

Project Purley Publications

- 4 **Sources for the History of Purley on Thames Vol 1 Index** (revised Feb 1989)
- 5 **Sources for the History of Purley on Thames Vol 1 part 3** (items 39-61) (Reprinted and revised Sept 2005)
- 6 **Index Locorum to The Diary of Reading Corporation** (reprinted September 2005)
- 16 **Monumental Inscriptions at St Mary's Church Part B - Memorials in old churchyard**
- 18 **Beating the Bounds (£0.50)**

Please contact Ann Betts if you would like to purchase copies of the above publications. The costs, unless marked otherwise, are £1 per copy for members and £2 per copy for non-members, plus postage where applicable.

The following are being prepared for re-publication

- 1 **Sources for the History of Purley on Thames Vol 1 part 1** (items 1-23) (revised Aug 1988)
- 2 **Sources for the History of Purley on Thames Vol 1 part 2** (items 24-38) (Aug 1988)
- 3 **Monumental Inscriptions at St Mary's Church Purley Part C** (Feb 1989)
- 8 **The Early History of Purley C of E School** by Rita Denman (1993)
- 10 **The Place Names of Purley on Thames** by John Chapman (Sept 1990)
- 11 **Project Purley Newsletters 1-11** (Apr 1996)
- 12 **Project Purley Newsletters 12-16** (Apr 1996)
- 13 **Purley on Thames at the Millennium** compiled by John Chapman (Dec 1999)
- 14 **Monumental Inscriptions at St Mary's Church Part C - Memorials in new churchyard**

Other Purley Related Publications

- Tour Guide to Purley Church** (1988)
A History of St Mary's Church Purley by John Chapman (1988)

*Cover: Firefly class locomotive,
designed by Gooch and used by GWR from 1840 to 1879.
Frontispiece: Tile designed by Street, St Mary's Purley.*

THE PROJECT PURLEY JOURNAL



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Reading Gaol - Part 2

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The most extreme form of punishment of course was the death penalty, sometimes commuted to a life sentence, but so often resulting in execution. Capital punishment, the death sentence, was finally suspended in 1965 and permanently abolished in England and Wales in 1969, leaving just three offences for which someone could still, in theory, be executed: 1. Treason, 2. Piracy with violence, and 3. Arson in the Royal Dockyards, but ended completely by the Sixth Protocol of the European Convention in January 1999. However, in the early 18th century there were 150 capital offences for which the perpetrator could be executed ranging from the grave, to the bizarre, to the ridiculous. In those days, stealing a handkerchief, scrawling on a wall, even cutting down a tree (William Potter was hanged in 1814 for cutting down an apple tree), could end with the noose, and in Reading Gaol between the years 1800 to 1913, the year of the last execution in Reading, 35 people were hanged, the very last being that of Eric Sedgwick for the murder of a young woman at Eton College. But as time went by, the public found executions particularly offensive, and many were disturbed when doubt existed concerning the guilt of the prisoner, or where a case of insanity prevailed. Executioners, and their dubious attitude to prisoners added to public disdain. Reading's longest serving executioner was also its most controversial. William Calcraft worked in the gaol from 1829 to 1874 and was noted for his use of the 'short drop' which caused most of his victims to strangle slowly to death, rather than a quick snap of the vertebrae. He carried out 450 executions whilst in office, of which 35 were women, most being public executions where attendance could be over 30,000, and in gruesome style would sometimes swing himself on the victims leg, or sit on their shoulders to effect a speedier choking death. He carried out the first three executions from the new Reading Gaol; those of Thomas Jennings who took over three minutes to die in front of 10,000 people, of William Spicer in front of 6,000, and Reading's last public execution

in 1862 of John Gould, who murdered his seven year old daughter by slitting her throat. Following William Calcraft as executioner, was William Marwood (in office 1874-1883), James Billington (1884-1901) who executed Charles Thomas Wooldridge, becoming the most famous of the victims, being immortalised by Oscar Wilde's *Ballad*, and Henry Albert Pierrepoint (in office 1901-1923) the father of , Albert Pierrepoint, who became Britain's most famous executioner.

The execution process after sentence was imposed, took place at 8 am on a Tuesday morning, following the Capital Punishment Act of 1868, before which public executions were held on a Saturday in front of large crowds. The large crowds flocking to public executions were comprised mainly of women, and the spectacle attracted funfairs and various amusements, and raised seating for a better viewpoint. In Reading, executions prior to 1844 took place in the market place, or at an area in Lower Earley, or yet again at Gallows Tree Common. On these occasions the condemned would be conveyed from the County Gaol in an open cart which would stop by custom at the Oxford Arms public house in Silver Street, where the prisoner and the hangman would take a drink together. The body of the hanged prisoner would, unless claimed by his friends or relatives, be brought back for burial in St Mary's churchyard, but following the construction of the new prison, a scaffold was erected above the gatehouse. Following the Act of 1868 when public executions ceased, all Reading executions took place within the walls of the prison in a special area called the 'Photographic Room' situated in the courtyard between C-wing and D-wing, and by 1900 the Home Office approved a specific Execution Centre in D-wing of four purpose-built cells, twice the size of usual cells, containing bath and toilet facilities. Two staff would be on constant duty with the felon, eating and sleeping in the cell centre, and a group of six staff in all would carry out this constant duty. At 20 minutes before the sentence was carried out, two new staff would replace the warders to counter the effect of empathy caused by continuous proximity. When the time came for the prisoner to face the gallows, a concealed panel would be removed allowing immediate egress into the shed

and onto the gallows, where the process of death could take under 30 seconds. The day before the execution the hangman would arrive, to observe the prisoner, take into account any unusual characteristics and to test the gallows, usually with a bag of sand of the exact weight of the prisoner. When the allotted time came, leather straps would be placed around hands and arms, and accompanied by governor, chaplain and medical officer, the prisoner was quickly led into the shed and a white hood placed over the condemned person's head, the noose placed and adjusted to the left side of the jaw to force the head to twist and turn backwards causing the neck to break. Finally the legs of the felon would be pinioned, and the executioner would operate the lever, allowing the trap door to spring open.

