

# *Account of Purley on Thames*

## Farm animals

R200014 13/3/2017

### *Introduction*

This section contains information about farm animals in Purley. The origins of farm animals may have been wild ones but it is fair to observe that none of those currently used on farms bear much resemblance to any wild animals in Britain today with the possible exception of Highland Cattle and of course ducks and geese.

For each type indentified there will be many different breeds and it will not be possible to go into all the breeds of all the species. However where individual breeds are known to have been used in Purley this will be noted.

The section is grouped under six headings:-

- Birds
- Cattle
- Pigs
- Sheep and Goats
- Horses
- Others

### *Birds*

The main types of birds that have been used on farms in Purley are Ducks, Chickens, Geese, Turkeys and Pigeons. None of them are kept on farms today as far as is known but a number of individuals do keep ducks and chickens ostensibly for their eggs, but in practice as pets.

Ducks belong to the family Anatidae (see MD8) and used to be kept around the farm pond by clipping the wings. It is in general difficult to distinguish the wild from the domesticated varieties although the latter have tended to be derived from the mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) and there has been a lot of inter-breeding. Their eggs are about 30% larger than a chicken egg and have a stronger taste. They make good eating. They were also used as a source of feathers which were used for stuffing pillows and eiderdowns.

There have been several chicken farms in Purley, although what breeds they used is not known. It is probable they included the Rhode Island Red, the White Leghorn and the Light Sussex which are some of the commoner breeds. They are easy to keep although they need to be protected from foxes in this area. They provide a plentiful supply of eggs for most of the year and make good eating.

So far as we are aware there have been no turkey farms in the area although undoubtedly some turkeys have been kept since they were introduced from North America. They are not easy birds to raise as they tend to be subject to all sorts of diseases and are sensitive to their living conditions.

There are several records of geese being kept in Purley, especially on Home Farm in Purley village where they would terrorise the passer by. The domestic goose tended to be derived from the greylag goose (*anser anser*) although almost always much whiter. The domestic variety was much more ponderous than the wild equivalent and preferred to waddle around rather than attempting to fly. Their eggs were large and very nutritious and they made a good table bird, although very greasy. In

fact goose grease was one of the best protections against the cold and would be smeared over the chest in the winter. It also had many other domestic uses.

Pigeons were kept in mediaeval times both as a source of eggs and for their meat. Most large houses would have a dove cote and there are certainly records of such at both the manor house of Purley Magna (alongside the church) and at a house in Purley Parva.

## *Cattle*

Nowadays cows form about the only farm animal to be found in Purley.

Home Farm was for many years under the Bucknells a home for beef cattle. They were bred on the farm, usually by artificial insemination and sold either directly for meat or for further fattening. Tim Metcalfe however bought a dairy quota and stocked the farm with dairy cattle after he had acquired the farm in 1987. However with the problems of the milk industry he has now given this up and breeds Aberdeen Angus for beef.

Westbury Farm kept a few cows and for many years also had a bull which was often to be found with the cows in the meadows adjacent to the Thames, much to the consternation of some walkers. However no harm ever seemed to have come to them. Bernard Theobald gave up milking when he turned to growing grapes so it became a fatstock herd. This has now gone following Bernard's death.

Most other farms in the area have had, or still do have some cows. At one time when Belleisle Farm was active the cattle used to be brought over the railway bridge (by what is now Winston Way) to and from the fields to the north of the railway. The major herd is probably that for Home Farm Sulham.

Cattle fattening in Purley was remarked upon by Mavor in his survey of 1809 when he noted that *Mr Sherwood (of Belleisle Farm) uses considerable quantities of oil cake in fattening cattle* (ref 209)

A famous case in Purley was recorded in the parish register when the rector (William Gostwicke) was accused of not keeping a bull for the use of the parish. (see the church history) It had apparently been the custom that the rector was responsible for providing a male animal for serving the breeding cows of the poor of the parish. Almost every household would have had a cow or two at one time.

As well as milk and meat the cow provides horn for making containers or cups, its sinews were used for thread and its hide for making leather. The milk could either be drunk direct or turned into cheese or butter. There was a strong preference for very fat cattle until quite recently as it also provided the chief source of lard.

Perhaps the greatest value of cattle however was in their ability to fertilise the ground where they grazed and there were therefore obligations to graze ones cattle on the lord's land first.

## *Pigs*

The pig is perhaps the most useful farm animal as almost every single part of it has a use. As well as providing meat it was a source of leather, bristles, its bones were turned into glue. It can feed on almost anything from beech mast and acorns to left over scraps of food and milk.

As with the cow almost every household at one time would have a pig or two. When the time came to kill one it was a great occasion as it provided a source of meat which could either be eaten fresh or preserved as a ham or a side of bacon. Oddments of meat would be made into sausages, utilising the pig's intestines, its bladder would provide endless amusement for the local youth as a football and its blood could either be incorporated into cooking to provide iron and vitamins, used as a fertiliser or mixed with the chicken mash.

## *Sheep and Goats*

It was noted that the predominant breeds in Purley in 1809 were Witshires and South Downs. They

were bought as store and fattened in Purley. (ref 209).

Both sheep and goats were often used as a source of milk, especially for cheese making. Sheep particularly were also very productive as a source of wool and the fleeces would be baled and collected by itinerant merchants who would take them to the woollen mills.

### *Horses*

The main use for horses was for riding and every gentleman would have a stable, much as we have garages today. On the farm they would be a source of power for the plough where they gradually came to replace the oxen which had been used in the earlier days. Special breeds of heavy horses would be used for this purpose and they were also employed in towing farm carts.

Smaller animals such as donkeys might be used for turning wheels, eg for grinding corn or threshing.

The horse as a mode of transport was superseded by the automobile from the 1920s and as a source of power for the plough by the tractor from the 1930's. They did not fully relinquish the latter role until after the Second World War.

In recent years there has been a great upsurge in riding as a recreational activity and we are now back to a similar population of horses as existed at the turn of the century. Springs Farm now houses around 20 horses and expects to take in another 20. Used mainly for riding although polo has been mooted.

### *Others*

The principal 'other' animal which could be considered a farm animal was the rabbit which was specifically introduced to man made warrens on the slopes of the hill where now Purley Park stands. The railway follows the course of ancient fields bearing the warren name (eg Long Warren) However this really is considered a wild animal today and is covered in both the pets and the wild animals sections

### *Bibliography*

209 General View of Agriculture in Berkshire (W Mavor 1809)

Larousse Encyclopaedia of Animal Life



