

# Famous People of SIDCUP



‘Famous People of Sidcup’  
is a celebration of the national achievements  
and local contributions of a selection of individuals  
in the Lamorbey and Sidcup district.

We hope that learning about them  
will encourage a greater understanding  
of our local history and pride in our town.



**Doreen Bird (1928-2004),**  
*founder of Bird College Conservatoire of  
Dance and Musical Theatre*

Doreen Bird was born in London and moved with her parents to 42 Braundton Avenue, Sidcup. It was in their living room aged just 17 that she first started teaching students. Her School of Dance was based at various premises including Studio House on the corner of Crescent Road/Station Road and an old school in Birkbeck Road.

Doreen lived with her American husband, Frank Cook, in Chislehurst. She was an examiner, worldwide lecturer and Council Member of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing. She worked on the choreography for four productions at the Geoffrey Whitworth Theatre. When she retired as Principal in 1998, her college had achieved its place as a centre of excellence. It is now based in Alma Road.

**Henry Robertson 'Birdie' Bowers  
(1883-1912), polar explorer**

Henry Robertson Bowers was born at Greenock on 29 July 1883. After the death of his father Alexander, his mother Emily brought up Henry and his two sisters in Sidcup. They are shown on the 1891 census at 13 Carlton Road. He joined HMS Worcester as a cadet in 1897 and voyages took him to Cape Horn and India. In 1910 Bowers was invited by Captain Scott to join the *Terra Nova*.



His expedition name was Birdie, on account of his red hair and beaklike nose. They reached the South Pole on 18 January 1912 but the return journey was hampered by lack of food and freezing temperatures. Bowers and his companions died on or about 29 March 1912, the date given by Scott for his last journal entry.



**Rose Bruford (1904-1983),**  
*founder of Rose Bruford College of Theatre  
and Performance*

Rose Bruford graduated from the Central School with top honours in 1928 and became a visiting teacher of speech and drama. From 1941 she taught speech and drama at the Royal Academy of Music and mime at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Although she had little money, she began preparing to found her own school. From 1950, she rented part of Lamorbey House from Kent Education Committee for £5 annually and this is where her

College operated increasingly successfully. Rose lived at 79 Burnt Oak Lane and later at 19 Crescent Road, Sidcup. She was succeeded as Principal of the College in 1970 and left a legacy to Sidcup in the highly successful college that bears her name.



**Sir Harold Gillies, CBE (1882-1960),**  
*pioneer of modern plastic surgery*

Harold Delf Gillies was born in New Zealand and studied medicine at Cambridge, later specialising in ear, nose and throat surgery. He joined the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1915 and witnessed the terrible facial injuries sustained in the trenches. Gillies pressurised the War Office to open a designated specialist hospital and The Queen's Hospital opened in Sidcup in 1917. With his colleagues Gillies pioneered experimental approaches to reshaping badly disfigured faces and Sidcup became an international centre for training in plastic and oral surgery.

After the war he continued as a plastic surgeon and became the first President of the British Association of Plastic Surgeons. Knighted in 1930, he was also a keen golfer and accomplished painter.



**Sidney Frank Godley, VC (1889-1957),**  
*awarded the Victoria Cross in World War I*

Born in East Grinstead, Sidney Frank Godley moved with his family to Sidcup and on the 1901 census they were living at 4 Ethel Cottages, Alma Road. He attended the Sidcup National School and from the age of 14 he worked in a hardware store.

In 1909 he joined the Army and when war broke out in 1914 he was serving with the 4th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers. At the Battle of Mons on 23 August 1914 he performed an act of gallantry that led to him being awarded the Victoria Cross. Injured and captured, he spent the remainder of the war as a prisoner. Afterwards he worked as a school caretaker in Tower Hamlets and retired to Loughton, Essex. He is commemorated in Sidcup in the name of the sheltered accommodation 'Frank Godley Court'.

**Douglas Macmillan, MBE (1884-1969),**  
*founder of Macmillan Cancer Support*

Born in Somerset, Douglas Macmillan entered the civil service in London in 1902, working for the Board of Agriculture and later the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. He was appointed MBE in 1944 for his support to young civil servants.

