

Account of Purley on Thames

Project Purley Meetings 1996

19th January 1996

On January 19th an expectant group gathered at 8, Huckleberry Close to hear Member Ben Viljoen's talk on Humphry Repton - Landscape Gardener and Water Colourist. Humphry Repton came to the profession of landscape gardener mid-way through his life. After a number of failed attempts at a career, he decided to be a landscape gardener and notified his friends and acquaintances of this decision. He was in fact the first person to use the term "landscape gardener". He had a talent for water colour painting and applied himself to the study of architecture. At last he had found his niche in life and became very successful eventually following in the footsteps of the great Capability Brown. It was at this time that the Grand Tour of The Continent was the vogue and successful traders had money to spend. What better way to flaunt one's money and knowledge of the French and Italian styles than to surround oneself with a few well chosen Greek and Roman Gods, and maybe a miniature Pantheon. Repton is famed for the so-called Red Books which he prepared for prospective clients, setting forth in words and paintings his ideas for their requirements. He took into consideration the natural elements of the area, water, trees farm animals, and in Purley's case, the turnpike road. These were manipulated to provide what in Repton's view was the best possible vista for the client.

Anthony Morris Storer bought the Manor of Purley Magna around 1793 and wished to replace the old manor house with something more fitting and commissioned Humphry Repton to design a new mansion within a park. In the Purley Red Book we have a wonderful insight into what the original Manor House and environs of Purley Magna were like recorded by Humphry Repton in his water colour paintings. Storer and Repton disagreed on a site for the new mansion and the plans that Repton prepared were never completely carried out. Purley does have the distinction of being the place where Repton suddenly realised the importance of the direction of light to a scene, and he mentions this fact in his book "The Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening". He discovered what those of us who love the river and Purley know, that everything changes with the light and time of day. The talk was accompanied by some stunning slides. We are looking forward with keen anticipation to Ben Viljoen's next talk. [RD]

19th February 1996

On 19th February 1996 we were delighted to welcome Lock -keeper George Fielder for his third visit to Project Purley. Each of George's talks about the River Thames have had a different slant and each time he has brought slides which are new to us. George told us that his first employment was as an electrician's apprentice but his recreation was to go boating on The Thames. Aided and abetted by the Lock-keeper at Day's Lock where one of his boating trips foundered, he fell in love with the river. George was soon collecting postcards and memorabilia and finding out all he could about its history, eventually succumbing completely to the romance of the river and becoming a Lock-keeper himself. Since time immemorial the river has been influenced by the activities of man and used in many ways from a heavy goods highway to leisure pursuits. Many water mills were built to take advantage of the river flow to power the mills and for the easy access for transport. Millers gained a bad reputation for blocking and controlling the free access on the river, interfering with navigation and holding

landowners and bargemen to ransom. The millers became very prosperous and created the river as we know it today. [RD]

15th March 1996

The Annual General Meeting was held in the small hall of the Barn on Friday 15th March at 8 pm.

The indisposition of Jan Jones necessitated a change of venue from the Gatehouse and best wishes to Jan for a speedy recovery were expressed by members.

Due to family reasons the retiring chairman Pat Deane was unable to attend and the Chair was taken by Cliff Debney who was delighted to present the Chairman's report on her behalf, particularly as the meeting was the first public occasion to be held at the Barn. It had been an excellent year for the Society

15th March 1996 [R000856]

John Chapman's talk on "Ephemera" followed the Annual General Meeting held at The Barn on the 15th March. Ephemera can be anything from family photographs and memorabilia to bottles, bus tickets and stamps and almost anything that you care to think of, which was originally intended to be used and thrown away. John is an ephemera collector of the first order, and his collection is legendary. The "small" sample which he brought with him merely filled four or five tables. The tolerance of his wife Ann was acknowledged, and applauded by the members. The throw-away items that we use today can become rare tomorrow, and although of no particular financial value, they can have a potential value in recording the times and services of their era. The talk was delivered on a light hearted note but a serious point was made of what could in time, be of interest to the historian.

19th April 1996 [R000857]

On April 19th an enthusiastic group of members visited the Reading Museum of Rural Life. Mr Roy Brigden gave an introductory talk about the history and function of the museum. The expertise and store of artefacts is constantly being called upon by writers, film makers, educationalists and anyone who wishes their work to be authentic. The talk was followed by a visit behind the scenes into the museum store rooms. The members appreciated the privilege of being permitted to view the vast store of items from books, records and pictures, to the smallest utensils and workclothes of rural and farming life. We were all totally absorbed in everything we saw, and eager to make sure that everyone else had seen our own precious find. [RD]

