

Account of Purley on Thames

Rides and Rambles around Reading

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This article was published as no 5 in a series by 'Viator' in an as yet unidentified local newspaper. The cutting was found in the Reading Reference Library in part of the collection by Mary Outen (ref B/D). Only the first part referring to Purley and Pangbourne is reproduced. (formerly R000068) From the references to the renovation of Pangbourne Church we may date it to between March 1865 and June 1866.

PURLEY, PANGBOURNE, WHITCHURCH, MAPLEDURHAM and CAVERSHAM

This ride will not be easily matched, either in picturesque beauty or in historical associations; its total length may be about 16 miles, but such a 16 miles as will challenge any other district in the vicinity of Reading. I have often thought, Mr Editor, that if there be a spot in which total abstraction from the world may be obtained, it is in a village church, on some week day; it is true that the door is generally locked, from the impression that the good people only expect ingress once a week, and never think of stepping aside out of the daily routine, for a brief application of a waste five minutes to a higher purpose.

Perhaps if daily access were afforded it might lead to better results. But my remark was, that the Village Church when left to its solitude and unbroken silence, when environed with the soft green shadow of stately elms or limes is of all places the most conducive to contemplation, as Cowper says, "Meditation here may think down hours to moments"

If this be so, how strictly is it illustrated in the case of "Purley Church", for I may further observe that there is a portion of residents of the neighbourhood who have never even seen it! When Mr. James Thorne took his "Ramble up the River Thames" he investigated Purley, which he calls "a pretty little rustic village" and he surveyed "Purley House" and he looked at "Purley Hall" and at the old mill opposite, at Mapledurham, but he did not find Purley Church, about 50 yards from the banks of the said Thames! This is not surprising, for one would suppose that the pious founders of the building had studied to conceal their own production. In a quiet corner of the Purley Manor House Park, buried in a luxuriant mass of elms and chestnuts, rises the brick tower; the nave canopied with the drooping branches, and the south front closed in with beech and poplars: the whole forms a picture in which solemn repose and quietude are in their fullest force.

The Tower bears the date of 1626, and this leads the visitor to fall back on historical recollections. What in the year 1626 was going on outside the leafy barriers of this consecrated spot? What agitated Old England then? certainly not a Reform Bill; perhaps it would have been better if it had - taking the word in its moral bearing. The Year 1626 was the year of the accession of Charles I to his throne and to all his Regal cares: the year of his coronation, when Arundell, the Lord Marshall, bade the people cry "God save King Charles" and they remained silent: the year of the impeachment of his minister, the Duke of Buckingham, afterwards assassinated: the year of his disagreement with his new bride, Henrietta Maria, youngest daughter of Henry IV of France, and that of his first quarrel with his Parliament: his Capital had been decimated by the Plague, nearly as severe as afterwards in 1666.

Such were a few of the outside events, whilst the quiet little Purley Church rose within its leafy enclosure. A uniformity of style pervades the interior: the nave divided by a Saxon arch from the chancel; monumental tablets are numerous, one the work of the celebrated Nollekens, to the memory of Anthony Storer Esq. On the pavement is the tombstone of William Noble " *Preacher of the Word of God* " date 1644; an ornamented oak ceiling covers the Chancel.

Quitting the Church one of the leading residences in this parish is 'Purley Hall' once the resort of Warren Hastings during that great epoch of his life - his trial.

'Purley House' is said to have cost £15,000 in building: it commands noble views of the valley of the Thames as far as Sonning and from the lawn are seen the Elizabethan mansions of Mapledurham and Hardwicke, backed by the noble woods above.

The Roebuck Inn possesses a garden with a view unrivalled - the river and the rail beneath the observer's feet, and the churches and buildings of Reading and vicinity in the distance.

Such are some of the features which may be noted at Purley; but following the turnpike road (in some cases in most dangerous proximity to the Great Western and its fearful Express) the stranger soon enters the village of Pangbourne - built says a tourist, in the form of the Roman capital 'T'.

The Manor was once granted to the Abbot of Reading: afterwards transmitted by Queen Mary to Sir Fras. Englefield and after further successions to John Bredon, Esq. in 1671

Pangbourne Church is undergoing a perfect renovation and that in so beautiful and elaborate a style that it promises when completed to be the finest specimen of the highly decorated in the neighborhood. The solid and massive brick tower will not, I fear, be in unison with the building, and to convert it into the foundation of a graceful spire would be a costly undertaking; as it is, very large sums are evidently being absorbed, but they are absorbed in a noble work, the best product of man's genius - a Christian Church.

Pangbourne is known as the resort of the painter, the angler, and the poet. Hoffland, Constable and Creswick have transferred the weir, the lock, and the fisher's hut to their canvass: the inverted image broken by the interrupted but transparent stream glows on paper through the magic power of the optic nerve: the rustic scenes of this vicinity might be applied to an old poet's picture of the cotter's life. He writes thus:

When morning's twilight tintured beam
Strikes their low thatch with slanting gleam,
They rove abroad in ether blue
To dip the scythe in fragrant dew:
The sheaf to bend, the beech to fell
That nodding shades a craggy dell

Midst gloomy glades, in warbles clear
Wild nature's sweetest notes they hear:
on green untrodden banks they view
The hyacinth's neglected hue:
In their lone haunts and woodland rounds.
They spy the squirrel's airy bounds.