Many executions taking place at Reading Gaol, both public and private, would be inconceivable by today's standards, but two stand out as being especially controversial. The first concerned Thomas Jennings who has the dubious distinction of being the first to die at Reading's new gaol in 1845, hanged on the scaffold above the entrance in front of 10,000 jeering townsfolk, professing 'I did not do the murder', and possibly telling the truth. Jennings was just 37 years old, born in Thatcham, and employed as a gamekeeper on the Crookham estate, marrying Amy Fitter of Cold Ash Common who bore him four children, and was pregnant with a fifth. On the day in question Amy was away, and the family, including the 13 year old niece, Maria, were having a meal, during which Jennings sprinkled some grains of what appeared to be salt on his son's (Eliazar) meal. Within half a hour the child became ill, and his condition worsened through the night and within two days he was dead. A week or so later a second son died under the same circumstances, and a local surgeon from Newbury suspected that arsenic had been administered. Jennings in his work, kept arsenic in his nearby store, and he attracted some attention to himself by claiming that his niece, Maria, had deliberately poisoned the children. The police became aware of these claims, and evidence from neighbours suggested to them that Jennings was lying, and thus he was eventually indicted

for wilful murder. At the subsequent trial, evidence rested largely on his niece, Maria, and her version of events. Local newspapers were scornful that such a young girl could be capable of such a crime, and the jury on retirement took merely 10 minutes to return a guilty verdict with a recommendation for mercy. However, Jennings looked on in disbelief as the Judge pronounced the death sentence. The trial had lasted barely six hours. During his remaining time in the cell, Jennings continued to maintain his innocence, despite entreaties from the prison chaplain and visiting curates to confess. Petitions from local townsfolk to commute the sentence were despatched to Queen Victoria, to no avail. Preparations were underway to prepare for the execution, and along the Forbury Road, stands and seating were erected for the huge crowds expected to witness the gruesome spectacle. Above the gaol entrance, a flat platform was erected on which the gallows were placed, and extra police were drafted. On the fatal morning and after a disturbed night, the prisoner was summoned to the chaplain, who once again attempted to extract a confession without success, and as the clock struck noon Jennings was pinioned and led to the gallows. When the body was cut down, it was despatched to the prison morgue, and an inquest followed, after which it was buried in unconsecrated ground within the prison, where today, a small plaque exists, placed in 2004.

Maria Carter, the young niece whom Thomas Jennings had accused of the murder, herself ended up in Reading Gaol barely two weeks later on a charge of theft from a farmer, with whom she had been staying. Uncomfortable uncertainty arose that Jennings had been wrongly accused, especially in the light of further evidence that Maria had originally been sent to the Jennings' household to help Amy with the cooking. It is not inconceivable that she might have added poison to the children's food.

The second case concerned the execution of Charles Thomas Wooldridge, hanged on 7th July 1896, who later became the most famous victim of the Reading gallows, as a result of being immortalised in Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. He was a soldier stationed at Windsor, and killed his wife Laura, using a cut-

throat razor. They suffered a stormy marriage, she being flirtatious, and he being insanely jealous, and this led to a separation, during which Wooldridge, who dearly loved his wife, attempted a reconciliation. Whilst she was staying at the home of a friend, Wooldridge gained entry to the house where a violent row erupted leading to the death of his wife. Wooldridge then gave himself up to the police. Oscar Wilde implies that Wooldridge was resigned to his fate, and despite petitions of clemency raised by the people of Berkshire, did not wish for a reprieve, his only request being that he could be allowed to wear his regimental uniform, a request that was granted. The authorities regarded Wooldridge's crime as premeditated; why else, they asked, should the man have gone out of his way to carry a cut-throat razor when calling upon his estranged wife. During Wooldridge's last days in captivity, both he and Wilde were likely to have met often in the exercise yard, and may well have

formed some kinship, which deeply affected the poet, who could well have seen the body being returned to the prison yard to be buried in quicklime.

Wilde himself was the most famous personality to suffer incarceration at Reading Gaol to spend the last part of a two year sentence, arriving in November 1895. He immediately suffered a conflict with the Prison Governor, Colonel Isaacson, who granted no favours, and compelled Wilde to the usual hard labour, poor sanitary arrangements, and silence. Thus he was relentlessly and continuously punished for misdemeanour and

Gate commemorating Oscar Wilde near Reading Gaol



fell into a condition of utter depression. After nine months a new governor, and a more lenient one, replaced the outgoing Isaacson, and life for Wilde became more tolerable. He served his time and was released in May 1887, taken by cab to Twyford Station and transferred to Pentonville, where he was freed the following morning. Shortly after, he left for France, never to return to England, and writing his *Ballad of Reading Gaol* and the story of Trooper Charles T. Woolridge of the Royal Horse Guards:

*I walked, with other souls in pain,
 Within another ring,
 And was wondering if the man had done
 A great or little thing
 When a voice behind me whispered low
 'That fellow's got to swing'*

Oscar Wilde died in France three and a half years after his release in 1900 at the age of 46.

By 1877 a Prison Act was passed transferring overall control of prisons to the Government, with Prison Commissioners answerable to the Home Secretary and, possibly as a result of the notoriety of Wilde's experience in Reading Gaol and his early death claimed as a result of his imprisonment, further Prison Acts were introduced abolishing hard labour, allowing prisoners to converse, and introducing remission for good behaviour. All too late for Oscar Wilde.

