

Account of Purley on Thames

The Growing Pains of a Split-level Village

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by Don Desborough

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Introduction

"Purley might well be thought to lie outside the strife of the wicked world. The lea, down which the village lies, is so secluded that none, other than those who live here, or have business in the place, ever come into it."

These words were written of Purley Village by a travel writer back in 1910, in the days before Purley became the split-level community that it is today, cut into two halves by the railway line and the A329 Reading-Oxford road.

But to what extent, one wonders, does this comment still hold true? Is Purley Village still divorced from the hustle of late twentieth century Berkshire life? And what of those living on the newer housing developments south of the main road - to what extent have they been integrated into the Purley Village community? The original part of the village nestles within a curve in the River Thames opposite Mapledurham House and Lock.

At the turn of the present century the parish of Purley comprised only 874 acres, mostly under the plough and reflecting the size of a rural community that for centuries had probably rarely risen above 200 souls. The Census figure for 1801 was 153, that for 1901 - 180. By 1981, however, that figure had risen to in excess of 4,000 and there is little doubting that the outcome of this year's Census will reveal that Purley has continued to grow at a substantial rate.

Purley La Hyde

There was, of course, another Great Survey of the Realm undertaken 900 years ago. At the time of the 1086 Domesday Inquiry that was undertaken in the wake of the Norman Conquest, Purley comprised three separate manors, La Hyde, or Hyde Hall, the present day Purley Hall lay to the SE of the parish and was held by a tenant of Milo Crispin, one of the leading Norman benefactors of the Conquest.

The present house, built by the Hyde family, dates from the very early seventeenth century. It subsequently passed to Francis Hawes, one of the principal victims of the infamous "South Sea Bubble" scandal that broke in 1720 before passing in turn to the Wilder family. Warren Hastings is reputed to have stayed in the house during the period of his impeachment for maladministration in India while serving there as governor-general.

Bernard Theobald

The manor of Purley Parva or Lesser Purley, lay to the west of the village in the direction of Pangbourne. In 1086 it was held, interestingly, by one Theodoric the Goldsmith who held the manor from the king for a rent of 20s a year. The site is occupied today by Westbury Farm. When Bernard

Theobald took it over after the last war it was as a mixed dairy concern, and, indeed, it proceeded to thrive as such under his management.

Eventually, however, Bernard came to the conclusion that there ought to be more to life than starting each day at 4.30 am to run a dairy herd that was proving to be increasingly less profitable. The result - a vineyard. Today the Westbury Farm has over 16 acres planted to vine and a reputation as one of the pre-eminent English winerys. both white and red wines are produced, with an annual production normally in the region of 40,000 bottles, although past bumper crops have resulted in quantities up to 100,000 bottles

Mr Theobald, an imposing, larger than life character, immediately made a point that is very important to him. "Lets get this clear from the outset" he said firmly "We produce here quality English wines - that is, wines fermented from home grown grapes. The ghastly British wines that one sees on shelves is a different beast altogether. That stuff is fermented from grape concentrates imported from the continent and elsewhere. There is a legal distinction between the two products quite apart from the vast difference in quality. The British stuff, unfortunately, has tended to tar the quality English wines with the same brush, though thank God, that is now coming to rights"

Bernard is clearly a man with a sense of mission. He speaks confidently of the future of English wines, placing them in the context of the country's viticultural heritage. "Look" he commented, "ever since the Romans introduced the vine 2000 years ago we have produced wines the equal of anywhere in the world. When Henry VIII closed down the monasteries in the sixteenth century, however, the vintner's art basically went with them, and ever since, for no sound reason, people have said Oh, you cannot produce decent wines in England! That is absolute nonsense. we have the perfect climate for vines - temperate.

The continent suffers from excesses of either heat or cold and have adapted to it. Failures in this country in the past have been because vintners have tried to adopt the French or German methods but it wasn't necessary. "Our conditions are better than theirs, and now that we have adopted the appropriate methods I can see no reason why English wines should not soon be nudging shoulders with the best that the continentals or anybody else can produce. Remember, we've only been in production here for 16 years. We are still learning and the vines will improve with age. The future looks very healthy indeed."

In addition to the vineyard the farm also has two lakes offering splendid still water trout fishing on what Bernard calls a "put and take" basis. "I put them in and the fishermen take them out" he explained with a huge grin. Westbury trout can be enjoyed by visiting parties who are welcomed for tours of the vineyard, lectures and wine tastings in the farm's handsome Tudor barn.

Bernard Theobald has helped resurrect on his farm a venerable English and, indeed local tradition. The Abbots of Reading, for example, had extensive vineyards along the Thames valley. Should English wines achieve the heights Bernard predicts then there is little doubt that Purley's Westbury Farm will be at the forefront of the breakthrough.

Bill Northmoor

The third Purley manor house, Purley Magna, originally lay next to the parish church of St Mary at the eastern end of the village. It was held in 1086 by one Roger fitzSeifreid, and later became part of the extensive honour of Wallingford. The proximity of manor house and parish church was typical, given that the majority of local churches were originally built by local lords primarily for their own use.