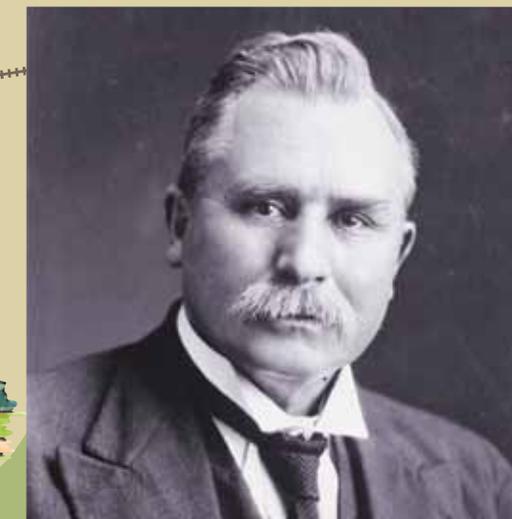
The death of his father from cancer in 1911 had a profound effect on him and he set up a charity to help cancer sufferers and their families. This later became Macmillan Cancer Support. He managed the charity from his home which from 1924 was at Walden (now 11) Knoll Road, Sidcup and fund-raising events

were held there. A man with many interests, he wrote poetry, arranged walking tours and was a member of Sidcup Literary and Scientific Society. In 1966 he left Sidcup and returned to Somerset, where he died of cancer three years later.

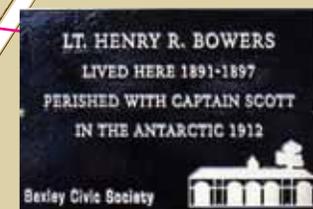
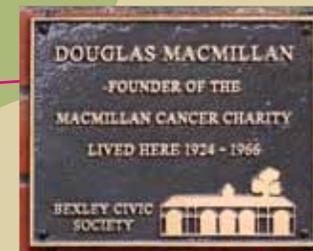
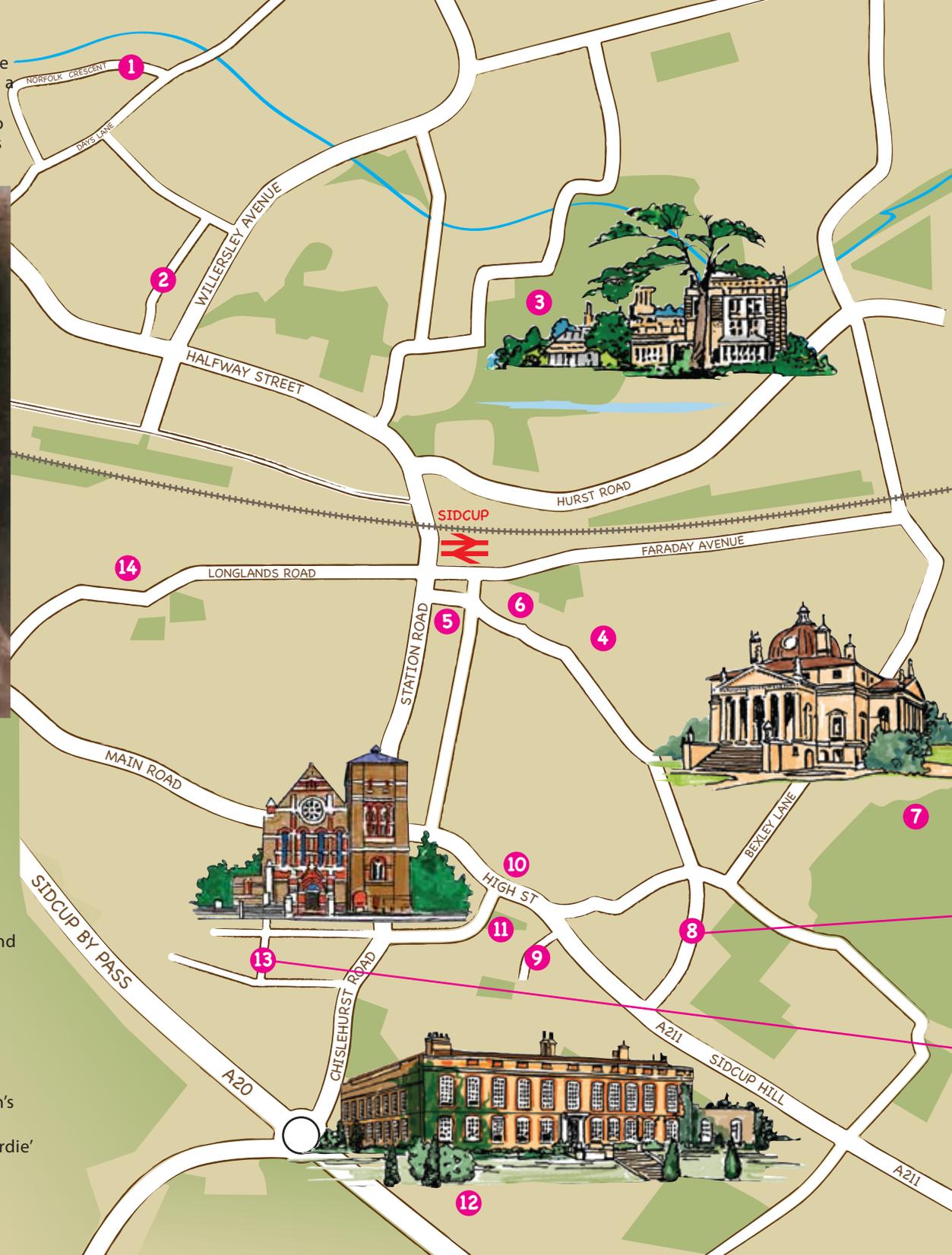


