



A Potted History of The Church of St Mary the Virgin Purley on Thames, Berkshire



We do not know precisely when the church at Purley was founded but, in a founding charter of Reading Abbey dated 1121, it was described as 'ancient'. We would therefore surmise it to have been built sometime in the 8th or 9th centuries, as by Domesday virtually all the villages in Wessex had their own church, usually paid for by the lord of their manor. The oldest part of the present building dates from around 1150 when it is believed the church was rebuilt in the Norman style after the old Saxon church had been burned down in the anarchy of the civil war of 1135. There remains a Norman arch and a Norman font although the arch has been moved and was considerably restored in Victorian days. Interestingly, graves from this period have been excavated only a few inches below the surface, indicating that the ground was levelled and excavated for the new Norman building.

The earliest record of a vicar is 1215 when John was accused of encroaching on meadows in Purley. After around 1320 we have an almost complete list of the vicars of Purley, thanks to the records in the registers of the bishops of Salisbury to which diocese Purley belonged until 1836 when it was transferred to Oxford. In 1291 the church was assessed at £4-6-8 and it was taxed at a tenth for 8s 8d to help fund Pope Nicholas's Crusade. This remained the basis of church taxation for many centuries until 1535.

For most of the 14th and early 15th centuries the clergy tended to stay for only a short time as it was to the bishop's advantage to keep them moving on so that he could collect the 'First Fruits' - ie the vicar's income for the first year as a token of thanks for having been given the Benefice. Most of them kept concubines but on only a few occasions did the bishop take action and require the vicar to do penance and get rid of his 'housekeeper'. The vicar had a small holding called his 'Glebe' which he was expected to farm or rent out to support himself. The tithes paid by the other land owners went one third to the maintenance of the church, one third for pilgrims and one third for the poor. The latter two thirds were handed over to the College of St Edmund in Salisbury, who had acquired the living in the 1300s, to distribute and 2s was paid to the Abbot of Reading. During this period more work was done on the church, including a new Early English style window, now installed in the foyer, but at various times in the past it was in the south wall (until 1870) then the old vestry until 1983.

The late 15th and early 16th centuries saw much more stability with the clergy, who generally remained as the only literate man in the parish. However new forces were afoot. John Wycliffe and the Lollards were active in the area, spreading new ideas and English translations of the Bible were circulating, although the church was still firmly Catholic. This all changed in 1538 when Henry VIII denied the Pope jurisdiction in England and abolished the monasteries. The Rectorship of Purley which had been in the hands of St Edmund's College became a Royal possession and thereafter

it was the monarch who appointed the clergy until 1838 when it was handed over to the Lord Chancellor.

Instead of a Vicar we now had a Rector who had control over all the tithes and one consequence was that whenever there was a general programme of ejection from the living, the rector of Purley had to go. This happened in the time of Queen Mary when John Leke was ejected for being married and then his successor Richard Gatskyll was ejected for being Catholic. A few months later Thomas Handcock was ejected for not being Protestant enough. The reverse thing happened to Daniel Raynor in 1662 as he had been ordained as a Congregationalist. He was ejected and replaced by Thomas Blagrove who restarted the Parish Register.

Lord Grandison provided a new tower in 1626 along with some new bells. At the same time the altar was moved back to a new chancel and a gallery was constructed with access from the ringing chamber. During Elizabeth's reign the altar had been moved into the nave but William Laud of Reading, who had become Archbishop of Canterbury saw the crowds around the altar as undignified. Shortly afterwards in 1632 Anne Hyde, the wife of the future Lord Clarendon died of smallpox at the manor house near the church and she was buried near the altar. A memorial in her memory was reset in the tower in 1870.

Throughout most of the Commonwealth period Purley's Rector was Richard Watts. In 1644 his son-in-law, William Noble, died while staying with him and a bronze plaque in his memory was erected. What is interesting is that it is on the back of another memorial, creating what is known as a palimpsest. This was discovered when the east wall of the old vestry was demolished in 1983 and it has not yet been remounted.

After the Restoration in 1660 it was Lord Clarendon and his 'code' who set the pattern for the Church of England for many years. It also marked a considerable change in the quality of rectors. Many of them were distinguished academics with very good social connections, no doubt through the Clarendon connections. William Gostwicke who had been Master at Reading School consulted Clarendon's son, who had become Chancellor of Ireland, about disputes he had been having over matters like tithes, bulls and clover which he recorded in the Church Register and Benjamin Skinner was married to the sister of the Archbishop of Canterbury. However the 18th and early 19th century were low points in the life of the Church of England. Many of the rectors were pluralists and employed curates at a fraction of the value of the living while they engaged in their social duties.

