

THE PROJECT PURLEY JOURNAL

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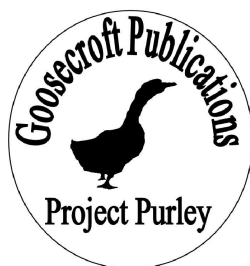
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The Electric Tramway System of Reading - 1903-1939

by Tony Trendle

If the question were posed by Project Purley members concerning their memory of trams in Reading, it is likely a negative reply would be elicited from most; and a further question asked if one remembered travelling on a tram in Reading, it is doubtful if a favourable recollection could evoke. Possibly I am an exception to the rule inasmuch as, as a boy of four years old, I managed to persuade my uncle, a publican resident at The Truro in Castle Street, and an ex-



Horse drawn tram [M080016]

Reading player, to take me on a tram ride. With reluctance, but to his credit, not only did he take me on a memorable journey from the Butts Centre to Caversham Bridge, but with some remaining objection agreed to my insistence to climb the winding stair to the open top, where the trolley arm self elevated to the ominous electrified cable overhead, and, suspended barely feet

above our heads, screeching a harmony of sound, interspersed by sparks and clunks. The sheer thrill of this experience, was equivalent to that of a four year old boy today, in 2017, who steps aboard the London Eye, or travels on Concorde, permeating a lasting and unforgettable memory in the brain, as well as encumbering a permanent love of trams and a huge regret that they were allowed to be superseded by the characterless trolley bus.

The town of Reading grew from a hamlet resting on the confluence

nce of the Rivers Thames and Kennet, and leapfrogged in size and importance over a period of a thousand years, by comparison to surrounding longer established towns such as Newbury and Wokingham, to become after the introduction of the railway, an important centre boasting a population before the turn of the century of over 60000 souls.

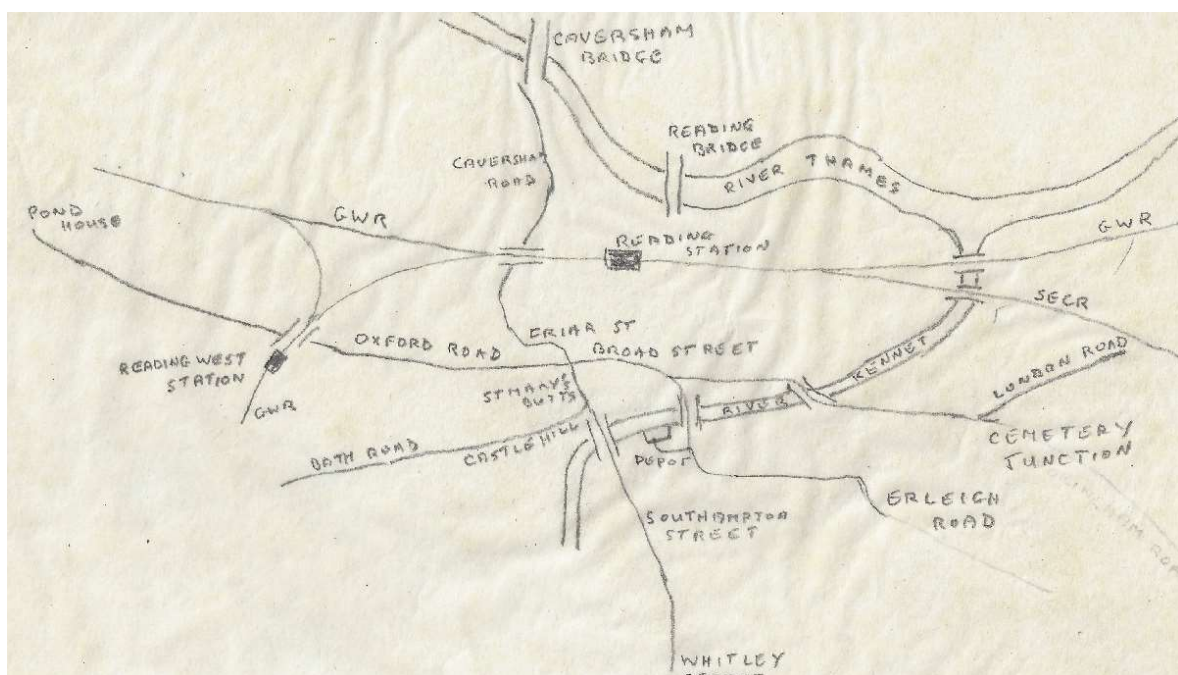
Thus when the Tramways Act was passed, Reading Tramways Company was formed and in 1879 the first tram route was constructed crossing the town from east to west commencing its journey from Cemetery Junction, through the town centre, and terminating at Brock Barracks on the Oxford Road, a journey of just over two miles, the initial cost being just over £11,000. Horse drawn carriages were conveyed on tracks four feet in width and by 1890 13 of these vehicles provided the service, with a fleet of 85 horses. But over the next four or five years, and with a heavily increasing population, Reading Council's ambition was to advance to electrification by overhead wire, and these plans were realised on the 22nd July 1903 by three routes all converging in and out of the town centre,

