

Account of Purley on Thames

A Something and a Nothing

R200373 3/6/2017

This article appeared in one of the Reading papers in the 1960s. (formerly R000069)

Berkshire's Purley seems a something and a nothing, just outside Reading Borough and heralding, if not belonging to Pangbourne. On the Oxford Road you get a brief glimpse of shops and houses of no particular interest, two sets of estate lodge gateways, tree-secluded parklands within long-ranging walls or fences, a fair amount of new residential building. As for a village, apparently nothing worthy of comment.

A small muddy parish, invaded by Oxfordshire's Whitchurch from across the Thames. In Purley Hall used to be a stone floor slab marking where Purley, Sulham and Whitchurch met (during dispute over the matter in 1813, old John Knapp recalled climbing in through a window to establish the claim and Dame Champ said that as a servant there she had for years washed the stone) The railway cutting Purley parish in half has not helped its status.

Yet it has a fascinating history. Take Purley Hall itself. Originally La Hyde and later Hyde Hall, it was built in 1609 by Francis Hyde and owned later by Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon who was Lord Chancellor and historian of the Civil Wars; his first wife Anne died there, only 20, from smallpox in premature confinement, and Purley's church has her monument. Hyde's daughter by a second marriage became the wife of James II and mother of eventual Queens Mary and Anne.

The Hydes sold their estate, heavily mortgaged, to Francis Hawes, whose cousin was a director of the South Sea Company - which "bubble" burst with financial disaster to Hawes as well as thousands of others that very year of 1720. Records exist of his lavish expenditure on the mansion "North the upholsterer" I was glad to see, received £2,000 in part payment; P Bridgeman, keeper of Hampton Court and Richmond Gardens, laid out the grounds. The Hawes family were left holding only the house, which in 1773 was purchased by the Rev Dr Henry Wilder, Rector of Sulham.

In Dr Wilder's time, Purley Hall was let to former Governor General of India Warren Hastings, from 1788 (the year his trial commenced for alleged corruption and ill-dealings generally) for seven years, when at last he was acquitted with honour. He prepared his defence here, relaxed by riding its park. Hastings also farmed and bred cattle and horses, had a large menagerie brought from abroad (there is still an Elephant yard at the Home Farm) A small painting in the house shows it (the third storey and tall chimneys as before Dr Wilder had them removed) with some of the creatures about the pool below. Hasting's ghost is said to haunt Purley Hall, so too a grey lady or nun. When Major H W O Bradley took possession fairly recently, the oppressive atmosphere was such, Mrs Bradley told me, that she arranged for a service of exorcism. Well it is a peaceful enough, charming enough house today, beautified by Mrs Bradley with exceptional artistry of interior decorations.

The entrance hall has pleasant monochrome murals of the style of Sir James Thornhill (he decorated the dome-interior of Wren's St Paul's), the Hawes arms are on a plaster decorated ceiling and stained glass windows, the dining room has original panelling plus two interesting pilasters brought from former stables and carved with reins, harness, curry combs and the like. In the library is an original chimney-piece of oak, with linenfold and inlaid panelling.

The garden front is largely original, the house looks down upon a quieten-invested pool, which with flint grotto at rear, remains from a larger area of water which used to thrust towards the house

when the stabling and another (now vanished) wing grouped about a courtyard.

Purley has another major estate, that of Purley Park, which had the Thames for boundary. The railway divided the mansion (built by Wyatt in 1795 for Anthony Morris Storer, the antiquary and collector) from the church of St Mary the Virgin (rebuilt 1870-7) that was within the park, so altering the outlook entirely. The house, with fine views towards Reading and the Chilterns is now a school for the mentally-afflicted.

Between church and river has grown up a bungalow estate shortly to be partnered by a caravan community. The bungalow estate saw its beginnings when up to a thousand people, evacuated from London during the second world war, strove to establish fresh homes. Main drainage having come at last, Purley village looks like developing quite substantially.

St Mary's church is well looked after, used encouragingly. Its chief beauties, the original Norman chancel arch resited left of the chancel, and the Norman font, carved unusually with the face, apparently of Our Lord. The brick and stone tower bears the date 1626 and the arms of Sir John St John (the St Johns were lords of Purley Magna manor for near 300 years after the Huscarles c1166-1379; he, staunch Royalist, lost three sons in the Civil Wars)

In the vestry is a photograph of tapestry that, with scenes from the story of Adonis, used to be on the communion table, but was sent to the South Kensington Museum in 1904. The roll of rectors dates from 1566; James Harrison (1723-41) built the dignified Old Rectory just off the village street. John Matthews (1902-1914) was drowned one December night after preaching at evensong at Mapledurham Church.

Farm buildings, timbered and later cottages, a flint faced school, and at the end Purley Lodge, built about 1769 - that is the village street. Did Reading Abbey monks once tread this way habitually? Tradition has it that the Lodge stands on the site of a monks rest house, a panelled room with stone piscina suggests a chapel. On a wall of former stables is a large unfinished painting by Eliot Hodgkin RA who, born at the Lodge in 1905, had the stables for a studio. (Cecil Aldin and Frank Spenlove-Spenlove are other prominent artists once resident in Purley) the ghost of a headless horseman is said to haunt the former stables yard

Up at Purley Rise, in an old cottage next one even more venerable in its timber and thatch, live the misses Amy and Laura Pocock, 84 and 87 respectively, and Purley's oldest inhabitants. Both were born in the village, attended its school, were baptised and confirmed in St Mary's And both sang in the choir. Amy was sub-postmistress more than 30 years, her mother held the post 40 years before her (Amy's grandmother once had Purley's only shop in that thatched cottage next door). Laura started her life's work in service when, only 13, she left school to don cap and apron at Purley Lodge for half a crown a week and her keep. Since then she has worked at many big houses, once served Princess Beatrice at Kensington Palace, also the Earl of Lichfield.

The sisters can remember when Purley Park employed almost everybody in Purley. Their father - he saw the coming of the railway - was estate carpenter. They as youngsters went round on Shrove Tuesday singing at doors the jungle 'Pit-Pat the pan's hot' for pennies; knew Harvest Home feasts in the great Home Farm, with singing and dancing. Band of Hope gatherings, and school treats in the Park. The South Berks Hunt established kennels at Purley in 1904 (Cecil Aldin was Master for a time) and on many an occasion Amy and Laura watched the meet at Sulham. But the kennels are now at Burghfield, Purley's having been razed.

They have watched new life and new people come to Purley: the introduction of gas and electricity after only candles and oil; and now instead of cesspits, a proper sewage system. "I'd like to come back and see the place 50 years from now .." chuckled Amy. "Don't suppose I'd recognise it!" Maybe not, but it was people like the Pococks who gave Purley its character, and successors should recognise this, strive always to follow worthily.

