

2 Early Days

Speculation (to 1180)

When the church at Purley was founded is not known precisely. We know that it was described as 'ancient' in 1125 and recent excavations have uncovered a late Saxon or early Medieval burial ground beneath the new church hall. A number of graves were excavated, most of which exhibited the pillowing style of burial in which the head is pillowed by large flints. This was a practice which had virtually died out by the time the Normans came.

Originally it is supposed that Purley and surrounding parishes were served by priests based at the Minster Church of St Mary in the Butts in Reading, However according to its own historians St Mary in the Butts is believed to have been founded as late as 979 as a nunnery church and did not become a Minster until after it had been rebuilt following a Viking raid in 1004 when the nunnery church was burned to the ground. It is possible that there had been an earlier Minster in Reading or that Purley had been served by priests from the Minster at Sonning

The village of Purley was well established by the time the Domesday Survey was undertaken in 1085-86, although there is no mention of a church at Purley in the survey. This usually means that the church contributed no revenues to the king directly as these were paid by the lord of the manor, rather than providing evidence for no church. The parish system had been firmly established for two or three centuries before Domesday and it is most unlikely that there was no church presence in Purley in 1066. It seems likely therefore that the church in Purley was founded towards the end of the ninth century and the building would have been very small and probably of wattle and daub construction. One may further speculate that this church was burned



One of our Saxon parishioners - a 19 year old woman whose head was braced by two large flints. This was a Saxon practice known as pillowing which had pretty well died out by the 12th century [M00167]

down during the early part of the reign of Stephen when Queen Matilda was based at Wallingford and her troops were roaming the countryside ravaging and burning. At the time Reading and its Abbey were loyal to Stephen. In a book entitled 'A Legend of Reading Abbey', Charles MacFarlane gives a very graphic fictional account of how Purley, Tilehurst, Theale and other villages around were ravaged.

In the mid 12th century a stone church in the Norman style was built and there remain today the chancel arch from this church together with a font which is very distinctively decorated in a style which can be closely dated to around 1150. There are also two lancet windows from this period, one of which is blocked up now. It was around this time that dedications to the Virgin Mary became very fashionable and it would appear that at rebuilding the church was also rededicated.

It is likely we will never know when Purley acquired its first church buildings and its own parish priest. It seems to have been well before the founding of Reading Abbey in 1121 as one of the Abbey's founding revenues was the pension of 2s pa paid previously to St Mary le Butts. It was ordered to be paid to the Abbot of Reading by Henry I in 1125 when the church at Purley was described as 'ancient'. However around 1150 Bishop Jocelyn of Salisbury confirmed that this did not give the Abbot any rights over the church at Purley.

One of the surprising discoveries at the excavation in 1982 was the fact that most of the very early burials found on the north side were only a few inches below the surface. It was certainly not a Saxon custom to bury bodies so shallowly so the only real explanation is that when the church was rebuilt in the 12th century, a level platform was dug which sliced off the high points of the mound upon which the earlier church had been built



A portion of the arcade around the Norman font dated to about 1150. The crack has existed from well before the 1750s [M00506]



Part of the nail stud frieze around the base of the Norman arch. Not a lot of the original frieze survived as it was 'restored' when the arch was moved in 1870 [M00257]



A drawing of windows in the British Museum shows two Romanesque windows in Purley Church around the early 18th Century. They were virtually identical to this window from St Thomas' Church in Wareham, Dorset and were set in the north wall which was demolished in 1870

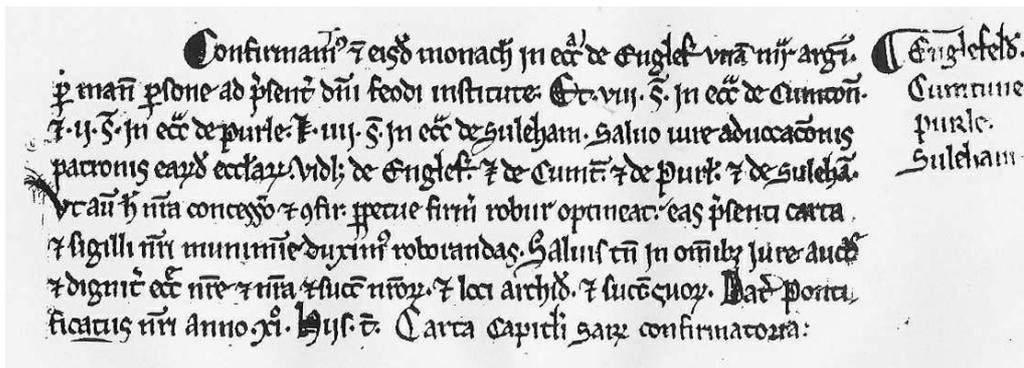
The Advowson of Purley

The Advowson, or right to Patronage was believed to have been held by the lords of the manor of Purley Magna until the mid 14th century. In 1291 all churches were assessed for what was known as Pope Nicholas' Taxation, the purpose of which was to raise money to boost the eighth crusade which was failing. At this assessment the church of Purley was assessed as being worth £4-6-8 and a tax of one tenth, ie 8s 8d was demanded for the next six years.