By the end of the eighteenth century the manor was in the possession of the Storer family, reputed to have made their fortune in the slave trade. In 1793 they had the old manor house pulled down and built a fine new residence in the classical style, the delightful Purley Park, on higher ground.

Subsequently the estate was split into three sections and sold off.

In 1948 that part which included the house was purchased by Colonel Duncan and Major Parry to set up a home for life for backward boys. Of course, boys do not remain so for very long and the home eventually developed into a registered charity, Purley Park Trust, licenced by Berkshire County Council to care for 50 adult residents. At the present time five ladies are part of the Purley Park community.

Bill Northmoor has run the home for several years now, and he speaks with pride of the work being done there. "we have a lovely group with us at present. Of course they all have their individual problems, but we are here to care for them and help them express themselves as much as they are able. "Essentially they come here for life, so far as that is possible, so they get a sense of security and belonging, which is very important."

Bill explained that unlike residents of some institutions, those at Purley Park are permanently handicapped, hence the need for life-long care. "Some of them live as a family unit in groups of four or five in our four outlying houses in the grounds. In the longer term we aim to obtain a house in the community, in line with the wishes of the County Council, but that would not be a feasible option for all our patients." The cost of running Purley Park grows annually and the Trust relies heavily on charitable donations and the work of its small League of Friends to survive and keep going.

"Quite properly the house was declared a listed building in the 1980s, but that has added to the expenses of maintaining it." Bill added. "Also sadly our residents' average age is increasing all the time. Several have developed Alzheimers Disease and that calls for extra vigilance from our small staff on a 24-hour basis.

The Rector

Down the hill from Purley Park is St Mary's Church which once lay under the shadow of the original manor house. The church gained a new rector when the Reverend Richard Howell took over the parish on May 1st this year.

"My family and I moved from a parish in Aylesbury" he commented "It was quite different in Purley. This parish, for example, is about half the size with half the congregation, so it has taken a while to get accustomed to the way things are done here and to settle in. But we are gradually getting ourselves straight. I have a super team of helpers and they have made things a great deal easier for me.

The church, once set in the parklands of Purley Magna, used to be rather cut off from the village community it served, although it is now surrounded by modern housing. It was extensively restored in the last century and has since been extended, but the church still retains its early twelfth century chancel arch and seventeenth century tower.

As is sadly the case with so many churches today, it is felt necessary to lock up St Mary's when it is unattended, which has the unfortunate consequence of keeping out genuine visitors as well as would-be vandals.

Changing Times

A resident of Nursery Gardens, who preferred to remain anonymous, has lived in Purley Village for 20 years and felt compelled to comment on the situation. "Its a vicious circle really. One of the tragedies of today is the way that so many young people reject the Church and its work. Perhaps the church does have a lot to answer for in regard of that, but the fact remains that it can provide the sheet anchor that so many of today's youth lack. In one sense the locking of the parish church symbolises the problem and its consequence"

His own house was part of the early phase of the housing development that has been the most marked feature of Purley since the War. "A fair bit of Purley when we moved in was still a sort of shanty town, temporary housing, holiday chalets and the like that had been used for evacuees during the War. Gradually people bought the plots and rebuilt on them. That's why there are so many individual styles down in the bottom part of the village, but you can still see some of the chalets tucked in between the houses.

He was of the firm opinion that present day Purley had lost most of whatever community spirit it once had, the result of too much development, especially across the Oxford Road, and the influx of what he termed a "transit community". "On the other hand, a lot of people, and I'm in no sense criticizing them, have to commute to work. - so the village can be very quite during the day. And on the other hand many residents probably don't intend settling here permanently; it's more of a stop gap until they move on to a bigger, perhaps no-estate home.

And the Estates across the A329 are really a separate village altogether, there is very little sense of community between the two halves as far as I can judge"

Ron Jenkins

Ron and Charlotte Jenkins run the Purley Rise Stores and Post Office on the Oxford road. They bought the shop six years ago and moved in from Dunstable. "I was an engineer and travelled a lot, so I knew the area. In fact we both loved it out this way, so when we saw the shop advertised we made up our minds and jumped in feet first" Ron explained.

He feels the area has changed considerably even in the six years that he and his family have had the shop. He is amazed that developers continue to build even more houses which are not selling. "There was a medium sized building company, Trenthams, opposite us when we moved in. But the recession caught them out and they went bust. What has happened? Another developer bought their site and built the Crown Green development over there. Over on Knowsley Road, that is Purley, I know, but in a funny way it isn't really. Its sort of separate.

He is very angry about the new Business Rate that has hit small traders especially hard. "Our tax liability doubled overnight, what with the new rate and the Poll Tax, and I know others who have been hit much harder than that. We are only just surviving. Local trade just cannot support it. It is killing off small shops like ours. If we didn't have the Post Office here we would have gone under by now.

Ron's other main criticism concerns the lack of any public houses in Purley. He himself has tried to obtain an off-sales licence but with little success. His own belief is that there is an old Quaker covenant on part of the village that has kept it 'dry'. Most people I know would love to have a pub in the village, and I'm always being moaned at to get an off-sales licence. I have to tell them it isn't because I don't want one!"