Oxford Road (Brock Barracks) to Lower Wokingham Road

Bath Road to London Road

Caversham Bridge to Whitley Street

all traversing or crossing Broad Street.



Sketch map of the tram routes [M080019]



The junction of Broad St and St Mary Butts [M080009]

Some changes took place during the life of 36 years some of these routes enjoyed. The Bath Road route was terminated in 1930, and then the Erleigh Road route two years later. The route from Caversham Bridge to Whitley was closed in 1936, leaving only two

routes to remain until the demise of Reading Tramways in May 1939, when trolleybuses replaced the tram.

Returning to the conversion from horse drawn to electric, in mid-July 1903 vast crowds thronged Broad Street for an inspection and approval by the Board of Trade by running a tram along the system, and barely a week later an even greater audience gathered around the Mill Lane depot, when the Mayor drove the first tram in a procession of cars filled to the brim with passengers making a round trip of the Oxford to Lower Wokingham Roads, with trams on return filling with paying customers taking their first exciting electric driven



*The inaugural service 23rd July 1903
[M080002]*



Broad Street looking eastwards in 1904 [M080008]

ride. It is worth noting that in coming days and years this journey by tram from one terminus to the other took 18 minutes in 1903, a time quite similar today when travelling the same route by Reading Buses.

Designing and running these routes encountered many obstacles, one instance being the low elevation bridge crossing the Oxford Road at Reading West Bridge. The trams, being doubled decked with open roof and trolley needed safe clearance, and thus the road was lowered to facilitate both trolley and wires. This thoughtful solution only caused further ongoing problems inasmuch as flooding often occurred after heavy rain, with trams ploughing through waves of water to the chagrin



On Oxford Road - The Reading West Bridge is in the background [M080007]



Queues of supporters waiting for a tram to take them along the Oxford Road to see Reading play Brentford in 1927 at Elm Park [M080014]

of passers-by. Eventually a steel girder bridge was built in 1938 by which time, regrettably, trams were facing extinction.

At the commencement of tramway service in Reading, 30 trams were built at Preston, designed for 22 seats on the lower, and 28 on the upper decks. After 10 years in service, most had completely new bodies built at the Mill Lane Depot, four side windows, a quarter turn staircase, vestibule ends, and in lovely livery of maroon and cream.

Remarkably at the end of service in 1939, 24 of the original cars remained in daily service. Further stock was added as replacements became necessary, and in 1904 with eight instead of four wheels and holding 70 passengers, these cars proved to be faster and with improved braking. Additionally to this population, was a car containing a snow plough. Each tram in service included a conductor and driver (called Motorman), tickets being issued to passengers by the

conductor. Many tickets issued were merely one penny, and were alternatively sold in packets, 24 costing 16 pence and three farthings. The highest priced ticket appears to be three pence.

By 1907 the trams in Reading reached their highest popularity in terms of public usage, and office and transport staff numbered over 90 people. When warfare arose in 1914, women replaced most of the men, many woman becoming competent drivers, and remained in an important role until transition in 1939. The drawings show the eight wheeler/double bogie car introduced to displace some of the four wheelers, allowing faster speeds, better braking, vestibules at each end, and most importantly, featuring 70 seats on two decks, catering for Reading's fast rising population, which by 1914 rose to over 230,000 including one or two of the satellite towns springing up into greater maturity, and with further significant increase to an urban population of 318,000 by 1917. Also, note the half circular stairway at each end allowing easy access and egress.

