

The village that refuses to have street lights - and more

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Espen Aas byline

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@ NRKesp1

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Theydon BOIS, ENGLAND. Welcome to the small village that is so committed to preserving its authentic atmosphere that residents refuse to have street lighting.

It's almost like making a small time travel when you walk off the train at Theydon Bois station outside London. Although it belongs to the same underground network as the rest of the capital, the station is in very rural location in the county of Essex.

The place is not strictly known for much, beyond being one of the last stops on the underground eastwards.

No to streetlights

That is, one thing has been noticed is that Theydon Bois has no street lights, and have never had them. Thus, it is pitch dark in the streets here in the evenings, which the majority of residents appreciate.

Peter Newton has for years been chairman of the local Preservation Society in the village, and explains that they want to preserve the real village atmosphere. In addition, they have what they call a "dark night sky policy", which among other things, the local astronomical society benefit from when they look at the stars and explore the skies with telescopes. But what about the crime?

- "We've had people who have moved here from places with street lighting, and they said they felt it less threatening and safer here than where they came from. People get used to it. As soon as your eyes get used to it, it is not at all as bad" Peter Newton assured.

There have been a number of Village Referendums regarding street lighting, but every time the majority votes it down. Only down by the station are there a few streetlights, the rest of the village is in complete darkness at night.

For various reasons including the late arrival of electricity that first arrived in 1926. When the electricity cables stretched here many streets and houses fully built. At the same time residents know that the local rates would go up if they wanted streetlights. Over the subsequent 91 years therefore the matter has been thoroughly discussed, but constantly without a single streetlight having emerged.

Bustling Associations

Theydon Bois has about 4,000 inhabitants, and many are very active in many pursuits. There are clubs and organizations for the majority of interests. Whether it's about

upcoming events such as the annual donkey race, fundraising for local purposes or hungry seafarers in foreign service. The village has associations enough for everyone.

People like Jane Turner, an enterprising lady who likes to participate in much, not least in being a Village Tree Warden.

- “We try do just as much as we can, and for the most we encourage people to look after the fine trees that are in our village”, she explains.

With its proximity to the old Epping Forest next to the village Theydon Bois several ancient oaks that villagers are mighty proud. The crown jewel among the trees is an avenue of oak trees just planted to celebrate the coronation of Queen Victoria in the late 1830s.

As more of these trees have begun to deteriorate, a new tree-lined street was planted outside the old, so that in the future the village does not risk being left without the views everyone has been accustomed to seeing.

Close by the forest is also one of the local churches where Church Warden John Eaton unlocks a heavy wooden door before he proudly shows off the church. He has been a member of the church for 40 years, and tells of great support every Sunday.

- “There are many villagers occupied with their religion. We have about 600 people who are regular churchgoers, and on a normal Sunday, we have up to 100 people here”, says Eaton proudly.

He proudly tells us about different collections for needy causes that happens under the church auspices. The people of Theydon Bois standing together to others besides themselves.

Threatened by Residential Construction

But although many battles have been had against streetlights, there is now a greater threat that has emerged in Theydon Bois – new residential construction.

There is an acute housing shortage in London and many of the surrounding commuter towns. In this village and its surrounding Green Belt there is now great pressure to build hundreds of new homes, which has created a huge amount of opposition.

One who is very passionate about this proposal is Jim Watts, Webmaster for the Theydon Bois Village Website, the village's online newspaper. There is an area right by the tube station on the opposite side of the line to one currently used for parking that it is proposed rezone for housing. Watts fears for the village's future if allowed construction there.

-“ It is proposed 360 new homes in and around our village, that alone will effectively mean we will no longer be a village. We are presently 4,000 inhabitants, with a large such a large residential development we are at risk in that it eventually doubles in a short time”.

Today, Theydon Bois is limited by Epping Forest on one side and by the rail track for the tube on the other. Beyond the tube line is the green meadows, and Watts and the other engaged in opposing this proposal think developers will not stop once they are allowed to build on this Green Belt land as there is then no clearly defined barrier.

Aging Population, Happy Residents

- “We have an aging population, and it makes it difficult to recruit people to our local clubs and associations. The younger people who live here, work mainly in London but because of this have no time to attend clubs” Watts says.

With its proximity to London, is also house prices are very high in Theydon Bois. So high that many children cannot afford to buy their own home here when want to move home.

But Watts denies that new housing would have solve this problem.

-“ It is easy to believe that 360 new homes would solve the housing problem here, but it would not. Instead, you'll get people who will move from London to here and then commute into work. It will increase inflow to the village, whereas what we want is affordable homes for those who already live here”, he says.

So although time sometimes seems to have stood still in the peaceful village of Theydon Bois, there is always something to fight for. Whether it's about stopping streetlights, or residential development. And although the place is small, the amount involvement tremendous.

What we say - it depends on which side you stand on. Before last Christmas one of the local groups started a petition for streetlights in the village again, but so far only managed to get the support of 51 others.