



Buildings and Estates of Purley on Thames

Purley Hall

The following text is taken from Rita Denman's account of a talk given by Ben Viljoen

In the 1400's the ancient manors of Purley were held by the Carew family. Nicholas Carew died childless and the manorial holdings were divided between his sisters. The area around where Purley Hall now stands passed to his sister Elizabeth and was then known as the manor of Purley La Hyde. La Hyde descended through various branches of the family until in 1609 Francis Hyde built the present house which became known as Hyde Hall. We know that the west front most resembles the house that was built by Francis Hyde in 1609. The bay windows with their stone mullions date back to the original house. Purley Hall has been described as a typical Jacobean house. It is inevitable that a house of this age should gather many legends some partly true and some wholly fictitious. One such was that the Hydies of Hyde Hall were closely related to Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon. What the owners of any stately home crave is a royal connection. Anne Hyde, daughter of the Earl of Clarendon married James II and we are told in one account that their daughters, Mary and Anne, the future Queens of England, played in the grounds of Hyde Hall. Sadly this is not so, as the research of members of Project Purlev have shown.

Two generations after Francis Hyde built the house the family was heavily in debt and the property was heavily mortgaged. This may have been due to the fact that the family remained Catholic during the period of the Protestant ascendancy and their fortunes were ebbing away. Francis Hyde the grandson of the man who built the house was looking for someone to take over the property. The man who began to take an interest in acquiring Purley La Hyde and Hyde Hall was a certain Francis Hawes. Born in 1679 he became Clerk to the Treasurer of the Navy and shortly afterwards was promoted to the position of Cashier of the Navy.



Purley Hall



The lake and the Temple c 1895.

The Temple is said to be a memorial to the fallen of the Battle of Culloden

He worked as cashier under various Treasurers including from 1715 - 1718 a certain John Aislabie and a close bond sprang up between these two men. Soon Francis Hawes was again promoted to become Receiver General of Custom while John Aislabie became Chancellor of the Exchequer. This was the time of enormous speculation in all sorts of ventures including the South Seas Company founded in 1711, one of whose Directors was Francis Hawes. The valuation for the South Seas Company, precisely like the present day dot.com companies was based not on past performance but entirely on an assessment of future worth. Francis Hawes acquired shares and sold them at a handsome profit. There is evidence that at this time, Hawes was renting the property. His brother Thomas, as cashier to the Navy was also involved in dubious dealings with shares, using Naval money to buy, pocket the profit and then returning the original sum back to the Navy. Francis Hawes decided to purchase the property, and during this period of family affluence undertook modernisation and improvements to the house. As part of this programme, the house was completely re-orientated. A stable block was added, topped by a clock, the grounds were landscaped and statues added. Unfortunately Mr Hawes' luck was about to run out. When the South Sea Bubble burst a great deal of money was lost and there was a hue and cry to find someone to blame. Aislabie was arrested, put into the Tower and then exiled to his estates in Yorkshire where he developed the beautiful garden of Studley Royal. All the Directors of the South Seas Company were declared bankrupt. Brother Thomas, eventually came to Francis' aid, and purchased the property permitting Francis to run it as his own. In 1753, the very generous Thomas made the property over completely to his brother Francis.

In 1777 what was by this time known as Purley Hall was purchased by the Rev Dr Henry Wilder of Sulham. The Wilders trace their links with Sulham back to 1497. They still hold the record of supplying the longest continuous run of Rectors in the Church of England. The Wilders initially leased the property to various tenants the most famous being Warren Hastings the former Governor General of India. The fashion at the time was to keep exotic animals, and Warren Hastings had his own menagerie including a poor yak, who being used to a much higher altitude, was slowly suffocating to death. Over the years Purley Hall was altered this way and that, in the process losing a

storey when the roof was replaced. The gardens were altered and then restored.

In 1961, the Wilder family put Purley Hall onto the market, and since then successive owners have played their part in its restoration.