Records show a very profitable contribution and growing numbers of users of Reading tramways, but during their eras of popularity, menacing methods of alternative public transport arose, suggesting advantages over trams. In 1919 auto buses were introduced and in 1929 the first double decker covered bus came in the shape of a Leyland Titan, the Bath Road tram line was closed, followed in 1932 with the closure of the Erleigh Road line. Worse was to come when on 18 July 1936 trolleybuses arrived, eventually taking over all the tramway routes with four routes of their own, and 63 trolleybuses operating until they too, were replaced by 3rd November 1968. Members may be interested to learn that five Reading trolleybuses still exist in the Trolleybus Museum at Sandtoft near Grantham, which is sponsored and maintained by the British Trolleybus Society. Not such an endearing supportership favoured defunct trams, often ending their lives as garden sheds.

Trams served Reading so well within a short golden age, but not only remain a popular form of public transport throughout Europe, but are regenerating in eight cities within the United Kingdom, largely due to their very low running costs favourably comparing to petrol and diesel forms of transport. So will trams return to Reading? One tramophile produced the following plan, discussed at

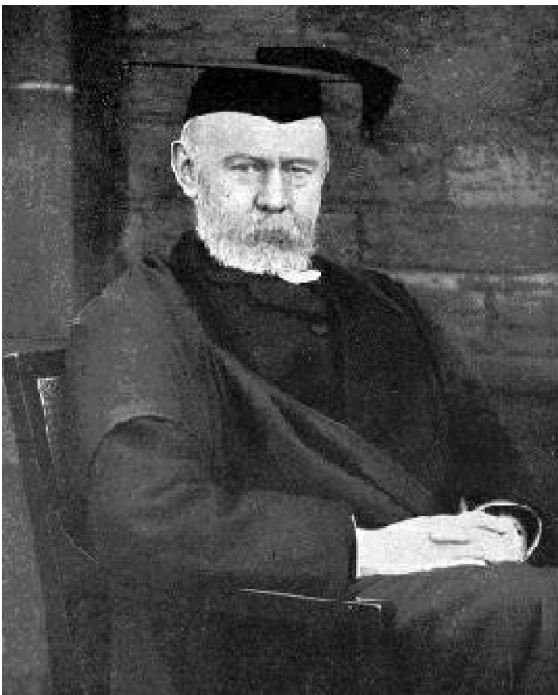
Reading Town Hall in 2016. My objection to this plan is that no line is shown to Purley swiftly cutting out the trauma of Long Lane and Overdown Road but instead rolling us seamlessly to Broad Street, as in the glorious past.

The Purley Scandal

by John Chapman

Mrs Rebecca Moule became head teacher at Purley C of E School in 1895 and she not only improved the discipline of the children, but also their educational standards. New books and materials were soon ordered to boost the poor equipment in use. For twelve years she was an efficient head whilst her husband Joseph Moule was employed by the Parish as Sexton.

The name *The Purley Scandal* was given to the matter which raged from Purley to the House of Commons in 1908. It concerned Mrs Rebecca Moule who had been head mistress of the village school since 1895. Her daughter had been married but had returned to her mother's home soon after a baby was born. Mrs Moule was dismissed because this arrangement offended the rector. Her case was taken up by the National Union of Teachers but she was not reinstated.



John Dudley-Matthews when he was headmaster at Leeds [M050627]

Her only daughter had become pregnant and at the end of July 1907, three days after Mrs Moule got to know of her condition, the daughter was married. After the marriage the daughter left home and did not return until after the child was born. On 21st November she returned to the village to live with her mother.

Upon hearing this, the rector, the Reverend John Dudley Matthews sent for her and subjected her to a grilling. She answered all his questions as best she could. The rector then wrote to her saying he expected her to

make a promise that her daughter and the child must be driven away for at least six months.

Mrs Moule asked on November 30th if she could be present at the next meeting of the school managers so that she could explain her circumstances. This the rector would not agree to. She was however summoned to a second meeting a short while later and after the case had been considered she was dismissed.

The view taken by the managers was that Mrs Moule had been engaged on a contract which allowed for a termination with three



The school around this period [M000310]

months notice on either side. In view of the publicity which the case had aroused they felt it would not be in the best interests of the school for her to continue. The matter was referred to a subcommittee of the County Council's Education Committee. They took the view that the managers had acted quite properly within their delegated powers and that they should not interfere. It would have been a very serious matter for the sub-committee to have passed a vote of

censure on the managers and this they were not prepared to do. The only sanction they would have would be to withhold maintenance funds.

The recommendation went to the full Education Committee who supported the sub-committee on the casting vote of the chairman.

Meanwhile Mrs Moule had appealed to the National Union of Teachers for assistance and the case had attracted widespread press

coverage. There were even questions asked in the House of Commons. A petition was drawn up on her behalf.