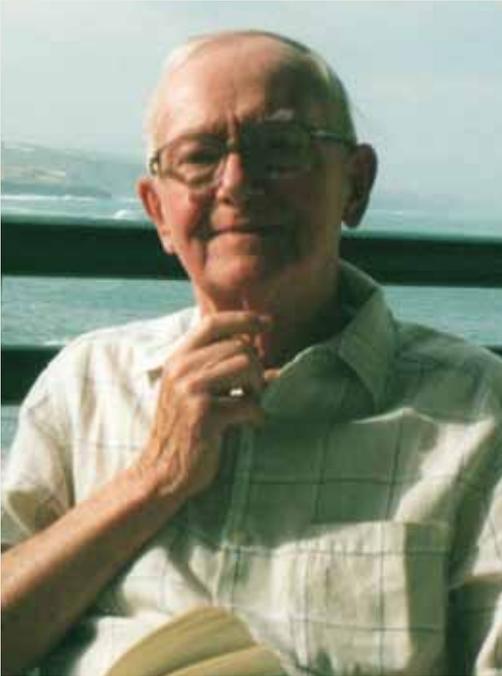
**Tom Mann (1856-1941),  
trade unionist and socialist**

Thomas Mann was born in Warwickshire on 15 April 1856. He began work at the age of 9. He had little schooling but he displayed a keen desire for knowledge and this led him to socialism and trade unionism. He served as General Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers 1919-21. Prison sentences for sedition did not stop him from going on speaking tours in support of striking workers, and in 1936 he addressed a rally of marchers in Trafalgar Square. In 1935 Tom and his wife Elsie moved into a newly-built semi-detached house at 29 Norfolk Crescent, Sidcup. With endless energy for campaigning, he travelled by ship to Russia even at the age of 80.



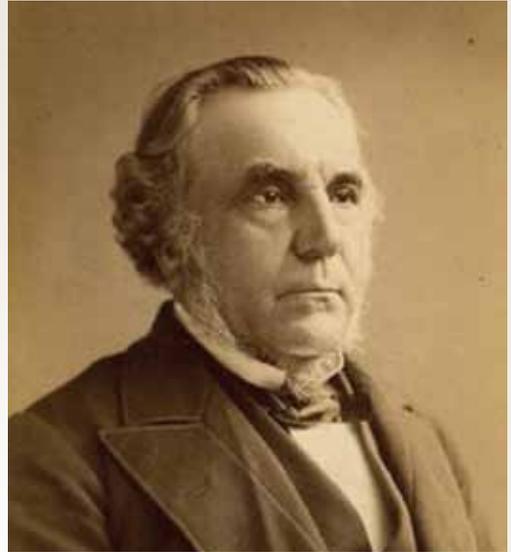
1. Norfolk Crescent, home of Tom Mann
2. Braundton Avenue, home of Doreen Bird
3. Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance at Lamorbey Park
4. Waring Park
5. Alma Road, home of Sidney Frank Godley
6. Bird College Conservatoire of Dance and Musical Theatre
7. Foots Cray Place, home of Sir John Pender and of 1st Baron Waring
8. Knoll Road, home of Douglas Macmillan
9. Frank Godley Court, Etfield Grove
10. Site of Sidcup Place, home of Dame Ethel Smyth
11. Church of St John the Evangelist
12. Queen Mary's Hospital, formerly The Queen's Hospital
13. Carlton Road, home of Henry Robertson 'Birdie' Bowers and of Elizabeth Wiskemann
14. Longlands Road, home of John Mercer





**John Mercer (1923-2015),**  
*Normandy veteran, local teacher and historian*

As a local historian, author and lecturer, John Mercer worked to make Sidcup a good place in which to live. A Normandy Veteran, he was awarded the Legion d'Honneur by the French Government. He taught at Hurstmere School and then became an education lecturer. He was Chairman of Bexley Civic Society and worked to preserve conservation areas including Danson House and Stables. He pursued the movement to erect plaques to famous local people of which there are two in Sidcup, and he wrote six books on local history. Latterly living in Longlands Road, he was a long-term member of Lamorbey & Sidcup Local History Society and Chairman of Sidcup U3A, he worked with Bexley Arts Council and was a school governor. He was a tour guide at Red House, Bexleyheath and served as a Lay Reader at St John the Evangelist, Sidcup for 32 years.



