

Account of Purley on Thames

Pottering and Pondering by Fred Rawlins

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First Impressions

It was on a damp dismal late December afternoon that my parents announced - "We are moving this weekend". Gloom! We were leaving a small adjoining parish to go to a larger one (up over the hill), a massive place that stretched from Pangbourne to Reading, and nearly as wide

Daybreak on Saturday morning, and out on our bikes to explore some of this untrod territory, with instructions from Pa to find out where the Church was - "just across touthter side of main road somewhere".

Down a long elm lined lane to the main road, a ten minute break, peering through cobwebbed windows of a quaint old village forge; not in use, but a sign in the window "Saws set and sharpened - 6d". On down the hill to the quiet old village below, with its school set back in grass playground, a ditch running down one side with little bridges crossing to the cottage gates. On past the village pond opposite the farm (now Farm Close), through a tall wrought iron gate, down the tee lined walk to the Church at the end, with a notice pinned to gate - "Owing to floods services will be held in the school until further notice". From the farm to the Church we rode in 6" of water, the river being in full flood at the time.

During this our first visit to Purley, we had seen only one person, a round faced teenager with a fringe peering out of the curtains at the bottom of the hill, someone I was going to see a lot more of in my later life in Purley.

Exploring the rest of the parish we found it consisted of 57 dwellings and nearly 200 people. The Village School consisted of one teacher and eleven children, the older ones going to Pangbourne by Carrier's wagon. But we began feeling at home. The teacher, I do not need to mention her name as most people of Purley know or know of her, taught me years before at the finishing Academy of Pangbourne Elementary School. Before I had lived here a few weeks I had made friends with many people from 9 - 90 with many tales to tell, some of which I will endeavour to re-tell as all of them concern People of Purley, all of them worthy Purley People.

Formerly R000049

The Old Rectory

Standing back of the road in the village was a large old house - "The Old Rectory" - dwarfed by a majestic cedar, also chestnut trees. How many local lads wenr scrumping those nuts, and how many of us still remember the call from the frontbporch "Boys, boys bob up and let us know who you are" Being locals we were always allowed to carry on scrumping.

At Easter the Sunday School choir were always invited to the Old Rectory after Matins to "Hunt the Egg" Easter eggs having previously been hidden by the family in the gardens and grounds, but how the gardener must have dreaded that Easter rampage.

Alas the bulldozers of progress came - The Old Rectory died overnight. But did it? I am sure it still lives in a smaller size nearby.

Formerly R00050

Purley Park

Hidden in the trees, between the railway and the main road, there stands a large mansion - "Purley Park" - built by Wyatt in 1795 for Antony Morris Storer. His great-nephew, old Storer the Squire, ruled his domain with a rod of iron.

From Home Farm (then part of the estate) the milk was carried in two large buckets on yokes up to the Park (were these carriers the local yokels?)

The Old Squire could be seen about the grounds, always carrying his walking stick, on which was a "paddle" (a narrow hoe), chopping and stabbing at any weed he could see. That stick was ever ready for anyone stepping out of place; he even carried it to church on Sunday.

Christmas time, all the locals (all were employed by the Squire) would parade at the Park for P.D. (what this stood for I have never found out) but after much curtseying and tugging of forelocks they were issued with blankets, Christmas pudding and other fare.

The grounds in springtime were a balze of colour, primrose banks, daffodil dells, snowdrop walk - they were all there.

On Good Friday (and no when else) the locals were allowed in the grounds to gather flowers etc. for the Easter decorations in the church, and Heaven help anyone caught in the grounds at any other times. It must have been the last Feudal stronghold in Berkshire.

In later years, when owned by the Farmiloe family, things were a little different.

Two village lads upon hearing that "they were away up the Park" decided to go "Pot hunting". Going up the back drive (now Hazel Road) they set their nets, popped in their ferrets and within minutes, six lovely dinners were on the grass beside them. - when a voice said "Ho! Ho! the cat's away" It was the local "Bobby" who, telling us to clear off, took the rabbits as evidence.

We heard no more about it - I wonder what happened to the evidence!

Formerly R000051

The Post Office

In the late 1920s following a deep snow and rapid thaw, the Thames, Pang and other local rivers broke their banks; the water was over a mile wide. "Locky Baldwin", a much feared lock keeper of the day, vame across the fields in his boat and tied up at the pillar box in the wall (still in use today) in the village while he went up to the Post Office on the main road where "Auntie Amy" a Purley character, served her stamps, Postal Orders and Pensions. How we enjoyed those sherbet dabs, liquorice laces etc. while she dispensed with her other goods, tea sugar, corned beef and those great 1d Monster Minerals she would bring up from the cellar below.

Formerly R000052

The Pot Hunters

During this flood time, rabbits by the hundred were forced up into the trees for safety. In the village a great commotion was going on. Old Mrs ? was frantically banging two tin trays together warning her sons who were down towards the river in a boat getting a dinner". That Old ? the local farmer, was after them - by the time he had travelled round in his old Model T they were in safe home and later, with a poker face, she would tell that farmer "Then boys bin home all day, Sir". Evidently getting a dinner was quite a past-time as years later, when I was beating on a local shoot, the Keeper, on hearing I came from Purley remarked - "Oh another Purley pot Hunter!". How true that statement

was.

formerly R000053

The Great Purley Run-away

Wandering down the village one day we had to take to the ditch. Careering down the road, reins trailing, tail board dragging and mangolds scattering over the road, came Violet, a large dapple grey cart horse, who, deciding she had had enough for one day, had bolted for home. It was then that an old Purley Resident told me of the "Great Purley Run-away".