The pressure for action was so great that eventually a special meeting of the County Council was called for Saturday 13th June 1908 at which the matter was considered in detail.

The debate was on a motion put forward by Cllr CW Cox of Bray:-That this Council desires to strongly express its opinion that the circumstances under which the managers of the Purley Church of England School have given notice to their headmistress to terminate her engagement do not justify the Education Committee in giving their sanction to the action of the managers, and urge upon the Education Committee the desirability of reconsidering their report with a view to the reinstatement of the headmistress. The chairman immediately ruled the last part (underlined) as being out of order, and confirmed that whatever the outcome there was no question of Mrs Moule being reinstated at Purley.

After Councillor Cox had put the case for Mrs Moule and Cllr A J Lawrence seconded the matter of the position of the Borough representatives was raised. The chairman stated that they could speak but not vote.

Cllr Petrocockino, who represented Purley, attacked the way Mrs Moule had put her case in her written representations to members of Council. He said there were several parents in the village who would refuse to send their children to school if she were there. There was a great deal of support for Mrs Moule from members of the Council however the general feeling was that while an injustice had been done it would be neither practical nor politic to reinstate her. The main wish was to see that a similar case would never occur and that suitable employment could be found elsewhere for Mrs Moule.

After considerable argument the original motion was withdrawn and the Council approved:- That this Council expresses a wish that the Education Committee, should opportunity offer, sanction Mrs Moule's appointment to a post similar to that which she has recently held.

The debate raged over a wide number of issues, of which the chief were:-

Whether a public board were obliged to act with humanity as well as with the letter of the law.

Whether the County Council should have intervened.

Whether it was in the interests of the children that Mrs Moule should remain.

The role of the NUT.

Whether it was right to punish someone without first giving them an opportunity to defend themselves.

Whether it was right to punish a mother for the sins of her daughter.

A detailed account of the incident appeared in 'The Schoolmaster'. Mrs Moule was supported financially by the NUT for some time after her dismissal but she never took up another post in Berkshire. She left Berkshire in September 1908 to live in Farnham.

At their meeting on 17th February the Managers appointed Miss E M A Mulford as the new teacher to take over on 1st June at a salary of £37-10-0 (c)

Miss Harris took over as headmistress in 1909, but she too did not stay long. The Rector was drowned in the Thames in December 1914. Some unkind people thought it a punishment for the way he had treated Mrs Moule.

Meetings Reports

History of Salter's Steamers

Simon Wenham has put together a fascinating history of the Salter Brothers boat business, from the time the brothers John and Stephen Salter set up a boatyard at Folly Bridge in Oxford in 1858, to the present day. Most of the information has come from records held by Salters, and offered to Simon when he worked for the company, on the boats and in the offices. The records were in the company offices, preserved in many, many cardboard boxes on top of cupboards, in piles beside cupboards, and tucked away in corners all over the place - a filing system familiar to many Project Purley members!

The brothers were brought up by the Thames in Feathers Boat House in Wandsworth, which was bought by the Salter family in

1836, and where a third brother Henry (Harry) trained rowers. Competitive rowing on the Thames was a serious business, with big prizes for winning teams, and the family started building boats. After the move to Oxford, their rowing expertise meant that from 1861 (just three years after the move) until 1869, Salters built all the winning boats in the Oxford boat race.

Salters expanded into building different and bigger boats. One of the more interesting was a paddle steamer for transportation overland to the Congo for a missionary society, but mostly they were boats for the increasingly popular pleasure boating market on the Thames. Many of these were small boats for hire by the day, but there were also large boats for big parties – often works outings – to take day trips on the river. The hire business expanded hugely during the last years of the 19th century, with Folly Bridge being the busiest landing stage on the Thames in 1888, and Salters being an important business for both Oxford and the Thames.

