



THE DE LA WARRS: A HISTORY OF A SUSSEX FAMILY

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Julian Porter is Curator of Bexhill Museum and expounded his subject in the context of a richly illustrated history of Bexhill-on-Sea which featured not only the De La Warrs but other famous families such as the Sackvilles, Wests and Brasseys.

Bexhill's history more or less started in 771 with the arrival of King Offa, who "defeated the men of Hastings by arms". ('Hastings' then referred to a larger area comprising probably what is today Rother District and Hastings). He then established a minster Church at what is now, heavily altered, St Peter's in Bexhill Old Town, in what was at that time a small Saxon community.

Bexhill Manor as such, owned by the Bishops of Chichester, was largely destroyed in the Norman invasion of 1066, but what was left was awarded to Robert, Count of Eu, whose grandson Robert gave it back to the Bishops in 1148. Around this time the significant Manor House or Court Lodge, cruelly demolished in 1968, was built. The ruins still survive.

In 1564 Queen Elizabeth I took possession of Bexhill Manor and gave it to her cousin Sir Thomas Sackville, Earl of Dorset. The Sackvilles, Earls (later Dukes) of Dorset, whose main seats were Buckhurst Place and Knole House, owned Bexhill right through until the mid-nineteenth century.

During that period Bexhill was just a small farming village uphill from the sea. However, between 1804 and 1814, soldiers of the King's (Hanoverian) German Legion were stationed in substantial barracks in the town and Martello Towers were built along the coast to repel any French invasion. The latter were also used by the Coast Blockade to combat smuggling and frequent skirmishes took place between the Blockade Men and the Smugglers, the most famous being the Battle of Sidley Green in 1828.

In 1813 Elizabeth Sackville, the youngest daughter of the Duke of Dorset, married George West, the 5th Earl De La Warr. The West/De la Warrs were/are a distinguished Sussex family whose ancestors fought at Crecy and in the 17th Century were instrumental in saving the Jamestown Settlement in America, the 12th Baron becoming Governor of Virginia. In 1845, on the death of Elizabeth's cousin, the 5th Duke of Dorset, the dukedom became extinct and the Sackville estates, including Bexhill, passed through Elizabeth to George West who obtained a royal licence to use his wife's name in front of his own, hence the familiar name "Sackville-West".

To complete the picture of Bexhill families, Julian Porter finally brought in the Brassey family, starting with the great nineteenth-century civil engineer Thomas Brassey, who built half the world's railways! Late in life he settled in St Leonards at Beauport Park and his son, also called Thomas, became MP for Hastings and the first Earl Brassey. He completed the works planned by his father to build the great estate of Normanhurst Court where he



settled with his wife Annie, the great Victorian explorer and collector (“A Voyage in the *Sunbeam*”) on whose life and work Julian Porter is a formidable expert. Their daughter Muriel Brassey married Viscount Cantelupe, later to become the 8th Earl De La Warr, in 1891 thus cementing the family’s connection with Bexhill. They refurbished the old Manor House and settled there until their divorce (see later).



Reginald Windsor Sackville, 7th Earl de la Warr

It was the previous 7th Earl De La Warr, Reginald, who had decided to transform the sleepy rural village of Bexhill into an exclusive seaside resort. He contracted the builder John Webb to construct the first sea wall and to lay out the fashionable De La Warr Parade including the luxurious Sackville Hotel. Webb was given the land extending from Sea Road to the Polegrove in part payment where he developed the modern town of Bexhill. The 7th Earl died in 1896, having already transferred the running of the Bexhill estate to his son.

It was Gilbert Sackville, the 8th Earl De la Warr, who built the first entertainments hall in Bexhill at the Kursaal on the Sackville estate. He is also famous for starting the first motor races in Britain along De La Warr Parade. However, in 1901, the Earl, who was something of a cad, went off with a Miss Turner, an actress from the Kursaal and Muriel sued for divorce. She won, was given sole custody of her three children and promptly moved back to the Brassey home at Normanhurst.



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Muriel De La Warr was a progressive woman, a Socialist, Suffragist and a Theosophist. Her son Herbrand largely followed in her footsteps. In 1915, at the age of 15, he inherited title of the 9th Earl De La Warr, became the first Socialist Mayor of Bexhill in 1932 and later a Labour Government Minister. It was during his mayoralty that the competition 'to design and build an entertainments hall for the people of Bexhill' was held, which resulted in the winning modernist design of Erich Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff for the De La Warr Pavilion, the first welded steel frame structure built in this country.

The Pavilion opened in 1935 and became a magnet for the social and cultural life of the town. The Kursaal soon became redundant and was demolished. But the Second World War put a temporary halt to the fun, Bexhill suffering significant bomb damage including the destruction of the Metropole Hotel.

Independent schools and tourism were the sources of the town's prosperity both before and immediately after the war but these sectors have suffered decline over the last 30 years or so and the town has become more residential in nature and particularly popular with the retired.

Nick Hollington