

Exordium to the Eltham Centre

A talk to The Eltham Society by John Kennett
2nd December 2008

John Kennett's annual December lecture to the Society was an insight into a particular area of Eltham's absorbing social history, so thoroughly researched and well presented with matchless illustrations. John chose one of the recent extremely successful building projects in Eltham, the new Eltham Centre, which has brought such a great facility to the community, including Council and leisure activities and incorporating the building that has survived over a hundred years, Eltham Library.



The Eltham Centre in Archery Road and the library in Eltham High Street.

As an exordium, or prelude, to the building of the Eltham Centre, John took us on a discovery of the area around the site of the new Centre in Archery Road. We were all captivated by the rich history and buildings that surrounded the area, which had in the early 1900s been the proposed site for a development of municipal buildings, including a town hall, public offices, swimming pool, library and electricity station, alas only the Library was built, which was opened in 1906.

Part of the new centre stands on the historically named 'Sun Yard', which from 1934 was a permanent Council depot with a variety of purposes including refuse collection and housing maintenance, until its closure in 1999.

However, records can be traced back to 1578 when charity land was donated in what later became the nearby Roper Street, where in 1868 the Eltham National School was founded. From



1901 it was associated with Mr Richard Gregory, when he became the headmaster, and later became the author of a book, which is famously associated with Eltham's history, *The Story of Royal Eltham*, which in 2009 celebrates its centenary. In 1933 the infant school at Roper Street was opened. Although the school has survived, many buildings and houses once standing on the site of the Eltham Centre site and fronting Eltham High Street have long since disappeared including the old cottages next to W Metcalfe's forge, which in 1905 was relocated to Pound Place.

Even several groups of cottages in Chapel Place and Sun Yard in 1901 were described as 'not fit for human habitation'. A poignant note in John's talk was the mention of the Woolworth's store opening on Friday 23 June 1933. Little would we know that just several days after the talk it would close its doors permanently after 75 years of service to Eltham's shoppers.

John's lectures always include an incredible number of slides, showing unique photographs from his own collection and those of a bygone age, and on this occasion illustrates so well that this once neglected area has been rejuvenated with the building of the Eltham Centre which has transformed the area for the enjoyment of all Eltham residents and the wider community.

David Sleep