Jean Debney

Jean Debney lives in Huckleberry Close with husband Cliff. They are both keen historians closely involved with a long term local history undertaking, Project Purley. Jean was able to shed a little light on Ron's statement about the Quaker covenant. "It still hasn't been established whether the rumours about the covenant have any foundation in fact" she observed "Purley certainly had an ale house in the 1700s called The Red Lion, though why it disappeared is unclear. It was on the Oxford Road. And in the last century a local grocer, William Pocock, for years had a licence to sell table beer as it was called. More recently another Oxford Road site was owned by a brewery and was earmarked for development as a public house, but the plans never got any further."

Jean also commented on the Crown green development on the former Trentham site. "The developers had to build around the pre-existing village bowling green, so they decided to make a feature of

it. I believe it has preservation order on it of some kind. Similarly there is a beautiful old barn on the site that is also listed. The plan is to move the whole thing, lock, stock and barrel into the field next to the Sports and Social Club off Beech Road, but there are problems over the Trentham's bankruptcy, and the best laid plans of mice and men"

The Heslops

Originally the village of Purley comprised little save Purley Street, a beautiful quarter-mile long lane lined with delightful cottages and the village Primary School. At its western end is Purley Lodge, an imposing eighteenth century house built by a Dutch businessman, George Liebenrood. The house has since been divided and part of the gardens built on.

Mr & Mrs Heslop have lived at Thornwood, a 25-year old bungalow just off Purley Steet, for five years now. At the bottom of their garden is part of the Lodge's original eighteenth century stone wall. Retirement brought with it an inclination to move out of Surrey, as Mr Heslop explained. "We wanted to move out to Oxfordshire but had no really fixed idea of where precisely. We sought over a pretty wide area and fortuitously found Purley and this house. We are very happy and I can see no reason why we should ever want to move away from here"

The Heslops are relative newcomers to Purley, and although he has seen building take place elsewhere in the village Mr Heslop feels that little has changed in nearby Purley Street itself. "We are off the main traffic route here, and we get little other than local traffic save a few cars seeking access to the River", he commented.

Peggy Tuchet-Jesson

A few yards from Thornwood in Purley Street proper is the enchanting Jasmine Cotage, a Cromwellian timber framed house dating back to the 1640s and now divided into two separate dwellings. It has recently been listed and now sports an impressive plaque noting its historical and architectural importance.

Peggy Tuchet-Jesson has lived in Purley since 1952, in Jasmine since 1963. She speaks with great pride of her home with its massive chimneys, underground tunnel reached through a trap door in what is now the dining room, and the first floor priest hole. A Catholic link with Mapledurham House across the Thames immediately springs to mind, and the Hyde family of Purley Hall was also persecuted for its Catholic beliefs in the seventeenth century.

Peggy also has some strong views about the changing face of Purley. "We moved out to Purley from Streatham after the war, partly because the streets of London were increasingly unsafe to walk at night. God knows what it is like there now. Purley was a different world, really.

There was the river estate and Purley Street and little else besides. Look at it now - houses everywhere they can squeeze them in. And across the main road, well, I don't even know my way around there. I know people need homes, but there must be a limit to all things, mustn't there?" Peggy also bemoaned the fate of the delightful little cottages that used to face her across the street. "They were lovely places, nothing wrong with them, they even had bathrooms! Then in the early seventies they were pulled down to make way for the modern houses there now. Why can't people leave things alone?"

Peggy moved into Jasmine to look after an elderly relative, a former JP and retired rubber planter from Malaya. "Thank goodness he didn't live to see what has gone on here, he would have caused a heck of a fuss. I've no doubt those new houses opposite wouldn't be there today!" Peggy smiled, showing a photograph of Purley Street as it was in the 1950s.

Finale

Purley village, it would appear, no longer lies "outside the strife of the wicked world" and yet it has perhaps suffered rather less than other Thames Valley villages in this regard. The A329 is regularly clogged with traffic, but that is separated from most of the old village by the railway line, although even that gap has long since been infilled with housing.

And although we have here only a few sample comments to judge by, the housing development south of the Oxford Road is clearly regarded by some as an almost separate community. Perhaps having its very own public house, a natural meeting place, would serve Purley well in this regard?

Postscript

The article repeated several 'fables' about the village and gave quite a wrong impression in many ways. What was said about Trenthams was particularly misguided and Peter Trentham was moved to respond in a letter the next week.

I read with great interest Don Desborough's Purley article. October 25, and wish to put the record straight as far as Trenthams the building company is concerned. For many reasons, particularly that of our size, we agreed a "friendly" take over by Egerton Trust plc in 1987. Since that date Trentham continued successfully in business although on a smaller scale.

It was Egerton Trust plc that went into liquidation in 1991 bring down several companies here and in America; one of these being G Percy Trentham. The company name does continue to trade but now as part of The Beazer Group. For the record Trentham did not go bankrupt.

One other minor point - the Bowling Green was not a pre-existing village green. This was, during the "good old days", the number two green in Berkshire - it is now a tragedy to see it enveloped in "little boxes".

P J TRENTHAM

Stanford Dingley

