



Basildon

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Basildon – A Short History

Basildon's friendly community spirit probably stems from the lively East Enders who migrated here in the early days. It was one of eight New Towns set up around London between 1946 and 1949, immediately after the Second World War, and helped ease the capital's overcrowding problems.

The idea was to create homes and places of employment in a countryside setting which would attract people and industry. But the unusual aspect about Basildon is that it requested New Town status – a situation almost unheard of. Essex County Council and the then Billericay Urban District Council (now Basildon District Council) found they were unable, through lack of finance and other resources, to improve local conditions. In January of 1949 the boundaries of the New Town were decided and in February the Development Corporation was formed to oversee the project.

This led to a huge change for the small village of Basildon which had been almost alienated from other communities because it didn't have proper roads. Its social centres had been the old Bull pub on Bull Road, now Clay Hill Road, Holy Cross Church and Fairview Hall in Timberlog Lane. Most people drew water from a well, cooked by paraffin or coal and lit their homes by hurricane lamps.

The decision was made to divide the New Town into self contained neighbourhoods to make people feel at home and each area of housing had a centre which included shops, schools and a church. Then came the fun of naming the streets and the Development Corporation plumped for titles which had a geographical or family association with Essex, resulting in unusual road names such as Curling Tye.

Factories soon sprang up, mainly on the industrial estates, but some people found work in London, or Southend. The Commission for the New Towns took over the reins from the Development Corporation in April 1986 and over the last few years growth of housing and industry has continued.

There has also been plenty to smile about with major developments such as the Festival Leisure Park and Barclays Life HQ which have created hundreds of new jobs.

Situated only four miles from the Thames, gateway to the capital, Basildon is the closest of all England's New Towns to the ports of Northern Europe and ideally placed to continue its success story.

Basildon Bell Tower

Basildon's unique bell tower will really put the town on the map. And the visit by Her Majesty the Queen has ensured the nation's eyes are watching the development of this Essex New Town with great interest. The world's first glass and steel bell tower is the culmination of a 13-year dream. Fundraising began in earnest in 1991 and five years later came the welcome news of support by the Millennium Commission. The beautiful tower is the perfect way to celebrate the town's 50th birthday and eight bells are on standby, waiting to mark the historic anniversary, and also ring in the Millennium in style. Two have been specially cast just for the tower. Basildon firm Electronic Office Equipment ordered one to mark its silver jubilee and another has been donated in memory of a former St Martin's parishioner, Peggy Brown, by her husband. The other six were presented to St Martin's Church, right in the heart of the community in St Martin's Square, in 1962 by the Bishop of Chelmsford.

Previously the bells had hung in the redundant St Nicholas Church in Colchester. Canon Lionel Webber of St Martin's linked up with architect Douglas Galloway, at that time Chief Executive of Basildon Development Corporation, and between them the idea of a see-through tower, to be lit up at night, was born. Mr Galloway said: "We had never designed anything similar. We wanted something that would not just be for the church, but for the whole community to see." That ambition is finally about to materialise. Canon Webber said: "The words of one local man sum it up for me. I had been working on my car in a pair of old racing overalls when I went to have a look at the tower. A man came up to me and asked if I was anything to do with the project. I asked him 'Why?'. He told me he just wanted to say that it was marvellous. People wouldn't just talk about Basildon in a derogatory way anymore - it would be Basildon the town with the glass bell tower."

Factfile

- The church was named after St Martin of Tours, a Christian who served in the Roman Army, who became a monk and Bishop of Tours.
- The oldest bell was cast before 1440 by Richard Hille. After his death his wife Joanne carried on the foundry and cast the tenor bell in 1441, making her the first woman in the world to do so.
- As part of the fundraising Canon Webber took part in the tough 5,000-mile Euro-Auto Challenge, visiting all 12 European countries in the shortest time possible.
- All the bells have been cast in Aldgate in East London covering a period of more than 500 years.
- The tower rises to a height of 130ft.

The Future

There's a buzz about Basildon and that buzz is optimism. Fifty years after it all began, the New Town is still going from strength to strength and the future looks very rosy indeed. John Potter, Labour Leader of Basildon Council, said: "We have an energy and drive within the community that is unrivalled. That will pay dividends in the future. People come to new towns because they want a better life and they come determined to make a better life. I arrived from Birmingham in 1966 after taking a job as a computer manager at the Ford plant in Dunton. I lived in Wickford but within two years I had moved to Basildon. It was the first New Town I had ever seen and I was fascinated by the idea of the whole community creating something. The town was growing and it was growing together, forging a new identity. I wanted to be a part of that. Basildon still has that energy and synergy. There was a time when we suffered from a bad image but we have come out the other side and the prospects for the future are enormous. It's the place to be in the south east. We are growing and what we are growing into will not be decided by outsiders - it will be decided by us." Cllr. Potter believes Basildon is going to develop as a regional centre for industry, leisure, retail, finance and particularly entertainment. He said: "Its location is marvellous – just off the M25 – and we don't suffer from a lack of space for building like our competitors."

Angela Smith, MP for Basildon and East Thurrock, agreed the only way forward for Basildon was up. She said: "When I talk to people the general feeling is one of tremendous optimism. I think community spirit is a characteristic we have always had and the truth will emerge about Basildon – people will see us as we really are. Other MPs in the House are quite envious about how much we have going on and I think after being knocked by outsiders for so long we have decided to do something about it."

Basildon really is booming with plenty of investment. Over the last few months it has been building a better future with:

- A new £37 million shopping centre and regenerated town squares.
- The £40 million Festival Leisure Park, the biggest leisure centre in the south east.
- Housing regeneration.
- Barclays Life choosing the town for its new HQ.
- £10 million investment in Ford's Dunton Research and Development Centre where the popular Ford Focus was designed.

Duncan Johnston, CNT Director South says: "Basildon is now well-established and will provide a key focus for the continuing economic expansion of the region. With its wide choice of housing, excellent leisure, healthcare and shopping facilities, it is increasingly recognised as a great place to live and bring up a family and the residents are proud of this modern living and working environment."