Cars brought major competition to the leisure transport market, as well as competition for staff in Oxford from the Morris works at



A Salter's Steamer [M002038]

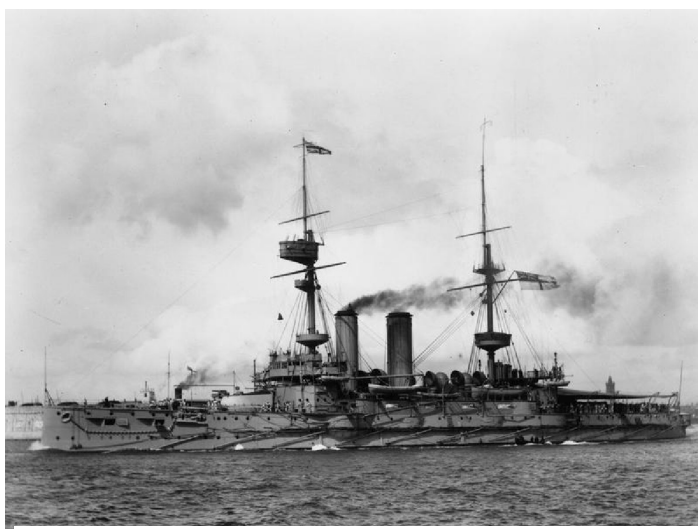
Cowley, and the rental market for small boats declined from its peak in the late 1880s, when Salters owned about 900 boats. Specialist boat building continued through the first half of the 20th century, but it is the passenger boat business, both scheduled and private hire, that has survived until now. There were tie-ups with Great Western Railways in the 1950s and 60s for circular rail/river tours, and peak years for passenger numbers were in the 1970s. The passenger boats are still popular, with staff and customers alike, and the Salter boats are a very familiar sight on our stretch of the Thames. The business remains in the control of the Salter family, now into the 5th generation of the family working in the business. Part of their success may perhaps be attributed to their teetotal Methodist background, and their longevity – the original Stephen Salter lived to 103!

It was a very interesting and well-illustrated talk, and for those who want to know more of the Salter Brothers history, The History Press has published Simon Wenham's book 'Pleasure Boating on the Thames: A history of Salter Bros 1858-present day'.

Gillian Wallace

Forgotten Wrecks of WW1

Stephen Fisher was the speaker at Project Purley's February meeting on the subject of the Forgotten Wrecks of the First World War. Stephen is a researcher on the Forgotten Wrecks project, being delivered by the Maritime Archaeology Trust to contribute to the Imperial War Museum's Lives of the First World War initiative. His talk started with some facts about the First World War at sea: 4,223 ships lost: 2,479 merchants, 254 warships, 675 fishing boats, 815 auxiliaries; about 57,000 lives lost, including approximately 30,000 with no known grave. Plenty of material to work on then.



*HMS Formidable sunk by U-24 31/12/1914
[M070117] (IWM)*

When we think of the First World War, the images that come to mind first are usually the trenches, mud, shell holes and ruins in France and Belgium. But the war at sea covered a much greater geographic area than Europe, where most of the land battles were fought. The Forgotten Wrecks project, based in Southampton and with a completion deadline of May 2018, is working on the mere 1,100 wrecks on the South coast of the United Kingdom.



SS Londinier sunk by UC71 12/3/1918 [M070115] (IWM)

Most of the wrecks need divers to investigate and photograph them. Conditions are often cold, occasionally stormy, and with visibility a metre or less. Despite the conditions, the dive teams are now taking hundreds of high resolution photographs of the wrecks to enable researchers in more comfortable surroundings to look around virtual 3D models, and sometimes to see more than the divers on site can see. By the end of the project, these models will be on the website for everyone to look at.

Surprisingly, only seven of the wrecks on the South Coast have been protected, five by war grave legislation (which covers only warships) and two by Historic England. A UNESCO convention kicks in at the 100 year anniversary of a sinking (or any site) where people lost their lives. This means that nearly all the wrecks will have some protection by the end of 2018, but in the meantime they are vulnerable to weather, accidental damage from other ships and even souvenir hunters. Many artefacts from the ships are already in private hands or museums, and the project is trying to find and identify these to include details with the information being collected on each of the ships, which will all be available to see online.

The talk was illustrated with beautiful photographs and some grim statistics, and covered many tragic and some almost comic stories of sinkings off our South coast. One merchant ship, the SS Indian City, was intercepted by a German U-boat a few miles west of Lands End. Before the ship was torpedoed and sunk, the crew



Two German destroyers V44 and V82 which had surrendered and been taken to Portsmouth Harbour to be used for gunnery practice and forgotten about for 80 years [M070116] (IWM)

were given 20 minutes to get into the lifeboats, which were taken in tow by the U-boat. The captain was entertained by the U-boat captain and his officers (all speaking excellent English) and given a glass of wine and a map of the Scilly Isles, where the lifeboats were cast off, and all crew survived! Our navy wasn't quite so gentlemanly, when HMS Dreadnought sank the U-boat the next day.