Purley Hall in 1977

Photo Ian Nash

The following is taken from Historic England's listing information

Remains of an early C18 formal landscape surrounding a country house, to designs by Charles Bridgeman, set within a later park, with garden buildings added in the mid C18.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Francis Hyde built Purley Hall (formerly known as Hyde Hall) in 1609. The estate was sold c 1720 for £14,000 by Hyde's grandson, also Francis, to Francis Hawes, a Director of the South Sea Company and Cashier to the Customs. Hawes employed Charles Bridgeman (d 1738) c 1720-1 to produce a design for the garden, and a record dated March 1721 exists for 'Mr Bridgeman his bill for laying out the gardens at Purley, £122 11s 0d', together with his design (Bodleian Library), and records of substantial payments for plants, and ornamental and fruit trees (CL 1970). Bridgeman's plan was carried out, although seemingly in modified form (Ballard, 1758). In 1720 the 'South Sea Bubble' burst. Hawes, as one of the responsible directors, had his assets seized early in 1721, and the Purley Hall estate was put up for sale, to be bought back by his younger brother, Thomas, probably

for the low price of £1080. The garden retained its formal layout during the mid C18 (Ballard, 1758; Rocque, 1761), remaining in the Hawes family until c 1770 when it was sold to the Wilder family. The Government rented the Hall for Warren Hastings during his impeachment by Parliament in the 1780s, a painting of c 1785 (Harris 1979) depicting the Hall and its environs, populated with the Indian livestock which Hastings kept at Purley. During the C20 the Hall was leased, remaining empty during the Second World War, and was sold by the descendants of the Wilders in 1961. A period of restoration in the garden took place during the 1980s, under the auspices of the owners Major and Mrs Bradley. At this time the east arm of the canal was restored, having been filled in c 1818 (CL 1970), and the gateway arch was rebuilt. The Hall remains (1998) in private ownership, separate from the park and majority of the walled garden, which are also in private hands.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Purley Hall lies 1km west of Purley on Thames and 1km east of Pangbourne. The 46ha site is bounded to the north by the A329 Reading to Wantage road, to the west by a water course, and on the other sides by agricultural land. The land in the west half of the site is largely level, sloping up to high ground within Mosshall and Harry Jaw's Woods to the south-east. The setting is largely agricultural, flanked by the edges of the villages of Purley and Pangbourne, with the ground sloping gently down to the River Thames 1km to the north, and a long, low hillside north of the river prominent in views from the garden and park.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main approach enters off the A329, 300m north of the Hall, via an arched and crenellated flint and brick gateway set back off the road, supporting iron gates. The gateway is flanked by two small, square-plan, crenellated lodges (C18 with C20 additions, listed grade II), built of banded flint and brickwork with prominent round windows facing the road. Flanking screen walls of flint and brick curve towards the road, extending 30m either side of the lodges and punctuated by flint and brick piers with obelisk finials. The top of the archway, formerly demolished, was rebuilt in the 1980s. The north drive extends south from here, flanked by a mature lime avenue set in grass, fenced from the park beyond. The northern half is aligned on the north front of the Hall. The southern half of the drive curves slightly round to the west, arriving at a gravel carriage sweep adjacent to the west front of the Hall, where stone steps flanked by iron hand rails give access to the central front door.

A further, south drive enters the park 450m south-west of the Hall, past the C19, brick, gabled, single-storey Purley Hall Lodge, extending north to the west side of the walled garden. This part of the drive seems to have incorporated the former course of Sulham Lane, moved further west to its present course during the C19 (Rocque, 1761; Pride, 1790; OS 1882). Formerly the drive continued east along the north wall of the walled garden, curving north across the lawn 50m west of the Hall and around to join the main drive just north of the carriage sweep (OS; this section gone, 1998). A short spur west off the drive gives access from the walled garden to Home Farm, and a further spur runs east along the south wall of the walled garden, leading up to Mosshall Wood.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Purley Hall (1609, altered c 1720, 1818-20, 1869, 1906, listed grade II*) stands towards the centre of the site. Built of red brick with stone dressings in half H-plan, and presently of two storeys, it was formerly of three storeys, but the upper floor was removed c 1818. The stable block was also demolished c 1818 (CL 1970), it having stood 50m south-west of the Hall, the site now being laid to lawn.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The gardens lie largely along the west/east axis of the Hall. The formal canal garden lies to the west of the Hall, the ground being terraced down to the water. The Y-shaped canal, aligned with the centre of the Hall, is surrounded by a terraced lawn ramped down from the east, and backed to the west by a shrubbery with mature trees and evergreen shrubs including mature yews. The lawn is flanked to the south by the remains of an avenue of mature trees including sweet chestnut and oak. The terminal feature of the west axis, standing 220m west of the Hall, set back from the west end of the canal amongst the shrubbery, is the Rustic Seat (dated 1746, listed grade II), a temple built, so tradition has it, to commemorate the Battle of Culloden in 1745. Of knapped and knobbly flint, in similar style to the north gateway and lodges, its open east front supports a pedimented gable above an arched opening supported by flint columns, and overlooks the canal, west front of the Hall and wooded hillside beyond to the east. The east end

of the canal was restored in the 1980s, having been filled c 1818 (CL 1970).

