

WILMINGTON: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUTER VILLAGE

by Frances King

THE VILLAGE OF WILMINGTON is located just beyond the London green belt in north-west Kent, south of the town of Dartford (Figure 1). It is an area of potential growth in the developing Thames Gateway. The village has undergone many changes in the last three decades.

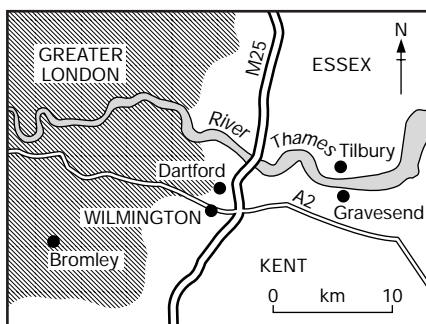


Figure 1: The location of Wilmington

What is a commuter village?

A commuter village is a settlement in a rural area that was once inhabited by people who worked in the village, mainly in agriculture. Now, however, it is inhabited mainly by people who travel regularly to work in nearby towns.

This unit looks at how the village of Wilmington has changed and how and why it now meets this definition of a commuter settlement.

The traditional village

Wilmington village dates from Roman times, but the name 'Wilmington' comes from Saxon times (it is mentioned in the Domesday Book). Until the mid-20th century it was a mainly

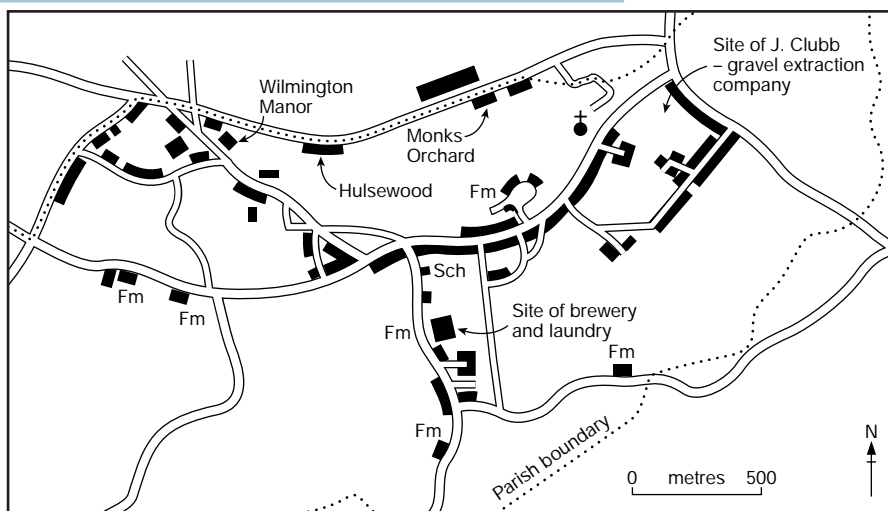


Figure 2: The core of Wilmington village in 1940

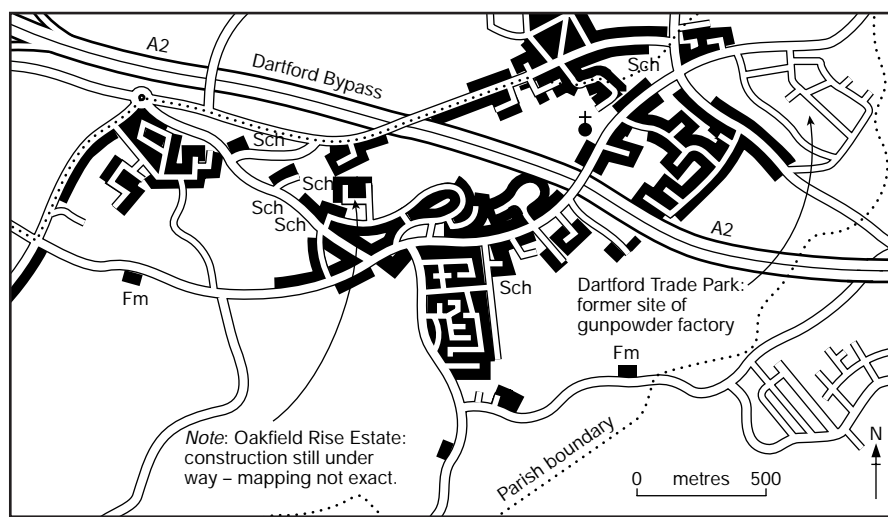


Figure 3: Wilmington village in 1999

agricultural settlement with a focus on market gardening, typical of northern Kent. Apple and cherry orchards and arable farming thrived on the chalk-rich soils (Figure 2). In 1960 there were still eight working farms in the village. Large manor houses such as Hulsewood, Monks Orchard and Wilmington Manor overlooked the valley separating the two sides of the village. As well as agriculture, local

industries in the village included paper-making, gunpowder manufacture, a brewery, a laundry, brick-making and gravel extraction.