Stephen Fisher is an excellent speaker, whose enthusiasm and expertise in the subject made for a great talk, which was very well received by the members. Maps and stories of the WW1 wrecks, and information about the project and the techniques involved are on the website www.forgottenwrecks.org.

Gillian Wallace

Annual General Meeting

The Society's 35th Annual General Meeting took place at the Barn on Friday, 17th March.

Following the recording of apologies for absence and the adoption of the minutes of the 34th AGM, the Chairman spoke about her five years in office at the start of which the Queen's Jubilee celebrations took place and Project Purley staged the Reigning Queens' Exhibition which attracted over 750 visitors. Since then the Society has put together or supported a number of smaller exhibitions and displays, seen the publication of our 100th edition of the Journal and enjoyed a succession of speakers, trips, barbeques and Christmas parties.

During 2016 our speakers were largely from within our own membership and the Chairman thanked Richard McDonald, Janet Southall and Rita Denman who spoke about the stories they had uncovered about relatives who had served in the First World War; Lee Hall, Jean Chudleigh and John Chapman who spoke about national and local celebrations of the Queen's 90th Birthday and David Downs who shared with us the celebrations enjoyed by his wife's uncle's 100th Birthday. We had talks about Purley, Sulham, Stonor House, Douai in France and even further afield to Zambia. All the speakers were thanked and Gillian Wallace who organised the refreshment rota, Ann Betts who runs the bookstall and everyone who has made tea and coffee over the last year or helped to set

up or take down the chairs and tables.

Last year's visits to Hugenden Manor and Sudeley Castle were well attended and thanks went to Jean Chudleigh for organising them. The barbeque was very successful (thanks went to our hosts, Dorothy and Ben Viljoen) and the Christmas party was as enjoyable as ever.

Thanks went to John Chapman and Ann Betts who produced the three Journals during the year and to regular contributors; Gillian Wallace (meeting reports) and Rita Denman (nature notes). Also to members who have contributed articles for the Journal.

John Chapman was thanked for all the work he is putting into organising the Society's archive and Barbara Finkle and Gillian Wallace who help with the organising and mounting of the collection behind the scenes.

The Rain or Shine Theatre Company once again performed to packed crowds and this year money was raised for the Blind Children's Society and the Intensive Care Unit at the RBH, the latter in memory of David Edwards who sadly died in 2016. David Downs was thanked for his part in organising these events.

The Chairman commented on the fact that the Society now has well over 100 members and she thanked the members and everyone who has served on the Committee. She particularly thanked Martin Bishop who is standing down from the Committee, also Ann Betts (Secretary) who stands down having completed five years and Marjorie Butler (Treasurer).

In the Treasurer's absence, her report was read to the meeting. She confirmed the Society is in a good position but pointed out the Journal costs were higher than usual for 2016 because of the cost of producing the special 100th edition and speakers' costs were low because many of the talks had been given by members. The accounts were put to the members and were adopted.

The Chairman, having complete five years in office, then stood down and John Chapman was proposed and elected Chairman. Marjorie Butler was proposed and re-elected Treasurer and Ann Betts, having stood down as Secretary under the five year rule, was

replaced by Catherine Sampson who was proposed and elected Secretary. The Committee (Mike Adnett, Pam Beddoes, Ann Betts, Jean Chudleigh, David Downs and Gillian Wallace) were proposed and elected en bloc.

Ann Betts

Growing up in Sulham and Tidmarsh

After the Annual General Meeting Jean Harland talked about her family, living and working on the Sulham estate, and about Sulham Valley from the 1800s until the 1930s. The talk was illustrated with photographs taken by (appropriately) Freddie Wilder.

The talk sketched the history of the Wilder family in Sulham, from the grant of land at Nunhide by Henry VII to Nicholas Wilder in 1497. Highlights of the history included the building of the Folly in the 1700s by Henry Wilder, to further his courtship of a Sulhamstead lady, the long line of Wilder rectors at Sulham church, and the week-long celebration in 1997 by the Wilder family of their 500 years in the Sulham Valley.

It was the domestic details that brought the magic moments in the talk. There was Box Cottage, where Jean's great grandparents lived, and where her great grandfather dug the garden in the evenings, after a full day working at Purley Hall. And the laundry room is still there, where her great grandmother did the estate laundry, brought on a cart every week (and it took all week!). There was the description of the garden at Sulham House in the 1930s, where all the local children could play on Sunday afternoons after church. We were told that the Rev Henry Wilder of the time was 'a stickler for rules' so perhaps attendance was required before you could play on all the toys in the garden. The garden isn't open to the public now, but the family host the Sulham and Tidmarsh fete in the garden when it is Sulham's turn every two years.