South of the Hall lies the south lawn, bounded to the east and south by the park. Gently terraced up to the east and south boundaries, it is surrounded by mature trees, including several limes (possibly of C18 origin) standing towards the south end, and encloses a tennis court. West of this an informal lawn planted with specimen trees extends west to the walled garden, with herbaceous borders at the west side. The site of the former stable yard stood to the north of this informal lawn.

East of the Hall, entered via a garden door in the east front, lies a level lawn with a small, central, rectangular brick pool, the lawn bordered by box hedges and knots, and surrounding these a low, brick retaining wall. This feature is enclosed by a further lawn, containing, at the north end, a large, mature *Robinia pseudoacacia* (possibly of C18 origin). To the east a clipped box hedge standing on a bank divides the area from the park beyond, which slopes up the hillside to Mosshall Wood.

Bridgeman's c 1720-1 plan for the canal garden is similar to what was in place by the mid C18, but the surviving Ballard plan suggests a shorter canal in slightly different form (Ballard, 1758; Rocque, 1761; CL 1970). The mid to late C18 form of the garden is well illustrated in paintings of the 1750s and 1780s (Harris 1979; guidebook 1980) and on the Ballard map of 1758. The canal, in form now much as in the 1750s, was flanked by avenues to north and south, with the Rustic Seat at the west end. The straight north drive led to the former main entrance on the north front, protected from the canal garden to the west by a screen wall leading north from the west front. This wall extended south from the west front to the stable yard to divide the carriage sweep and views of the canal garden from the south garden which contained a broad avenue, aligned on the south front, extending south to the garden boundary. East of the Hall a formal garden extended the main west/east axis, which rose up the hillside, continuing east over the crest of the hill as a ride through Mosshall Wood and Harry Jaw's Wood where it terminated. The area is now (1998) incorporated within the park. The ride was probably visible from the Rustic Seat as a notch above the Hall cut out of the woodland to the east. At the south-west corner of Mosshall Wood stood a garden pavilion (gone, 1998), overlooking the main axis as it descended the hillside and continued to the Rustic Seat. Two paintings of c 1790 (very similar views by the same artist, but with differing layout details) (Harris 1979) show the west front and adjacent lawn populated with Warren Hastings' Indian animals, including Arab horses, Tibetan goats and cattle of Bhutan, and in one view, probably Hastings himself riding one of his Arabs.

PARK The park, probably laid out in the late C18 to early C19 (Rocque, 1761; Pride, 1790) encloses the gardens to the north, east and south, being laid partly to pasture. Although formerly containing many single park trees and clumps (OS 1882; 1914), it retains relatively few. The northern edge of Mosshall Wood is bounded by closely planted beech trees, and the north and west boundaries are marked by a significant ditch. The planting of both this and Harry Jaw's Wood is C20 however, and does not appear to reflect the C18 layout of rides. A statue formerly stood at the west edge of Mosshall Wood (OS 1912), together with the C18 garden pavilion at the south-west corner (gone, 1998) which was set within a circular clearing in the trees.

KITCHEN GARDEN The walled kitchen garden lies at the south edge of the canal garden. Surrounded by brick walls, it is now divided into two by a fence running north to south, the western half being in use as a domestic garden attached to the former gardener's cottage and the eastern half being laid to lawn with orchard trees. Bridgeman's plan (c 1720) shows the walled garden in the same place as now (1998), divided into six regular quarters by paths, with two central ponds where the paths met, a layout which existed in the mid C18 (Ballard, 1758), although by the late C19 the layout had been simplified (OS 1882).

REFERENCES

Victoria History of the County of Berkshire 3, (1923), pp 417-21 Country Life, 147 (5 February 1970), pp 310-13; (12 February 1970), pp 366-9 N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Berkshire* (1966), pp 194-5 P Willis, Charles Bridgeman (1977), p 61, pls 47 a, b J Harris, *The Artist and the Country House* (1979), pp 330, 363 Purley Hall, guidebook, (Purley Hall c 1980)

Maps J Ballard, A plan of an Estate belonging to Frances Hawes of Purley Hall, 1758 (Berkshire Record Office) J Rocque, Map of Berkshire, 1761 T Pride, A topographical map of the Town of

Reading and the County adjacent to an extent of 10 miles, 1790

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1882 2nd edition published 1914 OS 25" to 1 mile: 2nd edition published 1912

Description written: July 1998 Register Inspector: SR Edited: April 2000