

Account of Purley on Thames

Purley through the Ages

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Report of a talk given to Project Purley - formerly R000

Project Purley has attracted a considerable number of new members in recent years, so it was entirely appropriate that the meeting on February 16th should be devoted to Jean Debney's talk on "Purley through the ages." Her comprehensive knowledge of the village's history was first demonstrated in a similar talk given as part of the programme of Millennium Lectures in 2000, and offers an overview of the changes that have occurred in Purley during a period of almost one thousand years.

Jean's lecture was backed up by a series of 77 slides, several maps and a table laden with reference books and family card indexes, so it became clear that the audience would need to pay rapt attention if we were not to miss any significant piece of information. As it was, Jean's meticulous preparation meant that she covered the period from 1086 to the present day in just under sixty minutes, so this review only has the space to highlight the most important events and dates.

Purley - the name means "snipe or bittern found in a woodland clearing" - existed in Saxon times as evidenced by its mention in the Domesday Book of 1086, when the village population was just 80.

The area was divided into three manors identified as Purley Magna, Purley Parva and Purley La Hyde. The manors changed hands several times, but by the Middle Ages, the manorial lords had leased most of their estates to tenant farmers and copyholders. Some future members of Project Purley made an exciting discovery in St.Mary's churchyard in 1980 when they excavated several "pillow" graves, where large flints are placed alongside the skull, a custom dating from [*before the Norman period*] the Middle Ages.

The 1500s was a time of religious turmoil, but record keeping was becoming more extensive and accurate, so we have more evidence in the form of wills and inventories of possessions. These tell us that most Purley villagers lived in houses with just two or four rooms and that the husbandmen produced their own food, bread and ale, whilst keeping cows, sheep, pigs and poultry.

The seventeenth century was dominated by the English Civil War and we know that villagers suffered at the hands of both Royalist and Parliamentary armies as soldiers from each side seized horses, crops and other food from local inhabitants. Parish registers were destroyed too and Purley's earliest surviving registers date only from 1662. At a time when non-conformist religious groups such as the Quakers and Baptists were being formed, there is little if any evidence that anyone from Purley was joining one of these new movements.

In 1711 the Rector of Purley, William Gostwick, made a list in the parish register of those responsible for maintaining the churchyard rails, the length of which corresponded to their status in the village. Many of the same property-owning men were charged with improving the road from Reading to Wallingford (now the A329) and building a bridge over the Thames at Shillingford. Money for this came from four tollgates along the way. As transport developed, Purley Lock was built to improve navigation along the river and, in 1794, the Thames Commissioners set up a horse ferry which crossed to the Oxford bank near the church and returned near to the Roebuck where Ferry Cottage can still be seen. Purley Lodge was built in the 1750s by John Liebenrood and the Red Lyon public house was the setting for a Court Baron held in October 1786, prior to the walking of the estate boundary. A costumed and scripted re-enactment of the Court Baron was held in the Barn in

2000 as part of the Millennium celebrations.

Ownership of land in Purley changed hands several times in the eighteenth century and the family names of St.John, Mackreth, Martindale and Storer all feature prominently in the village history. Anthony Storer M.P. bought Purley Magna for £15,000 in 1793 and, in his will, left another £15,000 to ensure Purley Park was built to a design by James Wyatt on the high ground overlooking the Thames Valley. Elyham House was built on the south side of the Oxford Road and, in 1914, the farm became the home of the celebrated artist, Cecil Aldin. The Barn was used as a remount stable in World War One and moved to its present site as recently as 1995.

The Great Western Railway extended its network as far as Purley in 1840, the line bisecting the parish, though few villagers could afford the fares until Tilehurst Station was opened in 1892. Before then, the post had been brought from Reading by cart, but now the mail arrived at 6.24 a.m. and was collected at 7.30 p.m. Purley Post Office happened to be wherever the postmaster or postmistress lived.

The first school in Purley was set up by the Rector, Charles Manesty, in 1818 for poor children. A new school was opened in 1873 for all local children aged from five to ten and this building still survives today, with of course, much modernisation.

St.Mary's Church was virtually rebuilt and restored in the 1869-70 period at a cost of £2,000. The Norman font was moved into the chancel and a new vestry and north aisle constructed. A new east window donated by Mrs.Cecily Storer in memory of her sister was installed and the lych gate was given by Caroline Sherwood as a tribute to her parents.

Purley changed dramatically in the twentieth century as a result of two world wars and the lasting effects of the industrial revolution. It was still a small village with few houses, but the old order began to break up with the sale of Purley Park in 1920. Geographical and social mobility increased as motor buses from the village to Reading were introduced, replacing the slower horse and cart. Council houses were built too in the 1930s in Glebe Road and the old blacksmith's shop at the end of Long Lane was demolished for road widening. At the beginning of World War Two, evacuees arrived from London, but stayed for only a few days. Their names are nevertheless recorded in the Purley School register.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Purley Memorial Hall was designed and built in tribute to those local residents killed in both world wars and the community spirit was further enhanced by the founding of the Purley Park Property Owners' Association.

The District Council was keen to clear the freehold sites in the large field near the church, but the River Gardens estate had become too widespread and mains water, sewerage, electricity and finally gas were provided for the area and the road improved. Local organisations, such as the Women's Institute, Mothers' Union, drama groups, Girl Guides, Brownies and indeed Project Purley itself have been formed in the last century as the village has grown in size and spirit. The only recent loss to the community has been the sale of Westbury Farm which, since the death of wine expert, Bernard Theobald, means the vineyard has been cleared.

The 1991 census showed Purley to have a population of more than 5,000, a vast increase on the 80 villagers of Saxon times. It may still be considered small by some standards, but was given additional status when it was renamed Purley on Thames to distinguish it from a similarly named area in Surrey. As Jean had said right at the start of her talk, our village is indeed rich in history, and it is thanks to the enthusiasm and expertise of her and people like her that we are able to share in it.

David Downs