How has the village changed?

There have been nine major changes to the village over the last 60 years.

- 1 A key development occurred in 1971 with the opening of the A2 trunk road through the valley



Figure 4: Typical new housing in Wilmington village

(Figure 3). This required the demolition of two houses and took out large areas of farmland. The A2 connects London to the coastal ports of Dover and Folkestone, and in 1986 a direct link to the M25 and the Dartford Tunnel was created. The negative effects of the road include noise, and visual and air pollution for the villages nearby, including Wilmington. By cutting through the valley, the A2 also helped to reduce the traditional community atmosphere of the village.

2 Housing construction in Wilmington started in the post-war period with the building of a council estate to the west of the village. From the 1980s housing development accelerated, and five new estates were built. These provided large, high-quality semi-detached and detached family houses with garages and large gardens, in the upper price range (Figure 4). Current projects include the building of executive homes on an infill site in the grounds of an existing property near the church.

1911	2,250
1931	2,700
1961	6,300
1971	7,500
1981	6,900
1991	6,600

Figure 5: Population growth in Wilmington in the 20th century
Source: Population census figures

3 The population of the village has risen significantly since 1940 (Figure 5). Despite the decline in total population in the last 20 years, the number of households has increased from 2,450 in 1981 to 2,665 in 1991. This suggests a growth of single-person households in the village.

4 The population structure of the village has also changed. It is dominated by the economically active population. Further change is illustrated by the recent rise in the number of residential homes for the elderly (see Figure 9 on page 4) – there are seven in the village.

5 The number of services in the village has declined. Despite a threshold population (the minimum number of people required to keep a service in operation) of over 7,000, the core of the village now has just one antique shop, three public houses and one small general shop, which is also a post office.

6 The village does, however, have immediate access to three secondary schools, two primary schools and a special needs school,

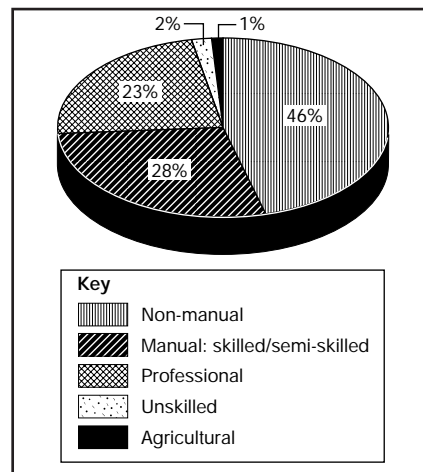


Figure 6: Occupational categories in Wilmington, 1991

	1971	1981	1991
No car	26	19	16
One car	57	48	43
2+ cars	17	33	41

Figure 7: Car ownership in Wilmington 1971–91 (percentage figures)

whose catchment areas cover settlements up to 40 minutes away.

7 An industrial estate, Dartford Trade Park, was established in the east of the village in the early 1980s. This accommodates modern footloose industries, including printing, electronics and computing. The traditional industries of the village have declined, and today only a gravel extraction company, J. Clubb, remains.

8 Farming in the village has also declined, from eight working farms in 1960 to just two. Much of the land has been converted for housing, or left to run wild (eg a nature reserve north of the A2). Land has also been developed for golf courses and horse riding – typical land uses of the rural–urban fringe. Shifts in the occupation of the local population also show that only 1% of people are now engaged in agricultural activities (Figure 6).

9 Car ownership in the village has risen significantly (Figure 7). This reflects the changing economic face of the village and the growing role of commuting. The percentage of people working outside the village has increased, as also has the use of the car to get to work (see Figure 10 on page 4).

Why has the village developed in this way?

There are several major factors that have underpinned these changes.

- **Communications** Since the construction of the A2, the village has had direct access to the main roads to the coast (A2, M2, M20), to central London (A2 – 45 minutes), and to the London orbital, the M25, and the Dartford Tunnel (Figure 8). It is about 7 minutes' drive from Wilmington to Dartford railway station, where regular services connect London (35–45 minutes) and the Kent coast.
- **Housing** Recent housing developments, including the most recent Oakfield Rise estate, have been designed for families with cars. Land has been taken out of the green belt within the village

for this most recent development. Houses have also been constructed on infill sites between other houses or as small estates on the land that was once part of larger houses, eg Monks Orchard. A number of large houses dating from the 19th century have been converted to residential care homes (eg Sonia Lodge), adapted for school use (eg Wilmington Manor), or offices (eg Wilmington House). Some, such as Hulsewood estate, have been demolished to make way for estates within the village.