A lifetime resident, staunch Church supporter, respected by all had passed on. The time for the Funeral Cortège to pass was nigh, the village people, women with clean white aprons, bare headed men, waited to pay their last respects. The horse drawn waggon was crossing the bridge on the hill when underneath a steam train roared.

Full steam ahead those horses came and did not stop until they came to the closed gates at the Church. One of the "white aprons" was heard to say "That's the fastest the old B... has ever travelled in his life". There is a memorial to this oild gent in the Churchyard. It is a shed, first used as a builders' shed when the local school was built, which he dismantled and rebuilt as a fuel store shed still in use today (the metal roof was added in the early 1920s)

formerly R000054

The Cat in the Pond

Another character of Purley was a large buxom woman who always wore a large black hat (some said it must have grown on her, she never had it off). She was the proud owner of a large tabby cat (warrior more than cat)

One day "Thomas" went missing and after much seeking, she decided "It was them boys with their catts" - to make matters worse, a few days later she received a drawing through her front door of a cat in a sack, sinking in the village pond. The good lady called the Police, the locals dragged the pond; never had Purley known such fiendish goings on. About a fortnight later Thomas returned none the worse for his amorous rambles.

formerly R000055

The Old Gent

Any evening wet or fine, summer or winter, on the road from the village to the "Duck", could be seen or heard "The Old Gent" - white haired and whiskered, bag in one hand, stick in the other with Trilby hat firmly on head, tapping his way to his favourite pint. Eight minutes to nine that tapping could be heard heading for home the 9 o'clock news on the radio. Locals set their clocks by him, some even their courting.

One night, "that round faced girl with the fringe" was a wee bit late and to get home first, went sailing down the hill on her cycle (no lights). Hitting a stone, her bell tinkled, "The Old Gent" stepped sideways. Bag beer, bike, spread over the road. Collecting herself, she made for home, to hear a few minutes later - "some mad young b.... on a bike cut me over the hill and broke me beer!"

formerly R000056

The Milkman

Jogging gently round the village with his pony and cart, complete with milk churn, cans etc was Joe the milkman doing his twice daily rounds. wet or fine, always a smile and a cheery word - how was it that when anyone was ill, hard up, or had a large family, Joe with a quick dip of two of two of his half-pint measures, could make a pint nearly fill a quart jug? and how many Purley People have a lot to thank those like Joe and his busy wife for. were they the bad old days?

Formerly R000057

The Church (as it was)

Set in the middle of woods at the end of the Church Walk was St Mary's Church where, on a moonlight night amidst the hoot of owls, the wind would blow the trees, casting ghostly shadows amongst gravestones.

Dimly lit by oil lamps, hanging from its lofty roof, and heated by a firebox to stoke which you had to lift gratings in the main aisle, the smoke and fire passed through a long flue to the chimney in the vestry, the heat rising through the gratings to warm the church, also there was a small stove in the vestry - a stop go - sometimes it would, other times no.

During the early 1930s (there being no sexton) a young choir boy was encouraged, press ganged, cajoled (take your pick) to fill in for the time being, whereupon the oldest resident at the time was only too eager to warn him of "Old Storer", the Squire of bygone days who still walked the Church on a full moon.

This same lad, stoking the fires late one night, stood at the Altar steps waiting for "stop-go" to make up its mind, when behind him he heard - clomp! clomp! - he froze to the spot for what seemed a lifetime.

Plucking up courage, he looked over his shoulder to see before him down the aisle, not "Old Storer", but the gratings, rocking in the heat as it rose from below. He covered the mile home as fast as Roger Bannister could today.

After Evensong one winter night, all had gone home, except a few Choir boys and girls. The last oil lamp by the Font alight, all were in the porch except that sexton lad, who reached up, doused the light and then crept forward to the main door and stood quite still. After being called a few times, a hand came across to the handle which he grabbed. With a shriek and a swirl of skirts, that round face with a fringe was gone like a scalded cat. "We never did say goodnight that evening".

Late on a cold winter's night, after an evening out and taking rather longer to say goodnight to that round faced girl with the fringe, the sexton lad returned to the Church to stoke up for the night (making a mental note to collect a dinner from a snare he had seen a furtive figure setting in the meadow). Entering the church in the dark, and walking to below the lamp by the Font, he prepared to strike a light when a voice at his side said "S'all right, s'only me", whereupon he dropped his matches to the floor in fright. Not another word or movement. Collecting his matches and striking a light, he saw in the pew beside him a female "Gentleman of the Road", Not necessarily a Purley resident, but one that he got to know quite well during her visits in the following years.

formerly R000058

Well Cottages

On the main road (now the entrance to "Nursery Gardens") there stood "Well Cottages", a pair of small tiled roofed, one up and one down, with lean to kitchens attached. The well in front, with its decaying lid and wobbly windlass, being the water supply for the cottages - 110 feet to the water and every drop wound up in a four gallon bucket.

In one of these cottages lived Joe the milkman, the other being occupied by a Mr Winkfield and his wife, known to all as "Winky and Liz".

Outside their door was a bench where, summer or winter, passers by would see in the early mornings, Winky dipping his bowl in the rainwater butt for his out of doors wash and brush up.

All his daylight hours, evenings and weekends, Winky seemed to spend in his garden alongside the road, having a tell" with all who passed by - and what stories he could tell.

Liz was a dear old soul, always ready to help, always busy. I think Liz and her mother, known to all in the village as "Granny Rogers" (she lived in a thatched cottage that was opposite the letter box in the village) were the original Purley washing machines always on the go, "doing" for someone or other. When Joe the milkman moved to his present house, he "put in a word" for that girl with a fringe and her Purley lad, enabling them to become neighbours to two of the best - Winky and Busy Liz.

Formerly R000059