17th May 1996

The 17th of May fell on a very cold and wintry evening but a large group gathered in Market Place, Reading, to meet Ken Major who was to be our walkabout guide. We soon forgot the cold and became fascinated with the architectural and historical knowledge that Mr Major had to tell us. The Simeon Memorial was drawn to our attention, a monument which is overshadowed by the clutter of modern day street signs and furniture, the designer, Sir John Soane, a son of Reading, unsung in his native town. There was a great deal to see and hear about within the Market Place, from the old timber framed medjaeval buildings to the modern ribbed concrete structures of the 1960s which are already deteriorating. Normal visits to the town are so fraught with the pressures of shopping, parking and parking fees running out, that it was a pleasure to be able to stand and stare and take note of what we usually hurry by without seeing. [RD]

21st June 1996

The visit to Englefield House on the 21st June had been keenly anticipated by everyone. We were very warmly welcomed by Sir William and Lady Benyon, but it was Sir William who conducted us around the house. The atmosphere was of a well loved family home and Sir William told us about his

ancestors and the contribution that they had made to the house and its contents with obvious pride. The evening ended with a walk around the garden. A delightful end to a memorable visit. [RD]

19th July 1996

The barbecue at The Mimosas on the 19th July was a great success. The evening was fine and warm and the meal was very appetising. The beautiful Purley views were a delight and the Company was stimulating. What more could one want! [RD]

20th September 1996

The Autumn programme commenced on September 20th with a popular subject and a popular speaker when our own Jean Debney gave a talk titled "The Storer Family". Jean has made a study of the family who were Lords of the Manor of Purley Magna from the late 1700s to the early 1900s, and has written a number of articles on the subject, for the Purley Parish Magazine. Jean explained the family tree from the mid 1700s, before they arrived on the Purley scene. The Storer family were a family with naval connections engaged in the British conquest of Jamaica and settling there. A judicious marriage was arranged which brought the Storer family favourable conditions to amass considerable plantation property and wealth. It was this wealth which financed the purchase of Purley Magna. The manor house of Purley Magna and its out buildings at that time were near the river. A new farmhouse called Belle Isle, after the name of the Jamaican Sugar Plantation, was built further up the hill and the large barn from the original site was transferred to the new farm. It was later decided to build a new mansion which we now know as Purley Park. The old manor house and its buildings were demolished. Jean has researched her material from a number of sources including Eton College Library, family papers made available by Mr Peter Downing Fullerton and the Repton Red Book. [RD]

18th October 1996 [R000862]

On October 18th an expectant group gathered to share an evening of memories of Purley. Joining us for the occasion were Miss Sybil Pryor and Mr Denys Hutchings. Also sharing his memories with us was member Bill Fisher. Some fascinating stories about their early days in Purley were recalled. From home made parsnip wine and tap dancing to rabbit hunting and carol singing, in the days when Purley was still a village and before the modern housing explosion. It was a nostalgic look back to the Purley that all of us wished we had known. [RD]

15th November 1996

The Story of Lady Frances Anne Hawes of Purley Hall, Later Viscountess Vane, was told on November 15th by member Ben Viljoen. As a background to the story we were shown a series of colour slides being a tour of the garden and grounds of Purley Hall as it is today. Francis Hawes started his working life in the Navy and in later life became a director of the South Sea Company. The Company was extremely successful and the list of subscribers included the King himself. In those days there were very few company controls or safeguards and corruption was rife. Francis Hawes made a small fortune for himself and was able to purchase Purley Hall. At this time his daughter Frances Anne was 5 years old and we imagined her walking in the gardens of the estate. However, as we know, the South Sea Bubble burst, and Francis Hawes was declared bankrupt. Eventually Frances Hawes' brother Thomas, purchased Purley Hall for £1080. Thomas always regarded the property as really belonging to his brother. Thereafter both brothers lived at the Hall. Frances Anne described herself at the age of thirteen, 'as remarkably tall for my years'. In that year she went to Bath where she was introduced to the world as a woman. Many proposals of marriage were made to her parents, but they came from people that Frances Anne did not like and she rejected them all being determined to refuse every man who did not make his addresses to herself in person because she had no notion of marrying for anything but love. When Frances Anne fell in love it was with Lord William Hamilton a young man who was not considered by her parents to be a suitable

match. She agreed to elope with Hamilton. The Gentleman's Magazine published an announcement of the marriage in May 1733. A stillborn child was born of this union and sadly in 1734 her husband died. She was left an unprovided widow with no home. In 1735 she embarked on a loveless marriage to Viscount Vane. It is from this point that the life of Frances Anne, now Viscountess Vane, started on the downward spiral.

In 1737 an advertisement appeared in the Daily Journal, enquiring of the whereabouts of Viscountess Vane. She had absconded from her husband. Circumstances became desperate and in 1743 she asked her father for a loan but was refused. Because of her loveless marriage, she resorted to making a living any way she could. A number of men shared her life and her bed but permanence and security eluded her. In 1751 the general advertiser carried an advertisement for a publication by Tobias Smollett titled *Peregrine Pickle* which was to contain the Memoirs of Frances Anne. When the book appeared it shocked fashionable society. She eventually returned to Viscount Vane and died in 1788.
[RD]

December 1996

Christmas party

