

Account of Purley on Thames

Project Purley Meetings 1993

15th January 1993

On the 15th January, Ken Hussey came to talk about Mary Russell Mitford. Mary was born in 1787 in Arlesford, Hampshire. Her father, a drinker and gambler, frequently landed the family in financial difficulties and spent some time in prison as a consequence of this. While she was still under age Mary won £20,000 in a lottery and this, due to her age, was "entrusted" to her father. Before long, the money had all gone and the family was once again destitute.

Mary was educated in London at Hans Place, and from an early age showed an aptitude for writing. In 1810 a book of poems was published. Her best known work "Our Village" was first published in "The Lady's Magazine" in 1822. We followed Mary's life through the family's moves, fortune and misfortune. Her later years were spent in Three Mile Cross and Swallowfield. Her story was illustrated with a superb collection of photographs and unusual memorabilia.

19th February 1993

The Society enjoyed a visit from Mr A Higgott, Curator of the Newbury Museum. His subject, Berkshire before the Conquest, gave us an insight into the life of the nomadic tribes who knew our area long before recorded history. Their story is told in the stone implements and archaeological and anthropological findings which have been studied over the last 100 years. Around 11,000 B.C., before the English Channel was formed, primitive tribes came from Europe. In the Middle Stone Age the Kennet Valley was an important routeway and much evidence of this has been found in the Hungerford area. Mr Higgott brought us forward in time to the development of a well ordered society and a hierarchy capable of organising such monuments as Avebury and Stonehenge, which was built in phases. The items which illustrated Mr Higgott's talk were handled with great respect. There were flints and stones which had been beautifully fashioned and artifacts which had been designed with great intelligence. It was a thrill to hold the implements that had been made and used by our early forefathers.

19th March 1993

The Society Annual General Meeting was held and the election of the Committee for 1993/4 took place. Jean Debney gave an absorbing introduction to the "Manorial System" as it was in Purley. From the earliest record, in the survey of 1086, we followed the rise and fall of the three known Manors in Purley, which were Purley Magna, Purley Parva and La Hyde. A Manor was an estate with rights to hold Manor Courts which can provide much information about the Estate and the inhabitants. Jean recounted some fascinating details which helped us to imagine our historic village and its structure, as it was in the Middle Ages.

April 1993

The speaker was Joan Dils who gave a fascinating insight into life in Reading under the heading "Religion, Education and Leisure in Reading circa 1892". At that time there was a great deal of home grown entertainment, from Choral Societies to Sporting Societies. Each Sporting Society was associated with a Public House, where entertainments known as "Smokers" were put on. The Temperance Society flourished from about 1850. Hundreds of people flocked to the Temperance

Meetings. The Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Society attracted 400 men to a meeting in 1892. Here the motto was "Bright, Brief and Brotherly" There were nine board schools in Reading, most of these being in the Oxford Road area, and Oxford Road Girl's School was notable for the dedication of its Headmistress and the successful innovations for which she was responsible.

21st May 1993

Mr Kerr Kirkwood, who has made a study of farming in Berkshire during the last 100 years, was able to give his talk postponed from March. Drawing on his vast fund of knowledge gathered from many sources we learned how the squires and landlords, who were not good at farming, preferred to leave the running of the farms to their tenant farmers who were very successful. In this way the squires and landlords were enabled to continue to live their high lifestyle. We heard that Berkshire soil is not good for grain growing, so farmers raised cattle and sheep. By careful breeding a suitable breed of sheep was raised which flourished in this area. The sheep farmers were successful until the New Zealanders found a way of sending carcasses in refrigerated ships. Milk was profitable in the winter when it was supplied to London, but slumped in the summer because it had to be sent by rail and did not "keep". Mr Kirkwood paid tribute to the farmer's wife who was the kingpin on the farm. She was expected to run the home, feed the single male farm hands, make cheese and butter, look after the hens, give a hand at busy times and raise the children.

18th June 1993

The Society visit to Reading Museum was a great success and was very much enjoyed by the large party who attended. We were met by the Curator, John Rhodes, who conducted us to the Conference Room, formerly the Council Chamber. Mr Rhodes explained to us the progress made with the interior refurbishment, and what it is hoped to achieve as finances become available. The Museum of the future will be the Museum of Reading, and all the exhibits will have a connection with the history of Reading. We were shown the resplendent Georgian Room, the Concert Hall in its shrouds and awaiting revival and the magnificently displayed copy of the Bayeux Tapestry. Embroidered by a group of Victorian ladies from Leek in Staffordshire it is the only copy of the Bayeux Tapestry in the world. The Tapestry Room is due to be opened to the public in September.