In the history of Reading Gaol lies the important aspect of escape. The escapee is largely regarded by fellow inmates as a hero, although the older and mature prisoner may have a greater regard for the consequences of being recaptured and would possibly regard the miscreant as deluded, unless of course there existed a real chance of not returning. To the authorities and the public however, an escape is an open admission of failure on the part of prison staff in falling down on the job. The haphazard construction and overcrowding of the old gaol for the first forty years of the nineteenth century recorded many successful escapes provided the escapee cleared well

out of town before the alarm was raised. Charles White, a notorious thief, entombed in the prison with his two sons for horse stealing, made two unsuccessful attempts to break out and on the third occasion was apprehended and tried, sentenced, and hanged in Reading in 1814 before a large crowd. In 1832, it is recorded that a prisoner named John Dickenson successfully escaped by cutting planks across the ceiling of his cell and skilfully camouflaging his work with strips of paper covering the gap. He was on the run for three months until apprehended and sentenced to death for burglary and other offences.

Most escapes are unrecorded, but many escapes continued long after the new gaol was completed in 1844. In 1879 a female prisoner escaped having slipped the bolt of her cell lock and it remains a mystery today how she made facsimile keys to the outer gates. She was apprehended after eight days of liberty recognised by the constabulary in Goring on Thames, and returned to the prison. If prizes were to be awarded for ingenuity, the outright winner, a young lad by the name of Johnson would surely take the prize. Secreting himself in the gymnasium he unscrewed the bars of one of the windows and scaled the boundary wall by the use of items from the gym, dropping into Forbury Road by means of a rope. His liberty came to an end two days later when he was discovered by a farmer's dog in a barn near Basingstoke.

As recently as 1992 a riot broke out in Reading, following the unrest in many prisons at the time, including the notorious incident at Strangeways. The staff at Reading were forewarned of plans afoot on Boxing Day. A warder was attacked, kidnapped, and six staff were encircled, all managing to clear the area. A group of prisoners started a fire in the gymnasium and the education block where they destroyed classrooms and offices. Reinforcements arrived in riot gear and trapped the prisoners and full control of the prison was regained. Criminal proceedings were later commenced against 23 prisoners including eight ringleaders and all received additional sentences over and above the five years they were serving. Since the riot, major changes that were long overdue were initiated, with all

individual wings being fenced and the grounds sectioned with high security fencing including the exercise area. Around the entire perimeter is a network of CCTV cameras, as well as internal cameras keeping a 24/7 watch.

In Spring 1992 a new prison called HMP Bullingdon, opened in Oxfordshire, taking over from Reading as the local prison for the area. Thus Reading was reclassified as a Remand Centre for Young Offenders whose ages range from 17 to 21, and changed again in 1996 as a Young Offenders' Institution, a role it continues to play today. Many changes and improvements have taken place to accommodate a different type of individual. A hard surface football pitch has been built on B and C yards, educational facilities have been increased, and the industrial workshops have been replaced by pool tables, computers, table tennis and television. A PIN phone system has been also introduced allowing these young prisoners the opportunity to call home and friends. Prisoners are allowed out of their cells nine hours a day, including evenings. A Vocational Training Centre has been built split into classrooms concentrating on Induction, Fitness, Drugs Rehab, Job Placement and pre-release.

Tremendous improvements to the prison service have taken place, largely initiated by the earlier riots. Reading Gaol with its Victorian Façade continues to appear awesome. But the treatment of prisoners has been humanised, with the accent on improving their lifestyle once they are released, by education and workskill. Offenders need to be incarcerated, and the public protected, but today the element of punishment and deprivation has been reduced and often eliminated, and replaced by a tolerance and sensitivity of prisoners' needs to provide them, on release, with a new and better lifestyle.

Source: *Reading Gaol by Reading Town* by Peter Southerton

George Edmund Street RA

John Chapman

George Edmund Street was born in 1824 the son of a London solicitor. In 1839 his father retired and took the family to live near Exeter where Street was attracted to the Cathedral and to the Priesthood. He started work in his father's old firm but was really not interested, so he became articled to Owen Browne Carter the Winchester Architect in 1841.

Carter was widely travelled. and enjoyed sketching and archaeology which soon became a passion of his pupil. In 1844 Street moved on to London to become an assistant to George Gilbert Scott who was one of Britain's most celebrated architects. His first independent commission as an architect was Biscovey Church in Cornwall (1846) - Scott gave Street plenty of scope and his talents flourished until in 1849 he was able to set up his own office in London. Soon after he fell in with the Vicar of Wantage, the Rev. William John Butler, who was a leading Tractarian and for whom Street built a new Vicarage in 1850. As a result Bishop Wilberforce appointed him Architect for the Diocese of Oxford and he left London to live in Wantage.

Now his career blossomed - he undertook rebuilding of churches all over the country including that of Purley in 1870. His interest in archaeology made him particularly sensitive to medieval design and wherever possible he retained original features (like our Norman arch and 14th century window) and when he couldn't he had the designs copied - like in our floor tiles.

He was not confined to churches and among his other major works were Cuddeston College (1852-4) and the Royal Courts of Justice (1868). Although most of his work was in the English countryside he went far afield building the American Church in Rome and an English Chapel in Bern and designing a vast church in Constantinople which was built not as he had planned, but on a greatly reduced scale for economic reasons.

He moved his office back to London in 1856 and was consultant architect to the Diocese of York from 1866 until 1877 when he was dismissed after some skulduggery on the part of a rival. During this period he was closely involved with the Sykes of Yorkshire, who were related to our John Sykes and the former owners of Westfield House and Basildon Park. Street did many commissions for the Sykes around the Sledmore estates.

The Royal Courts of Justice were still being built in 1881 and running into all kinds of trouble; his wife died and, burdened by worry and overwork, Street had a paralytic stroke and died in December 1881.

He was one of the greatest of the Victorian architects and while Purley Church is not one of his best examples, it does exhibit many of his sensitive touches and his feeling for medieval church architecture.

I am grateful to Paul Joyce of London for his help in providing information on Street and his works.

