

Account of Purley on Thames

A Boy when the Century was Born

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F R Matthews of Sandhurst was the son of the Reverend John Dudley Matthews who became Rector of Purley in 1902. His reminiscences were published in the Berkshire Mercury 3rd Feb 1962

In 1900 or 1901 when I was 10, my father (who had been one of the early masters at Wellington College) resigned from the head-mastership of Leeds Grammar School and was appointed to the living of Purley - as great a contrast as one could imagine.

I still remember the arrival of three large furniture vans drawn by a noisy traction engine. I remember too, remarking as to Reading that horse trams were still running there: in Leeds the newfangled electric trams had taken the place of that most diabolical form of transport, the steam tram, towed by an engine which vomited smoke and sparks to the great inconvenience of passengers. Another thing I commented upon was that coal was delivered in sacks, contrasting with the farm carts that had brought our coal unsacked, and at 10s per ton!

We stayed first at Belsize Farm (later the Kennels). The parish population was about 300; there was no shop except the Post Office, where in addition to stamps one could buy sweets.

Almost next to the Kennels was the blacksmith's shop at the bottom of Long Lane, now gone forever, but in those days an important place as the carrier called there. There was no public transport, but for 6d one could get a seat on the carrier's cart and plod on to Reading's Forbury, where all the carrier's carts assembled, leaving at about 5 or 6 pm for the various villages round.

The carrier was a useful link between town and country and could be entrusted to buy small articles on one's behalf. It was an excitement to go to the blacksmith's shop at night to meet him, and, while waiting, to watch the smith at work.

Entertainment was practically non-existent, unless we made our own. I remember the tea given for the Coronation of Edward VII. Someone lent a phonograph (an instrument with a vast horn which played off wax cylinders); I was told to be very careful of it, but managed to drop box and all!

My chief delight as a boy was the annual change-over of the farm labourers; we children used to congregate in the street and wait for the arrival of the newcomers, who came in hay wains, the horses jingling with their brass-work and all the family belongings piled behind.

Sometimes life was enlivened by a route march of recruits or militia from Reading depot, the men wore scarlet tunics and with the band made a pretty sight.

I remember the first tarmac being laid on the Oxford Road. Motors were few and far between, and before the tarmac came the dust was remarkable; I have seen a trail of dust almost from the Roebuck to the Pulsometer works! Incidentally there was no house between those points except a small cottage by the entrance to Tilehurst Station.

This cottage was called The North Star, and had been a place of refreshment for the navvies building the railway. An old marine named Burgess lived there; he was a regular attendant at Purley Church, and always came in a top hat and carrying both umbrella and walking stick.

The village was dominated by Major Storer, who lived at the Park. A regular martinet, the major

spent most of his time spying for people landing on the bank from the river. He was only about five feet tall; on one occasion he saw a boat tied to his sacred bank and dashed down to turn it away - it was occupied by the late Canon Coleridge, of Crowthorne, over 18 stone and about six feet high, yet the Major threatened to throw him into the water!

Another time he saw some ladies picknicking in the park, and, refusing to listen to them, took the tablecloth by the corners with all the crockery and cutlery and hurled it into the Thames. Afterwards one of the ladies said: "Please thank Mrs Storer for inviting us to come here and for lending us all the things you have thrown into the river!"

One great thrill was in August of 1914, when the H.A.C. en route to training camp near Streatley, halted for lunch. It was a wonderfully fine day, and we entertained the officers to an open-air lunch in the garden. A few days later the first world war broke out: most of them lost their lives.