

T W, see photo, came from Norwood and at the age of 24, he walked daily to and from Beckenham to work on the fledgling *Beckenham Journal* which had started in 1876 as a 24 page monthly costing 1d . TW became proprietor of the newspaper in 1881.

Having installed a steam driven printing press behind his stationer's shop, in 1882 TW started publishing the *Beckenham Journal* on a weekly basis. This was during the most exciting years during which Beckenham completed the evolution from village to town with the population doubling from 13,011 in 1881 to 26,331 in 1901.

By 1880 the Cator family (**see John Cator below**) had all but exhausted the income from the house building boom that followed the arrival of the railways and the management of Beckenham had passed into a group of successful local businessmen. They set up a company which purchased the lands of the old Manor House and which they largely demolished and replaced by new buildings centred around the Beckenham Public Hall in Bromley Road which opened by 1884. The management of the Public Hall was given TW who, a year later, expanded his interests when he published the first Beckenham Street Directory (**see Directories below**). TW operated his businesses from premises on the bend where the High Street leaves the 'Church Hill' turning west into the major shopping area. (**see Thornton's Corner below**)



The *Journal* became a campaigning paper which informed and encouraged local people to have their say in deciding the issues of the day. For example in 1902 there was an attempt to get a bill through Parliament authorising the extension of electric trams from Penge to Thornton's Corner. As this plan involved straightening up the High Street, it was met with violent opposition from residents who felt it would lower the tone of the place.

With the coming of the motor car, in 1905 the High Street was surfaced for the first time and was slightly widened and straightened from the bottom of Church Hill to the war memorial. In 1903 the speed limit had been increased from 14 mph to 20 mph and in its annual report for 1912, Beckenham Hospital reported casualties from motor accidents had increased to 1,026 from 285 the previous year. (the 30 mph limit dates from 1934).

It was through T W's efforts that the Local Council opened the town's first two public parks. (**see Parks below**).

T W also paid for the restoration of the 12th/13th Century Lych Gate at St George's Church, in memory of two of his sons who died in the first World War. Bronze plaques on either side of the main cross beam record the history and restoration of this reminder of the old village days. The Thornton family grave is in St George's churchyard.

TW's youngest surviving son, Victor, combined working in the family business with a thespian career – he was a great amateur actor and accomplished theatrical director. When he succeeded as Journal editor, Victor joined others to persuade the council to close the high street so that a fair could be held to celebrate the Queen's coronation in 1953. Also Victor contributed to the day by staging an open air performance of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in a replica Elizabethan playhouse by the big tulip tree in Kelsey Park.

A contemporary of Victor was Maurice Denham (whose father was a dentist in Albemarle Road). They were both members of the Beckenham Shakespeare Society in the 1920s.

Victor played a leading part in the emergence of the Beckenham Children's Theatre where the policy was to stage plays using child actors playing adult roles. For example in 1949, Victor produced Shaw's *Pygmalion* at Beckenham Baths in 1949 and none of the cast was over 15 years old.. It was through Victor's enthusiasm and the generosity of builders, Syme and Duncan, that in 1960 the Beckenham Theatre opened as 47-seater

premises in a converted private house at the corner of Manor Road and Bromley Road. Dick Emery performed the opening ceremony on stage in the presence of the Mayor and Mayoress of Beckenham.

In later years the Thorntons published the paper from a press opposite in Kelsey Park Road until the mid-1950's when it was sold to the Kentish Times group who kept the original name until 1985. It remained Beckenham's bestselling paper throughout its life.

In later life the Thornton family moved to Kelsey Lodge in Kelsey Square except for TW who remained living above the business. Although confined to a wheelchair for some time in later life, T W continued as editor until he died in 1933. He was succeeded as editor by a Mr E J Dark who retired during the war to be replaced by Victor who remained editor until his death in 1963. During Victor's years the paper was printed on a press opposite Thornton's Corner in a Kelsey Park Road.

The *Journal* was sold in 1955 to the Kentish Times who almost immediately closed the printing works and transferred production to Sidcup, although a sales office remained on the corner of Kelsey Park and Manor Roads.

The central figure in Beckenham when Thornton's business was booming was the Village Squire, the last of whom was Cornelius Lea Wilson who died in December 1911, aged 96. The coach of Squire Lea Wilson was a familiar site in the village and, on Church Hill there stood a gazebo, used as a look-out for the coach returning from London, via Lewisham. Tom Thornton purchased this gazebo and resurrected it in the garden of Kelsey Lodge, where it remained until destroyed in the development of Thornton Dene, off Greenways. However, some of the stained glass windows in the gazebo were saved and are now above the door into the Beckenham Theatre Centre.

A feature of the Thornton's Corner area of Beckenham was flooding. In April 1978 water in the stationer's shop was level with the top counter and 5 quires of paper floated out the shop door into the High Street. At the back of the shop a pony nearly died.

## John Cator

In 1780, John Cator junior had become the Lord of the Manor by buying up of most of north and west Beckenham, including what is the now the St George's Conservation Area. John felt that the Manor House, opposite the Church was not suitable with its meagre 11 acres and its position on the busy Bromley Road. John built his own mansion on the 100 acres which is now called Beckenham Place with views overlooking the then village of Beckenham and beyond to the furthest border of his estate, Crystal Palace. Soon afterwards he had the road adjoining his Mansion, which led to the hamlet at the southern end of Lewisham, moved to what is now called Southend Road.

## Thornton's Corner

TW's businesses included:  
Stationers and Newsagent  
Bookseller  
The Library\*  
Artists Materials  
Offices of the Beckenham Journal  
Printing and publishing and  
bookbinding  
A travel and entertainment agency  
Piano tuning and picture framing.  
\* (Beckenham's public library did not open until 1939)

Right: Thorntons Corner in c.1900.



## Beckenham's Street Directories

Reflecting the extensive area covered by the Parish of Beckenham the editorial at the front of the directories remarked that "The parish lies wholly within the County of Kent, but has a very eccentric outline on the western side, where a tongue of land extends right up to the Crystal Palace dividing in its course the parish of Sydenham (in Lewisham) and the hamlet of Penge (in Battersea). Recognising the spread of its readership, Tom extended the title of the Journal to include Penge and Sydenham.

## TW and Beckenham's Parks

TW was part of the group that established Croydon Road recreation Ground. Later he led the campaign that stopped the Council turning into a housing complex the land that is now Kelsey Park. It opened in 1913 and a plaque in memory of Tom William Thornton was unveiled by the Kelsey Park Road entrance to the park that he saved for his home town. Below are photos taken at the unveiling event in the year 2000. On the left is the silver spade used to plant an oak tree when the park opened. On the right is the T W Thornton plaque.

