

## A Brief History of Braintree



Braintree's history is based on the story of the rise and fall of the agriculture, textile and manufacturing industries. Whilst evidence of the earliest people that worked flint tools dates back to the Stone Age, the focus of the modern town was created around 2000 years ago. A Roman settlement developed from a Late Iron Age village, on the modern site of George Yard Shopping centre, at the crossroads of Stane Street and the road between Chelmsford and Sudbury.

In 1199 the Bishop of London, was granted a market charter for Braintree from King John. The original medieval market was held in Little Square and later moved to Market Square where the Town Hall is now situated. The gants or alleyways in Little Square are based on the original layout of the market stalls - the name "gant" is Flemish in origin, from "ein gang" as used by the Huguenot weavers.

By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Braintree was an important cloth manufacturing centre and became specialist in the production of bays and says cloths that were then exported. The industry suffered from dependence upon overseas markets and then in the 1665 plague, over 800 lives were lost which decimated almost a third of the town's population.

Many people emigrated from Essex to America, including a group who sailed on 'The Lyon' in 1632 and established Braintree, Massachusetts. Among the settlers was Henry Adams, great-grandfather to John Adams, US President from 1797-1801.

The cloth industry fell into terminal decline but was replaced by the silk industry in the 18th century. George Courtauld built the family's first Braintree factory in 1809. By the 1880s more than 1,300 of mostly women workers were employed by the firm, out of a population of 8,500.

A smaller but highly skilled workforce developed at the furnishing fabric mills of Warner & Sons, who arrived in 1895 to produce hand-woven fabrics for high status clients including the royal family. Samples of these can now be seen in the Warner Textile Archive.

Textiles were not the only industry. The arrival of the railway in 1848 supported development of heavy metal based industries in the area. Critalls grew in the 20th century to be one of the world's largest metal window manufacturers – and started out as a small ironmongers shop situated in a building still found in George Yard. Similarly the Lake & Elliot foundry grew from a bicycle tool shop started in 1896.

Braintree was still a manufacturing centre, particularly for munitions during the World Wars, but heavy industry declined in the mid 20th century leaving a market town looking forward to growing with the new industries of the 21st century.