- **Education** With two single-sex grammar schools and a mixed high school, pupils come from a wide catchment area. Combined with its three primary schools, the village is ideal for families with school-age children, and demand for housing in the village means that house-prices are high.
- **Rural character** Despite considerable change, the area still retains a rural image, with some woodland, Oakfield Park and farmland. The area around the Domesday parish church, St Michael and All Angels, is being preserved as a conservation zone. Four areas have also been designated protected areas of 'special residential character'. More recently, efforts have been made to protect the area immediately south of the A2, with the construction of a large earth bank to limit excessive noise and visual pollution from the road, particularly for the new development of Oakfield Rise. In time this will be vegetated to enhance the environment, and this will also stabilise the bank.
- **Shopping** Dartford town centre has experienced significant decline since the early 1980s. The developments of Lakeside (Thurrock) and Bluewater (Dartford) shopping centres, along with major supermarket stores including Sainsbury's and ASDA, both within 15 minutes' drive, have accelerated this decline. The use of private cars by people in the village also reduces the demand for local services. However, a direct bus link has now been established to the Bluewater shopping centre, some 10 minutes' drive from the village.

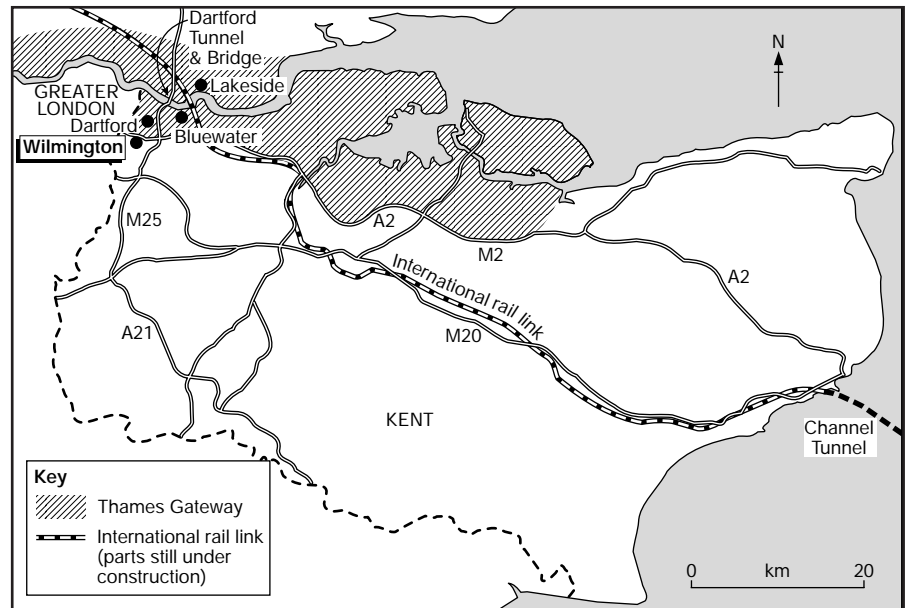


Figure 8: Wilmington in relation to major communication routes in the South East

- **Suburbanisation** While the character of Dartford town itself has declined in recent years, the village of Wilmington, just to the south, has now become almost a suburb of the town.

Conclusion

Wilmington has undoubtedly undergone considerable changes in recent years due to its situation in relation to surrounding settlements, communication routes and the London green belt. In the process pressures on the village have increased. There are growing concerns about congestion, the need for traffic calming in the High Street, and greater pressure on local primary schools, which are increasingly unable to accommodate rising local demands. These changes have been typical of commuter settlements with high car ownership, low local service provision, new family housing development and a high proportion of economically active population. With the further development of the Thames Gateway, Wilmington is likely to continue this pattern into the foreseeable future.

Activities

1 What is a **commuter village**?

2 (a) Using the data in Figure 5, draw a line graph to show population growth in Wilmington in the 20th century.

(b) When was the greatest increase?
 (c) Why do you think it occurred at this time?
 (d) Why has population dropped in the last 20 years, but the number of households continued to rise?

3 Under each of the headings below, write a brief paragraph describing how Wilmington meets the definition of a **commuter settlement**.

- (a) traditional industry
- (b) housing
- (c) services
- (d) communications

4 (a) What is meant by the term **threshold population**?

(b) Why might you expect to find more services in a village the size of Wilmington?
 (c) Why are there so few services in the village?