John Southall 1936-2010

John Chapman

John Southall was born on the 5th July 1936. He and I shared many interests in common and were very distantly related - my great great grandmother was a Southall and we both came from the West Midlands. He went to Sheffield University to study Chemistry and Geology and got a job at Aldermaston for some years before he moved into teaching. I first got to know him when he moved to the British Computer Society of which I was a Fellow. He started as their Education Officer and latterly became their Registrar.

He and Janet moved to Purley just after us and he always took an active interest in village affairs, becoming a Parish Councillor and the Chairman of the Parish Council. His knowledge of all things nuclear was kept alive by his being Purley's representative on the Aldermaston liaison committee. Janet had become a member of Project Purley, and when John relinquished the Council Chairmanship, he too joined. However his main passion was music and he sang in several local choirs including the Reading Festival Chorus and Opera at Bearwood. We also shared a passion for stamp and coin collecting and above all for hoarding!!

Much of his local history interests were devoted to Basildon Park and its history. He was a guide and prominent supporter of the work of the National Trust there. He and Janet took a keen interest in the problems of Alzheimer's disease and they founded the 'Singing for the Brain' group at St Mary's to which Project Purley devoted the proceeds of a recent 'Rain or Shine Theatre' production.

John had been diabetic for many years, but recently other health problems intruded and he passed away on the 20th March 2010. The church was packed for his funeral on 1st April and the service was very moving, supported by musical contributions from his choir friends. It was with great sadness that we saw him finally laid to rest in the cemetery which he had done so much to acquire for the village.

May he rest in peace.

Hospital Radio Reading

Ian Savin

Hospital Radio Reading was the featured charity when the Rain or Shine Theatre Company performed The Taming of the Shrew in The Barn last June. Members will recall that £700 was raised that evening for this very worthwhile cause - The Editor.

What's it all about then? Well, Hospital Radio Reading is a free service, run entirely by volunteers. Our purpose is to provide a wide range of specialist radio programmes exclusively for the patients of the Royal Berkshire Hospital.

Because we are small, we are really able to make a fuss of our listeners the patients and avoid the "One size fits all" approach adopted by other, larger stations.

Hang on though! We're getting ahead of ourselves.

Take yourself back to the year 1957 - Saturday 7th September to be precise. Imagine you are a Royals fan (or *Biscuitmen* as they were then). There's a home match this afternoon at Elm Park against local rivals Aldershot. You may be feeling down in the dumps because, not only are you stuck in hospital, but you're going to miss the match too.

Enter a certain Les Warth. Under his arm he's carrying one half of



Elm Park 1994 Left to right, Les Warth, Arthur Bint, Ian Bruce (Ian Savin) & Graeme Collyer.

an army walkie-talkie, which he's borrowed for the afternoon. He puts it on a table in the middle of the ward, switches it on and goes away. Then at about 2.55pm it suddenly crackles into life and Hospital Radio Reading is born. Les was on the other end of the walkie-talkie at Elm

Park, providing a full match commentary exclusively for the patients just down the road in Battle Hospital. Incidentally, Reading won that match 3-0!

Ever since that day, thanks to the continuing support of Reading Football Club, Hospital Radio Reading has provided a full commentary on every one of Reading's home games, with just one exception. On that occasion we arrived at the ground to find our equipment had been vandalised and despite our best efforts to patch something together, we weren't able to cover that game.

Shame really - we beat Barnsley 7-0 that day!

Soon the service became more popular and we began visiting the wards, collecting record requests to be played that same evening. This meant that we needed some sort of studio. The (then) Reading Standard newspaper let us use one of the rooms in their London Street offices and with a turntable, a microphone and a telephone line, we were able to provide a very basic signal to the hospital for our request programme twice a week.

As the service became more popular, our ambitions grew as well. It was then that Reading Football Club came to our rescue and offered us the use of a couple of empty rooms underneath the terracing of the Tilehurst Road end of Elm Park. The volunteers spent many hours turning the void into a working radio studio and we were able to increase our service to just over 20 hours a week. Times were tough in those days. There was no central heating and we couldn't use a fan heater, as it was too noisy when the microphone was on. So many a show was presented in cheery fashion whilst wearing overcoat, gloves and a hat!

At the start of 1978 we were on the move again, this time to a self-contained, spacious and comparatively luxurious studio complex in the grounds of Battle Hospital - with central heating! The official opening ceremony was due to be performed by Spike Milligan, but due to a last minute illness he was unable to attend. So we invited one of our listeners - a long-term patient - to do the honours.

We spent many happy years in our home at Battle hospital, until

we were 'evicted' when the site was closed a few years ago. It was then that we were offered space in the main Royal Berks Hospital complex, from where we broadcast today, 24 hours a day, seven days a week (with the help of computers etc).

To this day we still provide commentaries on all Reading's home games, thanks to the football club who've been with us all the way. Not only do these go to the hospital patients, but also to a hardy band of blind and partially sighted supporters at the ground, who follow the action via a set of headphones.



A new recruit to HRR, Amit Nathwani

Although HRR is run entirely by volunteers, there are still quite substantial overheads that have to be met every year. We receive no Government support, so this means we need to rely on help from local companies, organisations, benefactors and fundraising events by our members. All of which has

enabled us to continue serving the hospital patients of Reading for over 50 years.

Recently, we were tremendously indebted to your very own Project Purley who arranged a production of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* with HRR as the main beneficiary. On behalf of HRR Thank you!

At the start I mentioned that we were small enough to really make a fuss of our listeners. This is how.

We still run a 90-minute Record Request show every evening plus extra shows at the weekend. Our volunteers visit the wards, chat with the patients, collect their requests, return to the studio, select the music and present the show. How's that for personal service?

Sometimes we have many more requests than we can fit into the programme so we just carry on and other programmes have to wait!

