

New Town History

Crawley was one of the original eight new towns around London aimed at getting people to move from the over-crowded capital into the countryside. London had suffered dreadfully during the blitz and many of its citizens were living in sub-standard or slum conditions.

The Government created eight self-supporting towns in a circle between 20 and 30 miles from the heart of London. These were at Basildon, Bracknell, Harlow, Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage, Welwyn Garden City and, of course, Crawley which was designated a new town on January 9, 1947.

At the end of the 1940s these new towns represented the logical alternative to the continuing massive congestion and outward sprawl of the capital. They promised employment, decent housing in a green environment, and an end to daily commuting.

The new towns would attract industry to their reserves of labour, giving companies the chance to re-establish themselves in cost-effective purpose-built units. To those Londoners in need of accommodation and prepared to take the opportunity, the prospect of good jobs and pleasant homes in a clean and open setting was very attractive, as was the chance to use their skills or train in new ones. It all promised security, not only for themselves but for their children.

The original idea for Crawley was to merge the villages of Three Bridges and Ifield with the small market town of Crawley by filling in the gaps. Three Bridges to the east was on the London to Brighton railway line where it joined the West Sussex route, and was typical of the residential and commercial areas which grow up around a railway junction. Ifield, to the west, was a simple agricultural village in its own right, and Crawley in the centre had as its hub the George Inn, which since the 1600s had found increasing fame as an overnight stopping place on the London to Brighton stage route.

The designated area at that time was nearly 6,000 acres, stretching about three and a half miles from border to border. In the beginning the planners envisaged nine residential neighbourhoods, each based on a village concept, grouped around a town centre with an industrial estate to the north. In the main, three bedoomed houses would predominate, though the mix would vary to allow for private development and for people without families. In addition, there would be some four-bedroomed and a few five bedoomed properties for larger families.

Every neighbourhood was to have the same basic structure, though each would develop a character of its own. Each would have a neighbourhood centre with enough shops to meet day to day needs, plus a primary school, church, community centre and

pub. Homes for the elderly and disabled would be built close to the neighbourhood centres for the convenience of the residents.

To get such massive building programmes off the ground the Government of the day appointed Development Corporations to take on the planning and construction of each of the new towns, and gave them wide powers to enable them to do it. Their plans and activities were subject only to ministerial approval. The New Towns Act provided that when a new town was judged to be substantially complete its development corporation would be wound up.

In Crawley this stage was reached in 1962, with the town a thriving community of about 60,000, and the original nine neighbourhoods already increased to ten. The assets of the development corporation were handed over to the Commission for the New Towns, an organisation which would maintain and run what the corporations has designed and built. Crawley, however, was still growing fast. In 1983 its boundaries were extended by 1,800 acres, stretching to the M23 in the east and the new Ifield West development in the west.

Today with a population of 111,400 and with development well underway on Forge Wood, the town's 14th neighbourhood, Crawley is the largest inland town in West Sussex. Crawley marked the New Town's 70th birthday in 2017 with a series of events including the re-opening of Queens Square, a major theatre show looking back at the past seven decades and a huge cultural celebration in the town centre.