The Wilders had a long history of looking after their tenants well, providing housing, a school (where Jean and her son both started) and even a medical surgery for minor ailments and first aid. But there was reportedly one failing – a common one even now, not just amongst the gentry. The Wilders bought a car around the turn



Box Cottage on Sulham Lane [M080001]

of the century and they enjoyed showing it off. Jean's grandfather was their driver, and was instructed to drive round the village a couple of times to make sure it was seen! Jean showed us a photograph of the car with her grandfather, and it really was beautiful, so there were a good few in the audience who would do the same now.

All of the audience enjoyed the well illustrated talk, with the links back over the years being brought to light so well by Jean.

Gillian Wallace

Nature Notes

By Rita Denman

St Andrew's Day, November 30th was the last day of the meteorological autumn and the coldest November Day in the UK for 6 years. At Benson in Oxfordshire the temperature was minus 9°C. The autumn spectacular of intense long lasting colour has run its course and winter weather arrived in the last days of November. White thickly frosted fields with foot stamping finger tingling temperatures were all the more noticeable compared with recent mild weather.

A pink sky over Purley, with mist on the river greeted me when I drew the curtains and I was in time to see a skein of geese in formation fly low to alight in a frosty field where swans with cygnets were already settled. A few Egyptian geese were noticeable for their exotic colouring.

9th December. Weather has been cloudy, mild,damp and foggy and the trees are now bare. I stood in the garden at mid day listening to the sounds of Purley. The loudest was the honking of geese up and down the river. Rooks cawed and small birds twittered nearby. There was a drone of airliners overhead and the children out to play at the school.

December 16th. Apart from the very occasional burst of sunshine the past few days have been drear and dark, barely getting light the whole day. It is a shadowy world of bare branches and half formed images as fog has been widespread causing problems on the road. Increased traffic due to the train strike has added to the chaos.

December 24th The sheep have arrived at Home Farm for winter grazing. They have lined themselves along the far boundary hedge to make the most of an early morning burst of sunshine. In the next field the geese and swans have had the same impulse and continue a long line of animals and birds basking at the edge of the fields. A small flock of geese fly in to join the throng but unexpectedly the lead bird is a swan.

Villagers are hand delivering seasonal greetings cards to their neighbours and as dusk falls a few discreet white lights twinkle in the bare trees and holly wreaths decorating front doors are lit by porch lights. Lights in windows hint at the warmth and preparations going on inside for the most anticipated day of the year. The village becomes very quiet with just a few dog walkers and pedestrians wandering through the village street.

December 30th. English weather has kept its reputation for variety. Within a few days there was a near record for the warmest December day in this area and then the temperatures plummeted to around freezing. An opaque foggy light all day with weather warnings were extended as the fog barely moved. A number of

serious accidents and traffic disruption was reported in Oxfordshire. There was no-one about in the old village and very few cars moved. There was just silence and thick white frost covering everything. Little birds have been grateful for seed put out in the feeders. Long tailed tits, robins and dunnocks visited the garden.

January 6th 2017. Due to fog the outlook in Purley has been limited and temperatures have yo-yo-ed from 6°C to minus 8°C but it has been minus 25°C in Moscow!

January 13th The UK has been in a turbulent phase of weather coming from all directions. Gale force winds, snow and heavy rain have been prevalent in different parts of the country. We have added a new weather word to our vocabulary. Thundersnow is apparently a thunder and lightning storm but with snow instead of rain and is connected to temperature. The prospect of the south east region being affected prompted all kinds of precautions including cancellations at Heathrow. This scenario hung over the area for 48 hours. Our valley escaped with just a sprinkling of snow on the hills. As I was preparing my breakfast on a dark miserable morning suddenly the room lit up as though a huge lamp had been turned on. It was a brief appearance of the sun through a chink in very low cloud making it difficult to see where the sun was actually coming from. It lasted for seconds and the gloom returned.

January 21st Small birds are beginning to be busy and their song is quite springlike. Bulbs are beginning to show growth in the garden and catkins are hanging on the hazels. Buds are fattening on the flowering trees. The British Halley Weather Station in the antarctic is positioned on an ice shelf. This week it was moved to safety as a large crack has been forming which would have eventually left the station on a floating ice island.