In fact we are proud to boast that we *guarantee* to play every request we receive. We don't believe any other radio station can make that claim.

So, from our crackly walkie-talkie beginnings to our present day state of the art studios, Hospital Radio Reading has been looking after the patients, our listeners, for over 50 years and counting. We would like to thank everybody who has helped us along the way and invite you to join us. There are many ways in which you can help, either on the air or behind the scenes.

Simply get in touch with us and tell us what you'd like to do. You can write to us at Hospital Radio Reading, East Drive, Royal Berkshire Hospital, Reading, RG1 5AN.

Or mail us at studio@hospitalradioreading.org.uk

Valerie Hutchings 1928-2009

Ben Viljoen

Valerie and her husband Brian were two of the first people that we met when we moved to Purley 26 years ago. Valerie, a keen gardener, asked me to care for her vine after Brian died and over the years it produced a remarkable quantity of grapes that we used to make dry white wine.

Valerie belonged to many Purley organisations including Project Purley and Singing for the Brain where she was always ready to help with such tasks as making coffee.

Sadly her sight and health deteriorated and the last two years of her life were spent in a nursing home in Goring where she always eagerly questioned visitors about what was going on in Purley.

Valerie died on Christmas Eve. Father Terence Fitzpatrick of Douai Abbey being snowbound, was not able to conduct her cremation, but in late February he performed a requiem mass in Pangbourne for her, attended by family and friends.

Nature Notes

Cliff & Jean Debney



Primula vulgaris

As we write these notes in the middle of April all the signs of a very welcome spring are around us. The sun is shining and the gardens and road-sides are bright with swathes of yellow daffodils and forsythia. The soft grey buds of the pussy willow (goat willow) have burst and we await, with some trepidation, the cotton-wool seeds that float into the house and cover everything. We also have yellow primroses and celandines flowering in the grass together with patches of white, lilac and deep purple wild violets and some early cowslips. All this is much more enjoyable than the severest winter for over 30 years, according to the Met Office.

The cold spell began on 15 December with overnight temperatures of 0C (32F) and on Monday, 21st, when we planned to go shopping, the forecast promised snow and it took us fifty minutes to fight our way home from Sainsbury's via Pangbourne and slide down the icy gutter in New Hill. Cars were abandoned on the A329 in Purley and access in and out of Reading disappeared within an

hour or so. Icy conditions continued over Christmas making even the shortest journey by car impossible if any hills were involved. The total 'rainfall' (snow) from the middle of the month measured 37mm (1.4").

The freezing conditions continued into January. The lowest daytime temperature recorded on our max-min thermometer was minus 2C (28F) on the fourth and the cold weather continued until late in the month. But the biggest problem was the heavy fall of snow of 9 inches which arrived overnight of 5/6 January and, car wise, we were snowed-in for a week. Fortunately we had a good stock of tins and food in the freezer and had bought extra milk after hearing the forecast but Project Purley and the Farmers' Market were cancelled, there was no post and the dustbins weren't emptied for two weeks.

Feeding the birds became a priority and we made a mixture of porridge oats, sultanas and chopped apple mixed into some melted fat which proved popular. Then Cliff bought a "Wild bird fat feast" block from the ironmongers in Pangbourne and hung it in a special cage on our rotary washing line. This proved popular with the birds and the squirrels, unless we spotted one on the cage and shouted at them - they all know Cliff's voice and responded more quickly than to me! Even though one 'feast' contained chili, reputed to be unpopular with squirrels, it didn't work for our lot.

We were very pleased to have a pair of colourful greater spotted woodpeckers who visited the fat feeder for several weeks plus two hen blackbirds who balanced precariously on the top before frequently falling to the ground. The tits and blackcaps had absolutely no problem with hanging upside down while they pecked out little pieces. Other birds enjoyed the fallen scraps below the cage.

A couple of redwings arrived just after Christmas and were seen again two weeks and then four weeks later with a solitary one three weeks after the first sighting. We did not record any flocks of them this year. The maximum number of long tailed tits seen at any one time was six during the weeks commencing the 10th and 24th January and the last recorded was a single during the week commencing the

21st March. Blackbirds were recorded every week with a maximum of four which coalesced to two pairs. A hen was seen collecting grass for a nest in the week of 29th March. Blackcaps were noted every week until the week commencing 21st March and then a single in the week commencing 5th April.

Dunnocks, otherwise known as hedge sparrows, have been noted every week and a pair were seen to mate during the week of 21st February. Carrion crows have been seen in the garden almost every week, as have the magpies, robins and song thrush while woodpigeons are ever with us, the maximum being eight in the week of the 21st March. The chaffinch has only been seen during eight of the sixteen weeks of winter but the greater spotted woodpecker has been noted during thirteen weeks. In all I have noted 23 different species of birds this winter.

A Brimstone butterfly was noted on the 18th and 22nd March but not seen since. This butterfly starts flying in the late winter but between sightings gathers its strength again for the next flight. One day a female muntjac deer with her foal picked her way delicately through the snow at the top of the bank: mother was looking in vain for a tasty leaf to eat - the foal just appeared puzzled by all the white stuff. A male deer appeared a couple of days later. We haven't seen them since and we hope they all survived the bad weather.

A thaw began in the third week of January and we all went about our normal duties again even though the temperatures were still low. The total measured 'rainfall' (snow) this month was 60mm (2.4") plus the pile of snow on top of the rain-gauge which fell off and 45mm (1.8") overnight on 13 Jan just as the temperatures began rising.

Early in February we visited the Boathouse Surgery in Pangbourne and, as usual, sat where we could see the river. The late afternoon sun was casting a golden glow over the leafless trees on the opposite bank in Whitchurch and a flock of white terns were flying up and down the river. Every now and then one would do a stall turn and dive down to dip its beak in the water to pick up a tasty morsel it had spotted.