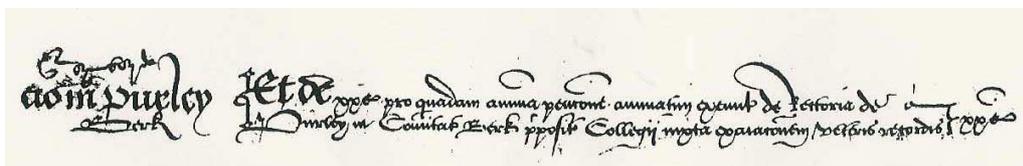
This assessment was used for many centuries as the basis for a variety of taxes and patrons took great care to ensure that any new buildings were classified as lay and hence not subject to a revised assessment. It would have been used as the basis of a levy of a farthing in the pound to support a teacher of Hebrew at Oxford University which had to be collected from all the parishes of Berkshire by the Archdeacon and delivered to the Prior of Holy Trinity, London by 7th July 1321. He raised £1-7-6 of which Purley's share would have been about a penny.

The advowson had fallen into the hands of the College of St Edmund in Salisbury by 1361. This followed a national trend as during this period the religious houses were active in acquiring assets. The king, the pope and the bishops were all attempting to extract revenues from ecclesiastical property owned by laymen and devised a remarkable array of taxes and impositions. It became relatively easy for a lay patron to get himself seriously in debt and redeem himself by passing over the asset to a religious foundation who were usually exempt.

The College of St Edmund had been founded in Salisbury in 1269 by Walter de la Wyle. It provided a centre for 12 priests and a number of lay brothers. It had been struggling along as a relatively impoverished foundation, not fulfilling its founder's objects. In 1309 only six priests were resident and when Bishop Robert Wyville held an enquiry in 1339 he reported that there had never been more than seven there since its foundation, and its revenues were barely enough even to provide for seven. From 1339 under its Prior, Peter de Wymbourne, the College embarked on a policy of acquiring additional revenues and by 1362 it had a full set of priests. Undoubtedly it was as a result of this policy that the advowson of Purley came into the College's hands. Its successive Priors made presentations to the vicarage of Purley for many years until the College was dissolved.



Confirmation by Bishop Poore of Salisbury (1241) that Purley is to pay the Abbot of Reading a pension of 2s, but that this does not include the advowson of Purley [M00259]



The sale of the assets of the College of St Edmund to William St Barbe in 1538 included the advowson of Purley and the pension of 20s paid previously to the Provost [M30455]

Henry VII raised considerable sums of money through both Parliament and the Convocation of Canterbury, mainly to finance his wars with France. The taxes were known as 'Benevolences' because they were intended to be paid only by the well off and Purley was exempted three times in 1487, 1491 and 1492 as being worth less than 12 Marks (£8). It was made to pay in 1489 when it was assessed for two payments of 3/4.

In 1534 King Henry VIII ordered a valuation of the assets of all religious houses and churches and the results were recorded in the 'Valor Ecclesiasticus' In it the living of Purley is recorded as being worth £12-17-3 ½d and paying pensions of two shillings to the Abbot of Reading and twenty shillings to the Prior of the College of St. Edmund.

In 1538 the advowson of Purley was bought by William St Barbe, a layman of the King's privy chamber. On the death of Provost John Gough in 1543 the office of Provost was given to William as well. Dissolution came in June 1546 when the Mayor of Salisbury and others took formal possession of the College and all its assets for the use of the King. Two months later William St Barbe purchased the College for £400 which he held until his death, whereupon it reverted to the Crown. Queen Mary in 1554 was the first monarch to exercise her patronage. It was transferred to the Lord Chancellor's department in 1822 for convenience, where it remains today.



One of the Saxon skulls showing the depth of burial. It looks like about four feet of soil has been scraped from the original surface and then the platform covered with about two feet of gravel to form a new platform for the Norman church. Amongst this gravel were found fragments of Roman tegulae which could indicate a much earlier building on the site.[M20163]