

Brief historical notes



Worthing is the largest town in West Sussex with a population of 100,000. However it was once an insignificant hamlet lying within the parish of Broadwater. The Domesday Book mentions two hamlets near the coast of Broadwater, Mordinges and Ordinges. The former is almost certainly that which in medieval times was known as “Worting” and later “Worthing”.

As recently as the early eighteenth century the population of Worthing was no more than three or four hundred persons, most of whom were engaged in agriculture. There were four “common” fields, i.e. West Field, Middle Field, Home Field and East Field. The addition of an extra field had been the only significant alteration in the land management of the village lands since Norman times. The old Home Field is still recalled in the present-day Homefield Park, all that is now left of the Victorian “People’s Park” which contained an ornamental lake fed by the Teville Stream.

The Teville Stream acted as the northern boundary of the old village of Worthing. To the west it was bounded by the common fields at Heene, to the east by the “Brooklands”, an area of wetland fed by the Teville Stream. The sea, of course, formed the southern boundary. Very few buildings survive in Worthing today of this earlier period, although “Box Cottage” in North Street is a possible exception. 1 and 1 a Prospect Place are also believed to date from at least the late eighteenth century. Most of Worthing, however, is post 1800.

Worthing’s transformation from farming village to seaside town followed the visit of Princess Amelia in 1797. The Princess, youngest daughter of George III, was in poor health and the recuperative properties of the sea air were prescribed for her. However the King did not want his beloved daughter to come under the influence of his rakish son, the Prince of Wales, at

Brighton, so Worthing was chosen as a tranquil alternative.

The popularity of Worthing amongst the elderly and infirm increased noticeably after the visit of the Princess, those seeking more bawdy scenes tended to stay away. In 1803 the passing of the Worthing Town Improvement Act allowed for the setting of a Town Rate, in order that paving and street lighting might be erected. The first elected Town Commissioners (early councillors) met in the Nelson Inn in South Street. It was thirty years before a Town Hall was built.

Worthing developed in stops and starts according to the popularity of sea bathing and the state of the economy. The 1830s were a period of slump with little building and protests (sometimes violent) by the poorly paid and unemployed populace. Smuggling was also endemic. In 1832 a Steyning smuggler, William Cowerson, was shot dead in Worthing High Street by an officer of the Coastguard. The arrival of the railway to Worthing in 1845 heralded another period of growth and expansion which reached its height in the 1870s when imposing villas were built on the last remaining fields in the town centre. The population reached and surpassed 10,000 with many people coming to live in the town from outside the immediate area. This, however, created tensions with the indigenous population becoming increasingly resentful of, and hostile towards, "outsiders", especially Londoners. The anti-Salvation Army disturbances of 1883 – 87 were symptomatic of this mood.

In 1890 Worthing was granted Borough status, a privilege received with great pride in the town. At the first elections to the new council, two-thirds of the electorate participated (in 2000 it was less than a quarter). In 1893 the town was again plunged into crisis by a severe outbreak of typhoid fever which claimed two hundred victims.

In 1910 Worthing elected its first female councillor, Ellen Chapman, who, a decade later, would become the town's first female mayor. During the Great War over 600 local men were killed in the fighting – their names being recalled on the handsome war memorial unveiled in 1921.

Between the wars Worthing saw its most intense period of development with the population reaching 70,000 by the 1940s. In 1929 the outlying parishes of Durrington and Goring were incorporated into the Borough. The corporation also expanded its responsibilities, being responsible for Electricity, Water, Education and Highways and particularly for Health and Gas Supply.

After the Second World War the town once again entered a period of change. Much of the “old town” centred on the High Street, Market Street, and Ann Street was demolished between 1955 and 1970, including the town’s old Georgian theatre. New buildings included the shopping complexes at Teville gate and the Guildbourne Centre. In 1974 the Borough lost many of its powers and responsibilities to the County Council at Chichester and Central Government. This process has accelerated in the intervening period and today local planning remains as the only significant power left to the council.

Worthing has become a much younger town since 1971 in which year it had the oldest population in England. Today large “pre-club” pubs dominate the town centre, replacing business premises. A large housing development at West Durrington has contributed to the rise of a more youthful population. Pressure for further house-building continues with fears for the “strategic gap” between Goring and Ferring being particularly acute.