One day the squirrels and woodpeckers began attacking the rotting cherry tree stump at the top of the fall down to the railway fence, near the washing line, in search of grubs. We don't know what they found but the stump is now much smaller and a very different shape. I had to clear many shards of rotting wood to enable the lawn mower to get at the growing grass.

Daytime temperatures remained below 10C (50F) until 24th February and then began to improve over the final three days. February was wet and 69mm (2.8") of rain fell in the month. The first eight days of March were still cold with below freezing temperatures most nights, only rising to 8C (46F) during the first two weeks of the month, there was a maximum of 17C (63F) on the 18th which fell to 12C (54F) the following day, after which it stayed at or above 12C, 54F. It was also pretty wet and we had 50mm (2") this month.

Early April has been warmer with temperatures between 11C and 15.5C (60F). The lawn has just had its first cut and, apart from going round the budding cowslips as much as possible, hundreds of hopeful sycamore tree seedlings have met with an unexpected demise. Luckily the grass has not started to grow fast at the moment but it won't be long now.

Reviews of Meetings & Events

Pangbourne Census & Owners 1894

Project Purley's scheduled January meeting, entitled "Wedding Day Memories", had to be postponed due to inclement weather. There was so much snow and ice on the ground that the title of the talk, had it taken place, might have been more appropriately changed to "White Wedding Day Memories."

However, any disappointment felt by members was quickly dispelled when we assembled at The Barn for the February meeting on Friday, the 19th. Not only had Catherine Sampson prepared an impressive display of photographs of old Purley, she had also produced a series of colourful and informative leaflets advertising forthcoming outings, talks and events. Project Purley has clearly gone upmarket in its drive to attract new clientele.

The recruitment campaign has succeeded already as there were several new faces in the audience who listened to Professor Lyn Davies telling us about the Pangbourne Census and Owners of 1894, or to use his own more fashionable title 'The Sale of the Century'. He is a member of the Pangbourne Heritage Group, lives in the area and so has a keen personal interest in the way Pangbourne has developed.

He explained to us that the Great Western Railway reached Pangbourne on June 6th 1840, Pangbourne thus becoming the only station in the area apart from Reading. The 1841 census of population showed that the number of people living in Pangbourne had risen to only 550 from the 500 resident in 1801, a surprisingly small increase considering the opening of the railway line and station. Pangbourne's population had grown to 3,000 at the time of the 2001 census, but Purley expanded much more rapidly from 400 in 1931 to 4,000 in 2001. So Professor Davies examined the reasons for Pangbourne remaining so apparently static during the second half of the nineteenth century.

It was all to do with land ownership and occupation. Landowners were obliged from 1836 to make a tithe payment in cash to

their local church, so the parish of Pangbourne was surveyed and ownership established. This was the first major and accurate survey since 1066 and found that almost all of Pangbourne was owned by the Breedon family. Because the Breedons did not wish to sell any of their land, there was no potential for development. By contrast, the parish of Purley had many landowners although Edward Sherwood was the occupant of most of the land.

The Breedons had come to Pangbourne in 1841 and bought the Bere Court estate with the intention of ensuring the land would be handed down to the oldest male in the next generation. John Symonds Breedon had ten children, but family quarrels meant that disputes over his land went to court. As a result of the court case it became ever more certain that no land could be sold off, so there was no possibility of house building in Pangbourne. The only parcels of land not owned by the Breedons were those belonging to the Great Western Railway and two local landowners, Robert Pigon and Maria Tovey. The latter two did sell their land for housing development, which led to a population increase of approximately 200 by the census of 1891.

As the Breedon family gradually died out and the line of succession diminished, the dispute over their land once again went to court. Thomas Breedon went to live at Courtlands and decreed in his will that the entitlement to the estate should pass to his relative, Elizabeth, but the court decided otherwise and ruled that it must pass to Eliza Morphet, another relative.

Eliza decided to get rid of the estate, thinking it was too big an undertaking for her to administer. In August 1889 she first sold Bere Court with all its furniture, paintings and 1,300 books. The Free School, which the Breedons had established for twelve local and deserving pupils, also closed.

The estate was surveyed and valued in 1894 as preparations began for the "Sale of the Century". Seventeen lots were listed for sale, with instructions about what they could be used for. Farming, building sites, gentlemen's residences and farmsteads were among the agreed uses and the sale, to take place at Reading Town Hall in

August 1894, was advertised in national newspapers. On the day 350 people attended, many of them tenants who were able to buy their own plot of land.

The potential value of the estate was £80,182. In the event the sale realised £55,856, the profit to Eliza being £42,698 after auctioneers' and valuers' fees had been paid and mortgages redeemed. Some lots such as The Elephant and Rectory land were not sold as the reserve could not be met and The Swan could not be sold anyway as it was in Oxfordshire and was not brought into Berkshire until as recently as 1991. Many small plots were sold off as shops in the village, but Courtlands was too large a plot to be sold and remained as Eliza's home.

All sales were completed by February 9th 1895. Riverview, Horseshoe and Meadowside became sites for housing development and the population of Pangbourne expanded rapidly. Shooters Hill House was bought by Mr D H Evans, owner of the shopping chain, and the Seven Deadly Sins, the group of large white houses on the Reading Road were bought by Mr Evans, Mrs Kent and others. Housing development continued regularly between 1894 and 1939, Clayesmore Court became Pangbourne College in 1917, Bere Court was sold in 1938 and the estate split up after World War Two.

Our speaker concluded his hour-long talk by showing a postcard of Pangbourne Station in 1905, as if to emphasise the fact that the arrival of the railway in the village did little to augment the population, owing to the internecine squabbling between members of the Breedon family. The station sign stated "Pangbourne Station - Clayesmore School" as a reminder of a bygone age.