**Sir John Pender, GCMG (1816-1896),**  
*pioneer of undersea cabling*

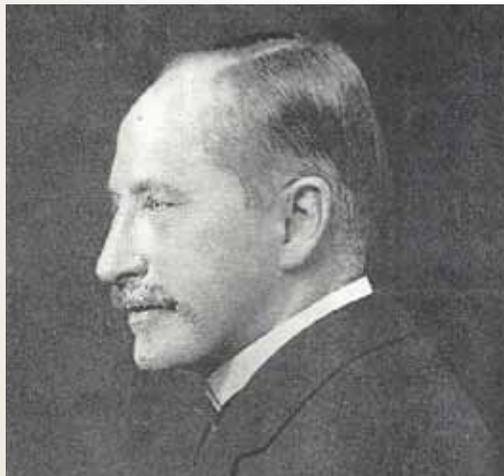
John Pender began his working life in the textile industry in Scotland, later moving to Manchester where he became an affluent merchant. Realising the potential benefits of improved communications with the USA, he invested a considerable amount of money in the Atlantic Telegraph Company in its attempt to lay a telegraph cable on the ocean floor. Finally a cable was laid in July 1866 allowing Queen Victoria and President Andrew Johnson to communicate. Over the next 15 years, Pender's companies laid cables which linked Britain to Australia, South Africa, China and South America.

Also serving as a Member of Parliament, John Pender lived from 1876 at Foots Cray Place and he was knighted in 1888. He is buried at All Saints Church, Foots Cray.

**Dame Ethel Smyth, DBE (1858-1944),**  
*composer and suffragette*

Ethel Mary Smyth came to Sidcup as a young child with her family, living at Sidcup Place which was a large house on the present site of St John's Road/Market Parade. Ethel fought for the opportunity to study music in Leipzig and became a highly acclaimed composer. In 1910, after meeting Emmeline Pankhurst, Ethel decided to devote two years to the cause of women's suffrage and she composed the rousing anthem, March of the Women. After smashing windows in the Colonial Office she was arrested and imprisoned.

In 1915 she volunteered as a radiographer at a military hospital. Despite increasing deafness, she continued to compose and wrote her memoirs, fondly describing her childhood home in Sidcup. She was created DBE in 1922.



**1st Baron Waring (1860-1940),  
industrialist, public servant and benefactor**

Samuel James Waring was born in Liverpool and inherited a furnishing company from his father. He was astute, hard-working and ambitious, and in 1903 the company merged with Gillow to become Waring and Gillow. He came to Sidcup in 1898 when he leased and

eventually bought Foots Cray Place. During the First World War many of his factories were turned over to the production of war materials. Waring was the Kent County Commissioner for Scouts and opened up the Foots Cray Place grounds to jamborees, one of which was attended by Baden-Powell, the Chief Scout. He donated the spire to All Saints Church and gifted part of his birch wood to the people of Sidcup, now known as Waring Park. In 1922 he was made 1st Baron Waring of Foots Cray.



Oxford University Press Archives

**Elizabeth Wiskemann (1899-1971),  
journalist and historian**

Elizabeth Wiskemann was born of Anglo-German parentage at 14 Carlton Road, Sidcup. She obtained a First in History at Newnham College, Cambridge and visited Berlin in 1930. Fascinated by German life, she began dividing her time between teaching history at Cambridge and her journalistic career. An ardent opponent of National Socialism, she wrote articles on German affairs for periodicals including the *New Statesman*. She was arrested by the Gestapo and expelled from Germany in 1936.

Wiskemann spent the Second World War in Switzerland, officially as the assistant press attaché to the British legation in Bern but in reality responsible for gathering non-military intelligence from inside Germany and the occupied territories. As an academic historian she wrote several books including a pioneering study of relations between Hitler and Mussolini, *The Rome-Berlin Axis* (1949).

## The Lamorbey and Sidcup district

In the mid-19th century Sidcup was just a small street of houses with a coaching inn, The Black Horse, surrounded by countryside and a few homes of the gentry. The first church, St John the Evangelist, was consecrated in 1844. It was the arrival of the railway in 1866 which changed the district's fortunes. Sidcup's situation, close to London, made it a popular choice for house-building. By 1914 the population was over 8,000 and there was an abundance of amenities, including a Public Hall, with a large number of good shops in the High Street. There were many local clubs and institutions such as the Sidcup Literary and Scientific Society, Sidcup Rifle Club, Sidcup Golf Club, Sidcup Horticultural Society and Sidcup Boy Scouts. The 1930s brought further housing development, especially in the Lamorbey area, and with it more shops, schools and leisure facilities.

### To find out more visit:

Lamorbey & Sidcup Local History Society: [www.lam-sid-lhs.co.uk](http://www.lam-sid-lhs.co.uk)

Bexley Local Studies and Archive Centre:

[www.bexley.gov.uk/services/archives-and-local-history](http://www.bexley.gov.uk/services/archives-and-local-history)

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View of Sidcup High Street c1910 (Bexley Archives)