The middle of the 19th Century saw a revival in the life of the church and increasing wealth enabled many parishes to rebuild their churches. There were two other factors at work. The first was the Oxford Movement which tried to restore some of the more traditional practices and the second was the Gothic Revival in architecture. The Oxford diocesan architect was G E Street who had built the Royal Courts of Justice in London and he was commissioned to rebuild St Mary's in 1870. Very little of the 1626 church survived other than the tower and Street moved the Norman arch to be the arch

over the organ loft so that a new chancel arch could be built. He took great care to preserve or reproduce mediaeval features and developed a concept of hierarchy. So for instance the three windows in the south wall had lights starting with a trefoil and moving to a quadrifoil and finally a cinquefoil. The floor tiles start on the lowest level as very simple, but as one goes up steps towards the altar dais the designs become more and more elaborate. Similarly the Trinity was one of his passions and many of the features he designed repeat themes three times; triplets of windows and arches for example.

The church was also a great promoter of education and 19th century rectors often provided classes at the rectory for the children of the village. In 1870 however, the rector, Richard Palmer, a member of the well known biscuit family of Berkshire, left money to build a new school in the village. This led to a dispute which brought Purley to the attention of the House of Commons when, in 1908, the rector John Henry Dudley-Matthews dismissed Mrs Moule as head teacher because she had sheltered her daughter who had left her husband. This was an early case for the National Union of Teachers and the case raged through the County Council before being raised in the Commons. Tragically John was drowned in 1914 when crossing the Thames in a boat, but many said it was a case of Divine retribution.

The First World War began a huge change in the social fabric of the parish. Many of its menfolk went to war and 13 were killed, about 20% of the male population. New houses began to be built after the war and several small-holdings were established as the lands of the ancient manor of Purley Magna were sold off in the 1920s. The Rectory which had been built in 1740 was deemed unsuitable and sold to the Lister family, being replaced by an even more unsuitable rectory on glebe land south of the railway.

Hugh Lister, a grandson of Lord Lister of antiseptic fame, had a vocation for the priesthood and often used to help out in Purley while Ernest Skuse was rector. Hugh became famous for his work among the poor in the east end of London and, when the Second World War broke out, he joined up as a combatant becoming a Major in the Welsh Guards as well as acting as an unofficial chaplain. He was killed by Hitler Youth in Hechtel in 1944 as he was walking up to take a surrender. There is a plaque to his memory in the chancel. Ernest Skuse tried very hard to serve the parish but he had a serious stammer and was personally poverty stricken. He used to hold services with congregations that could be counted on one hand.

After the war successive rectors brought water and electricity to the church, but times were hard and most of the remaining glebe lands had to be sold. One benefit was however that a new, modern rectory could be provided out of the proceeds and this was ready for the arrival of Derek Taylor in 1970. Derek was young and vigorous, in sharp contrast to most of his predecessors and set about revitalising the church. He introduced a new parish magazine and developed the idea of a church hall. Colonel Hugh Duncan of Purley Park gave a plot of land for the purpose. Derek came into

conflict with the leaders of the Sunday School who set up a rival school as 'The young followers of Jesus' at the Memorial Hall.

When Derek left in 1975 he was replaced as rector by David Evans, a Welshman who had been brought up as a Baptist, seen service in the army in Malaya and used to joke that the only reason he became ordained into the Church of England was that no-one else would have him. However David was very popular and for some of his Christmas services had standing room only inside and a queue outside. He had the Welsh passion for music and introduced the congregation to a wide range of new church music. He outraged the traditionalists when he proposed the removal of the pews but honour was satisfied when they found out how comfortable the new chairs were.

David took up Derek Taylor's quest for a church hall, although at one time he tried to get the church demolished and rebuilt on a site adjacent to the Knowsley Road roundabout. After plans for a hall adjacent to the church fell through, the architect, Richard Perkins was asked to draw up some plans and came up with the idea of building an octagonal extension to replace the Street north aisle whose timbers were rotting away. In no time the money was raised with an enormous effort and the building was ready for dedication in 1985.

The new build gave an opportunity for some archaeological excavations to the north of the church which had been thought to be barren. However skeletons dating from the 1100's began to emerge very close to the surface and a great deal was learned about the early history of the church in Purley.

Since the opening of the new hall and the removal of the pews the church is now available for a much wider range of uses and many different groups have found a home here. Services can be held traditionally east-west, but for big occasions they can be held north-south. The bells have been restored after nearly a century of disuse and the church is now a mecca for all the other ringing groups, hoping to add Purley to their tally of conquests.

The old churchyard was becoming overcrowded by the 1920s and so, in 1934, another plot of land to the north was purchased to provide an extension and the south-east corner of the old churchyard converted for cremation memorials. However by the turn of the millennium the extension was full and a new cemetery opened at Goosecroft by the Parish Council.

I would like to commend this “potted” history of St. Mary’s to you and to express my thanks to John Chapman (and the members of Project Purley) for their fascinating and revealing account of Christian witness through the centuries.

The parish has changed almost beyond recognition over the years, and those written about here could not hope to recognise much of today’s Purley - the church though and the many who worship God now continue to thrive. Although history reveals many turns and changes - it is Jesus Christ who remains *“the same yesterday and today and forever.”* (Hebrews 13:8)

David Archer, Rector of Purley