Lyn Davies is Emeritus Professor of Town Planning at Reading University and despite his specialist knowledge, was happy to accept information from members of Project Purley to clarify points he made during the evening. He spoke in a clear, loud voice with a pleasant Welsh lilt and enhanced his talk with a series of colourful and easy to understand graphs, maps and photographs. We are all now much more aware of the reasons for the somewhat erratic growth of Pangbourne.

David Downs

Humphry Repton in Berkshire

Project Purley members gathered at The Barn on Friday evening, March 19th for the society's Annual General Meeting, which was to be followed by a talk from Ben Viljoen entitled "Humphry Repton in Berkshire". Ben's talk would be a change from the advertised programme owing to the indisposition of the original speaker.

The AGM passed off smoothly, the chairman's annual report and treasurer's accounts being accepted by those present, and the officers and committee re-elected. Peter Perugia and Tony Trendle had announced their intention to stand down from the committee and were thanked for their efforts.

There was an interval for wine and nibbles, kindly provided by Catherine Sampson, then members reassembled to listen to Ben, who had prepared his talk at just a few days notice. He explained that this was not quite as arduous a task as it might seem because he had given a similar talk about Repton to the Berkshire Gardens Trust for its inaugural lecture. It was also appropriate for the talk to be given in The Barn as it was built around 1730 (though some of the oldest timbers date from 1540) and Purley was featured in one of Repton's Red Books for Berkshire. The Barn was used as a remount centre in World War One, and administered by Cecil Aldin, Master of the South Berks Hunt, which was based in Purley. Horses were taught not to bolt at the sound of gunfire, though many of them were maimed and slaughtered in battle.

Having set the scene, Ben went on to tell us about Repton's life. He saw himself as a successor to Lancelot "Capability" Brown, probably the greatest and certainly the most financially successful landscapists of all time. Repton was born in 1752, sent to Holland to learn Dutch, and returned to England to become a merchant. He then set up in business as a mail venturer, before moving to Essex in 1786 and deciding to become a landscape gardener. In 1793, when his career was in full bloom, he carried out his Purley commission. By that time he had improved over 100 properties and produced 60 Red Books, each one detailing changes he had made to a property. In 1811 Repton was involved in a carriage accident and subsequently

confined to a wheelchair. He died in 1818, aged 66, as a result of a heart attack.

Whereas Brown dealt exclusively with the aristocracy, Repton had to work harder to find his clientele among the nouveau riche. He felt obliged to protect Brown's reputation, but at the same time considered some of his work to be too bland, too uniform. At a time when there was much controversy about the styles of landscaping, Repton moved away from Brown's beauty and smoothness to introduce a more picturesque design. This innovation meant that a landscape could be made more interesting by the addition of details such as cows, people, trees and indentations to break up the scenery and roughen the edges.

Ben mentioned several properties in the South of England, including Gidea Hall in the parish of Harestreet on which Repton had worked. The owner of Gidea Hall was Richard Benyon, one of a long line of Benyons who eventually took over the Englefield estate where the family still resides. Our speaker now turned his attention to the specifics of Repton's influence in Berkshire.

Repton worked on 11 sites in Berkshire and completed three Red Books. Ben had completed only light research on three properties: Bear Hill, Chilton Lodge and Holme Park, which is now the Bluecoat School at Sunning. More information was offered to the Project Purley audience about Sunning Hill, bought by James Sibbald, a prominent banker, in 1788. In 1790 Sibbald commissioned Repton to create a lake in the valley the house overlooked. This Repton did after considering several options, though his advice about building a new house was ignored. Today the ground belongs to Imperial College, but the lake is in a sorry state and the bridge is dilapidated.

The property best known to members was undoubtedly Purley Magna, acquired by Anthony Morris Storer, MP, in 1793. Storer, who never said a word in Parliament and became latterly and briefly the British Ambassador in Paris, invited Repton to Purley to discuss possible designs for his house and land. Repton completed a Red Book for Purley. This book was thought to be lost but, after more than 200 years, was brought to one of our members, Jean Debney, by Peter Fullerton a co-lateral descendant of Storer. Peter Fullerton kindly



Suggestion for a bridge from the Purley Red Book

allowed Project Purley to copy the book.

Repton made several recommendations, including having a new house located near the river, and the church refaced to match the newly built house. The pictures he drew did not convince Storer, even though he also advanced the argument that the location the MP wanted would make the views from the building too harsh in the direct sunlight. But even this suggested disadvantage did not deter Storer, who insisted the new house be built on high ground because of his fear of flooding. Not all Repton's advice was ignored however, and his relocation plan for the farm buildings, including The Barn in which our meeting was taking place, was implemented. Purley Magna still stands today of course, high on a hill and has been converted into three apartments, one on each floor.

Other commissions in Berkshire for Repton were Maiden Earley, Woodley Lodge, The Queen's Lodge at Frogmore, Holly Grove Windsor, Warfield Grove, Saint Leonard's Hill and Coombe Lodge, which although it was not precisely in Berkshire, was close enough to be of interest.

Ben concluded his hour-long talk by placing Repton's importance in the history of English landscape gardening. Not as prolific as Capability Brown, he nevertheless relentlessly pursued the theme of polite taste in everything he created. He was keen on the introduction of water features to reflect the sky, and the spacing of planting to create an illusion of distance. He clients were obsessed with privacy and he improved their sites to maximise this.

Finally our speaker confessed that he was embarrassed to be considered by the Swiss art historian Andre Rogger as a scholar and aficionado of the 18th century disciplines of art and history, as they

are reflected in landscape gardening. I can assure Ben that those enthusiastic but amateurish gardeners among us who were intrigued by Ben's talk are in awe of his knowledge, and wholeheartedly concur with Monsieur Rogger.

David Downs

Great Western Railway

On Friday, the 16th April our Chairman, John Chapman, took on the role of speaker for the evening and the following is his summary of the talk.

