with its playing fields, bowling greens and clubs, was the social centre of the village for most of the 20th century.

The Boat Race

The first Oxford and Cambridge boat race to be held on the Thames between Putney and Mortlake was in 1845. The race finishes opposite Thames Bank with the seven-storey maltings building the final landmark of the course. It has always attracted huge numbers of spectators, many crowding around the historic Ship pub and, in more recent years, the finishing post has become the focal point for television cameras and celebrity interviews.

Market Gardens

By 1800 market gardening was an important and well-established industry in and around Mortlake, helping to feed the expanding population of London. Asparagus, peas and carrots were produced in huge amounts and

were carried overnight to the markets in London. Night soil, street sweepings and dung from London would be transported on barges to the draw dock on Ship Lane; it was then collected by cart and taken to the fields for manure.

Mortlake's Parish Church

Henry VIII ordered St Mary the Virgin to be built in 1543. It is therefore one of the first churches to be built after Henry's break with Rome. The church continues to lie at the centre of Mortlake's community and its distinctive tower serves as a geographical focal point. John Dee is believed to be buried under the chancel steps.

An Historic Riverside

There is evidence of prehistoric settlement on the Mortlake riverside and many artefacts are now on display at the Museum of London. From the 15th century, Thames Bank became a site for grand houses – Leyden House, the oldest house in Mortlake and now a listed building, was built in around 1485; Riverside House, Cromwell House, The Ship and other buildings along the river side were documented in the 1617 Survey of Mortlake. These buildings have been developed over the years and lie within a conservation area, but they remain of significant historical importance as well as aesthetically enhancing the riverfront which is so popular with users of the towpath and river.



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