January 28th A warmer day was a welcome change to the cold frost and fog which has dominated the week but the frosty weather has made for some beautiful landscapes. A waning moon with Venus very bright in the south western sky has been visible on clear cold nights. The frost has been so hard for several days that the boats on the Kennet and Avon Canal through Berkshire have been ice bound bringing a halt to all restoration and maintenance work.

February 4th The last day of January was dark, mild, foggy and wet. February is traditionally the 'fill dyke' month and it too began

dark, mild, foggy and wet with occasional short-lived bursts of sunshine to relieve the dreariness. The Thames is running fast, very high and muddy. The annual RSPB bird count took place on a dark miserable day and there were few birds in my garden. Weather presenters referred to the 70th anniversary of the very hard winter of 1947. Some readers will remember it well for the bitter cold and snow that lasted from January to March and the shortage of coal.

February 10th. More dark and wet or dark and foggy weather is not the sort that does creaky joints or wheezy chests any good. An unexpected day of springlike weather brought a Red Admiral butterfly out of hibernation. It fluttered around the window and settled in the sun for a moment and was gone. Then the weather returned to winter with snow flurries. Weather forecasting is difficult with fronts and lows, winds and high pressure moving in all directions with a very fast flowing jet stream.

February 17th The sun has come out and for a few days it has felt that spring is in the air. The birds are doing some serious singing at dawn and dusk. Six swans and their cygnets have adopted Oak Tree field as their winter quarters and it is an iconic sight to see a pair of swans coming in, in unison for touch down.

February 25th Storm Doris affected most parts of the UK. It was ferocious but fortunately short lived. Clouds were very black and fast moving, garden furniture was blown about and Purley lost a few trees. Betty and Flo were caught in a sudden down pour and rushed home in a very disgruntled state hurling themselves through the cat flap. A red kite seemed to enjoy the rough conditions and was able to ride the gale force gusts by banking and circling but rooks were thrown off course and the little birds stayed well under shelter. On the grey murky mornings that were prevalent there was a moment when the daylight was strong enough to backlight the bare trees bringing their structures into focus.

March 7th. A red sky in the morning is a shepherd's warning. The eastern sky is grey and heavy with no sign of a sunrise but in the north it is tinged with red and pink. The clouds are traveling west to east. Maybe the sign of an umbrella day. If March comes in like a lion it goes out like a lamb. This year it came in with mighty roar.

Swans are still in their winter quarters in oak tree field with their cygnets and a few colourful Egyptian geese. A rook on its own is a crow and a crow seems to have taken up residence in the meadow. I will need to prepare nets for the cherry trees this year before he gets at them. In the meadow the mirabelle plum is in flower and there are daffodils under the trees. Forsythia is beginning to show yellow all around Purley. All welcome signs of spring.

March 11th. The week was generally grey and rainy with fitful sunshine, but on Thursday March 9th we woke to a wonderful English spring day. Betty and Flo were anxious to go out so I got up early and made a cup tea and sat where I could watch the morning develop. At 7.30 it was calm and peaceful with broken cloud in a blue sky with sun bathing the valley. The swans in oak tree field were resting on a lake of deep green the whiteness of their feathers gleaming as they caught the sun. Many small birds were greeting the morning with song and fluttering busily here and there. Brimstone yellow butterflies made an appearance and a bumble bee took advantage of the warm sun. Ladybirds are emerging from their winter hideaways.

March 17th The remnants of storm Stella brought more rain and wind to the Thames Valley but the force of nature continues. Frogs are gathering in the garden pond, pigeons are billing and cooing and there is the insistent 'pink pink pink' of the chaffinch. The drumming of woodpeckers is more frequent. Gardens are looking very pretty with primroses and daffodils and forsythia in varying shades of yellow. Magnolias grow well in the Purley area and there are some very beautiful specimens in blossom.

March 24th Spring has now officially sprung. The 19th the Vernal Equinox was gloomy cold and windy and not at all springlike but the 20th March the meteorological first day of spring dawned bright and sunny though cold. It has been the kind of weather for rainbows, sun shining through misty rain. We have been told that this is known by weather forecasters as a sunshower. As children we called it a monkey's birthday. An old saying that slips off the tongue without thinking about it and I wondered how the saying arose. Consulting the internet I discovered that there are many countries around the world who have a saying for this phenomena and almost all of them involve an animal.