16th July 1993

It poured and poured with rain all the morning and it was difficult to envisage the evening walkabout taking place. However, there was an improvement in the weather during the afternoon and in the evening a group of enthusiastic members gathered in Whitchurch to walk through the woods and onto the hill that overlooks Purley. The evening was warm and there was no rain, in fact we enjoyed a good deal of sunshine. We were accompanied, or rather guided, by a very friendly dog from one of the Hardwick Estate cottages. He obviously knew the route far better than we did. The woods were very peaceful and beautiful as the sun came slanting through the tall beeches. It was an easy walk and finally we broke out of the trees to the breathtaking sight of the whole of Purley and surrounding area spread out in panorama. Caught in the setting sun the scene was bathed in a golden glow, the ploughed fields dark and rich, the uncut hay intensifying the golden sun. We stood spellbound, and as if he too knew that it was something special, our new-found friend 'dog' sat and gazed at the spectacle with us. The air was full of the scent of wild thyme, and as we walked back along the footpath we surprised rabbits and birds and saw many wild flowers, including a field of poppies. Nearing the end of the path, his job done, 'dog' raced off home, and we carried home a lasting memory of our beautiful Thames Valley.

17th September 1993

The opening meeting of the Autumn programme, was a talk on the maps of Purley, given by our Chairman Cliff Debney. The difference between a plan and a map was explained at the outset; a plan is accurate and to scale - a map is a representation not necessarily accurate, particularly with maps

before the Ordnance Survey series. These early maps were often used as a base for added information and consequently perpetuated inaccuracies. The first Ordnance Survey maps were produced by the Army as part of their own equipment. We studied the Purley Tithe map of 1840 and from his large personal collection, Cliff showed us examples of all shapes, sizes and scale, from those surveyed at 2" to the mile in the early 1800's to modern times. Maps have many uses for the Local Historian. By careful examination and comparing one with another, changes in ownership can be traced, the reconstruction of field names, field patterns and strips can be followed. The evening was a treat for map enthusiasts and an opportunity to see many aspects of Purley in map form.

15th October 1993

The Society continued its varied programme with a very interesting talk with slides by Mr Tony Corley showing the growth of industry in Reading through the ages. When Henry I founded Reading Abbey, employment was given to the townsfolk. The Abbey was, in fact, the biggest employer of the Middle Ages in Reading. Until the end of the 17th century Reading was mainly a cloth town. This was followed by malting with the barley being brought in from the Berkshire uplands. Mr Corley then spoke about Huntley and Palmer, Simmonds, Suttons and Cocks. These businesses were the main employers in Reading in the 19th and early 20th century. To sum up, Mr Corley said that Reading was famous for its industry. The key to the towns' success was the excellent communications through the ages. Initially the Rivers Thames and Kennet, then the Kennet and Avon Canal and good access to the Oxford Canal and then latterly the railways. Reading was also on the main east-west road route and has always been a main stopping point for travellers.

November 12th 1993

November 12th saw the visit of Martin Parsons whose talk was titled "Local Historians, Education and the National Curriculum". Mr Parsons was a man of great personality and with a great enthusiasm for his subject. His opening remark, "History doesn't have to be boring" set the mood for his talk. He related the way in which he had worked with Primary School pupils at Pangbourne in a project concerning the coming of the railway to Pangbourne. The children were engaged in a hands-on experience using documents, maps and census returns. The young pupils became deeply involved in discussions concerning the repercussions of this event on the 19th century village. The finale to the project was an enactment of the announcement that the railway had been approved. Each child played the part of a Pangbourne resident shown in the census and feelings ran high when the decision was made known, each character reacting according to how the decision would affect their occupation and way of life. Mr Parsons' objective was to prove that even very young children can be enthused by history if they are introduced to the subject in an imaginative way.

3rd December 1993

The Christmas Social Evening was held at The Gatehouse. This was very much enjoyed by all who attended. The traditional mulled wine got the evening off to a good start and there was a variety of delicious home-made dishes for the buffet. Jean dipped into her games box and produced a selection of pre-war and early post-war games which provided much amusement and competition among the players.

