

Account of Purley on Thames

The Statue in the Woods

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Along one of the footpaths in Sulham Woods, just above Purley Hall, there are the remains of a stone plinth. A long time resident of Beech Road remembers the statue that once stood on this plinth: two naked men wrestling. Others refer to the statue as Cain and Abel, perhaps thinking that it portrayed the moment when 'Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him'. What is known is that the statue was stolen. Sadly this may have happened because it was cast from lead and could therefore easily be melted down and the metal sold.

The first reference to the statue is in 1720. Francis Hawes, one of the Directors of the South Seas company, had just purchased Purley Hall and asked Charles Bridgeman to lay out the gardens. Bridgeman, who in 1728 was to become Royal Gardener to George II, prepared a plan, in the bottom right hand corner of which there is the following note: Entrance of the Wood above the ground floor of the House 58 feet. Centre of the Wood at the Hercules & Antaeus above the Entrance of the Wood 34 feet..

This can either be interpreted as Bridgeman noting what was already in position or suggesting where the statue should be located. Either way this is strong evidence of the statue being that of Hercules and Antaeus, a popular classical subject.

A recent exhibition of drawings at the British Museum included a drawing of this subject. The description of the drawing tells the story: Antaeus was a Libyan giant, son of Poseidon and Gaia, the goddess of the earth, who challenged Hercules to combat. As Antaeus' strength depended on his contact with the earth, Hercules lifted him aloft and crushed him to death.

Confirmation that this was indeed the subject of the statue in Sulham Woods was obtained from the Wilder Albums. These contain two photographs; the first, dated 1895, shows the side of Purley Hall and the statue in the distance and the second is a close-up of the statue itself.

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