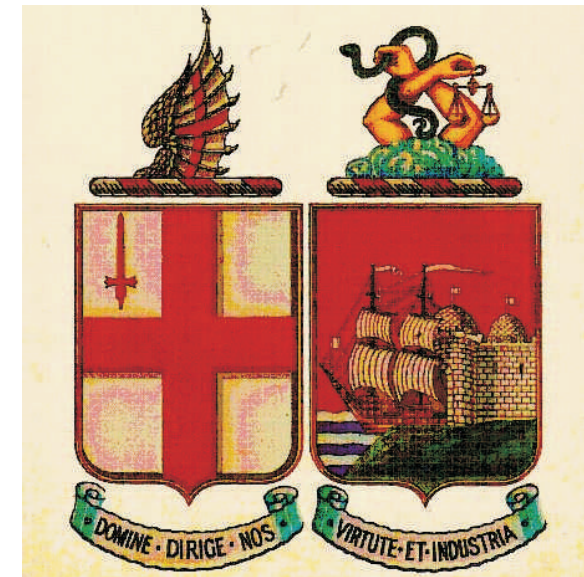
Before the coming of the railways the ability to carry people and goods over long distances was strictly limited. Heavy goods were hauled in huge lumbering carts by large teams of horses and you had to be fairly well off to have a carriage. Also the state of the roads was worse than awful. Things improved with the turnpikes and stage coaches provided some sort of public transport system. Canals were developed to carry heavy goods.

The GWR was conceived by Merchants in Bristol as a short cut in a journey from New York to London, and the first Bill was proposed in 1824 as a railway with a corresponding turnpike to collect passengers between stations and just off the route. Although fully subscribed the proposal failed.

A new Bill was promoted in 1833 when Isambard Kingdom Brunel was appointed as Engineer - this included a line through Windsor, Newbury and Devizes with some very long tunnels but it was strenuously opposed by landowners, the canal companies and Eton College. The name Great Western Railway was proposed but as a member of the House of Lords observed - it was neither Great, nor Western or even a railway.

The route was resurveyed by Brunel to run via Southall, Didcot and Chippenham and most of the tunnels were replaced by cuttings. Brunel achieved a most remarkable mathematical feat in his cut and fill calculations which gave an almost level railway with only a few hundred tons of spoil over. The new Bill received Royal Assent in 1835.

The Bill gave the railway the right to compulsorily purchase land and Brunel hired many teams of contractors and each set out to build their bit of the railway. The British contractors devised methods which were so efficient that over the next 50 years or so they were hired to build railways all over the world - local contractors just could not compete.



*The badge of the Great Western Railway,
based on the coats of arms of the City of London and the City of Bristol*

Brunel designed every last detail - even down to his own special screws. He had a standard range of buildings and bridges which could be readily adapted to local situations. But he also tried to design and specify locomotives and at that he was a disaster - about 20 years behind the times. He was forced to employ the young Daniel Gooch as his locomotive engineer.

The first section of line from London to Maidenhead (actually Taplow) was opened on 4th June 1838 but so dreadful were the locomotives Brunel had ordered they were unable to keep to the timetable and Gooch had to do a vast amount of work to keep two or three locomotives operational. He eventually designed his own Firefly Class which were immensely successful.

The Thames at Maidenhead posed a real problem as the river authorities required that river traffic must be unimpeded - Brunel's standard designs were of no use so he designed a brand new bridge with shallow brick arches - everyone said it would fall down - but it didn't and is still there today.

The proposed tunnels on either side of Reading were replaced by deep cuttings at Sonning and Purley and the line to Steventon opened 1st June 1840 and later a branch from Didcot to Oxford was constructed.

At the same time construction had started from the Bristol end and the line to Bath was opened on 31st August 1840, Chippenham was reached from Steventon on the 31st May 1841 and on June 30th when Box tunnel was completed it became possible to traverse the whole route from Bristol to London.

Branches were built to Windsor, Oxford and Newbury and then to Cheltenham and under the direction of Charles Russell a thriving business was established which saw off most of the canals. Expansion to Penzance, Birkenhead and Fishguard followed and soon they had a very comprehensive travel business which eventually got into hotels, steamships, package holidays, buses and aeroplanes.

Initially the first station from Paddington was West Drayton but the Enclosure Acts had allowed developers to build estates on the fringes of London and the railway built stations to serve these new communities. A deal was done with the North London Railway to provide a link from Acton to London Docks and with the Metropolitan railway to link to the markets at Smithfield and Covent Garden and to the City of London.

Initially rolling stock was based either on stage coaches or

farmers' carts but a terrible accident in Sonning cutting on Christmas Eve 1841 when a goods train hit a slippage in the cutting side killing 8 third class passengers and severely injuring another 17, caused the Board of Trade to begin to take rail safety seriously. Initially signalling had been a matter of hand signals but this was so obviously inadequate that other methods had to be devised. The GWR introduced a simple ball and crossbar system.

The GWR ran to a gauge of seven feet which enabled trains to be much bigger, faster and more stable, but the rest of the country were adopting Stephenson's standard gauge of 4ft 8½ ins. The Manchester and Southampton Railway got the right to build a standard gauge line in 1844 which meant that the GWR from Birmingham to Basingstoke had to have dual gauge track. Eventually the complications of dual gauge became so uneconomic that finally the GWR gave way and the last Broad Gauge train ran in 1892.



Purley Lane Bridge, wider on left because of original broad gauge track.

In the early 1850s there was a take over bid by interests in South Wales and the Midlands and Brunel was sacked after the railway ran into severe financial difficulties. He turned his hand to building Steam Ships and died on September 15th 1859. Daniel Gooch bought Brunel's Great Eastern and pioneered laying transoceanic cables to link the Empire. He became an MP and very wealthy.

John Chapman

John is very knowledgeable about his subject and spent some time after the talk finished answering questions from the audience. He was warmly thanked by members and visitors alike for a fascinating and informative evening.

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