5 Study Figure 9.

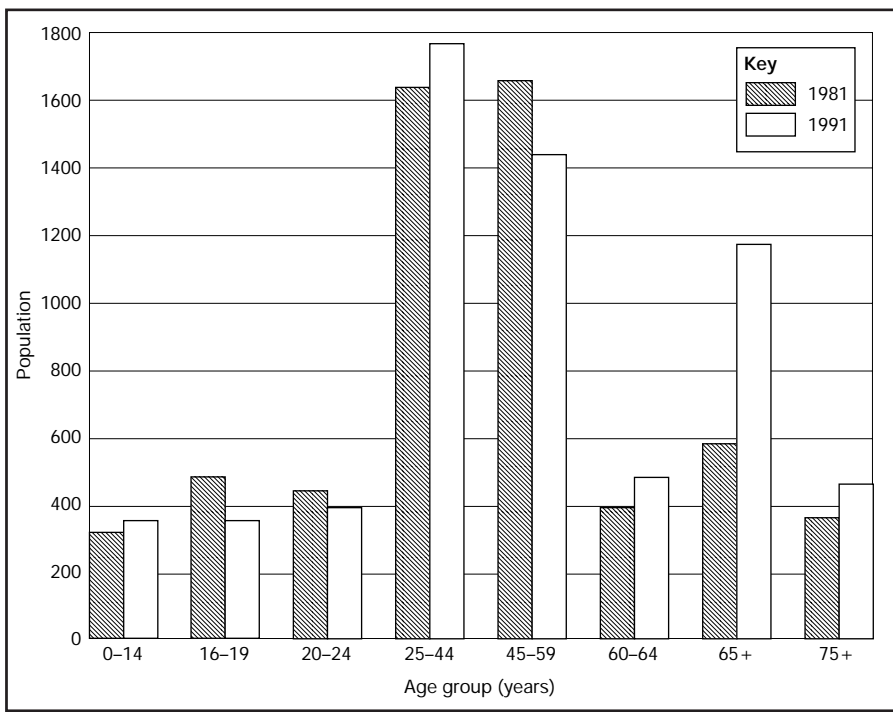


Figure 9: Population structure in Wilmington, 1981 and 1991

Source: Population census data

(a) What is meant by 'an economically active population'?
 (b) Why does Wilmington have such a high proportion of economically active population?
 (c) How has the dependent population changed in recent years?
 (d) Why do you think this is?

6 (a) Use the data in Figure 7 to draw three pie charts showing the changes in car ownership in the village since 1971.

(b) How does this show change in the character of Wilmington?

7 Study Figure 10.

(a) What percentage of people working in the village in 1981 travelled to work by car?
 (b) How had this figure changed by 1991?
 (c) Why do you think travel by train is the second largest category?
 (d) How does this graph support the idea of Wilmington as a commuter village?

8 Imagine you are an estate agent in Dartford selling a house in the new development of Oakfield Rise, similar to the one in Figure 4. Use the information in the unit (text and maps) to write an advertisement that will attract buyers to the village.

9 **Change for the better?**

Do you think the village of Wilmington has benefited from the changes that have occurred? In groups, draw up a table with columns headed 'Benefits' and 'Costs'. Spend 20 minutes writing down as many points as possible. Elect a Chairperson to read your points to the class.

10 Do you know any villages near you that have experienced similar changes? Undertake a similar study using information from local census data, old photographs, maps and newspapers. How has your chosen village changed in the 20th century? Why did it change?

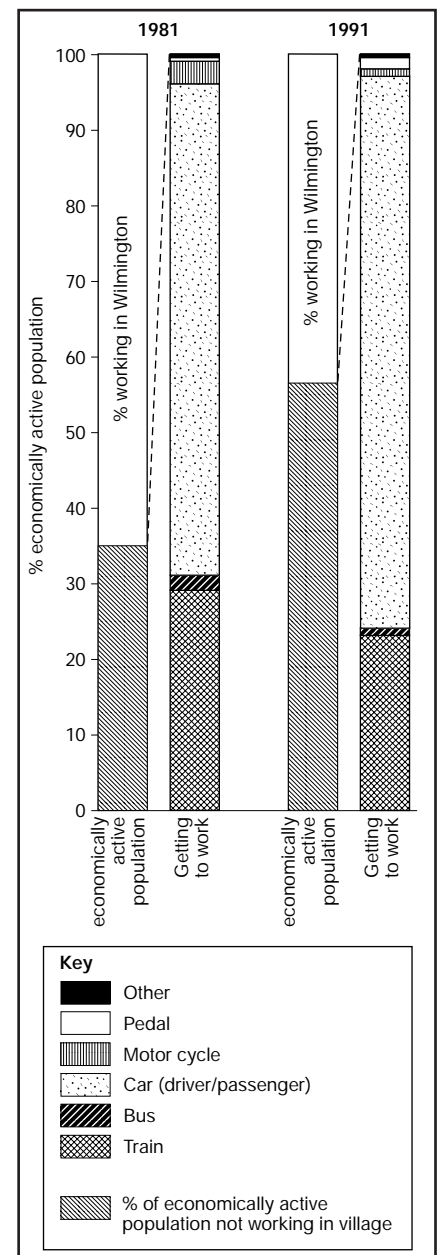


Figure 10: Means of travel by commuters living in Wilmington, 1981 and 1991