



Account of Purley on Thames

Flooding

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Introduction

These days Purley gets a flood of some sort every year and frequently hits the local or even national news on account of it. However if one looks at the geography of the Thames basin at Purley one can see we have the steeply rising banks to the north becoming the Chilterns and the wide plain to the south averaging about half a mile before rising steeply to the Tilehurst plateau. If we look farther afield we are just below the Goring Gap which drains most of central England and just above the confluence of Thames, Kennet and Loddon. Around the Tilehurst station area the north and south banks converge leaving a much narrower channel, so, when there is an excess of water, it is going to pile up just upstream of this narrowing. The problem is that this is just where people have chosen to build their houses and all their pleas for 'something to be done about it' fall upon deaf ears as there is nothing practicable that can be done, especially when one realises that only about a third of the water is held in the river bed and two thirds flow through the river gravels just below the surface. The best that can be done is to slow the rate of flow by building bunds as it is the force of moving water which causes most damage.

Water Meadows

In past centuries however the flooding has been welcomed as it rejuvenates the ecology of the area. The meadows alongside the Thames have retained their value because of regular flooding. In mediaeval times flooding was actually encouraged as it provided an ideal way to re-invigorate the grasses which were so essential to the well being of the animals of the village.

The term 'water-meadow' usually implied a fairly sophisticated method of controlling the flow of water so that the maximum benefit could be obtained, and there seems to be evidence of such control in the area where the Sul Brook enters the Thames. In 1734 the Lord of the manor of Whitchurch laid claim to the Pangbourne water meadows for himself and his freemen. The section of meadows between Pangbourne and opposite Hardwick had long been shared between the parishes of Pangbourne, Whitchurch, Sulham and Purley and always seemed to have had a very special status, indicating the sort of management which went along with a water meadow. Even today much of the ground is still undulating showing fairly clearly the shallow channels which were a feature of water meadows.

It would probably have worked by partial damming of the brook and diverting the water along shallow depressions to provide the maximum spread of water. In very dry summers this could easily yield a complete extra crop of hay. In some parts of the country it was used to grow water cress but this seems unlikely in this area.

In any event there was usually two or three floods of the meadows each spring and after exceptional rains almost the whole valley floor could be submerged.

The Great Floods

Flooding on a large scale is usually a noteworthy event and as such will often be recorded. In Purley's case this was often in the Parish Register. The earliest bad flood recorded was in 1648 when there was also a failure of the harvest bringing near starvation to many villages. (ref 427)

On March 11th 1774 the rector, Benjamin Skinner recorded: The greatest flood in the river Thames remembered to have happened within the memory of the oldest inhabitants. The water ran into the church which is an event of which there is no tradition ever to have happened before. The water in the church was ankle deep and continued there for several hours' The church is in fact built on a slight mound and so the water must have been exceptionally high. (ref 27)

On 29th October 1848 it was noted 'There was so high a flood this day that the congregation were conveyed to and from the church in waggons'.

In November 1852 the rector noted 'A very high flood, the churchyard impassible. Divine Service in the schoolroom for two Sundays

In 1862 the note read 'After a very dry and mild winter a high flood in March, not so high as '48 or '52'

In 1873 Mrs Leila Fullerton recorded ' Church Walk raised from farm gate owing to constant flood'
On 25th October 1875 she recorded ' The highest flood ever known here, rather higher than the great flood of 1852'

The highest ever flood was recorded at Mapledurham lock in November 1894 at 4 feet 4 inches.

In January 1915 there was a very bad spell of flooding which evoked considerable comment in the local papers. On 9th Jan it reported that Pangbourne had been hit by the highest flood for 20 years and that there had been no services in Purley Church. Large tracts of land had been submerged. In late December and early January there had been incessant rains during which the river had risen steadily. It reached its peak on Wednesday 6th Jan and with a short spell of better weather it fell in many places, however at Mapledurham it continued rising. For the 9 weeks ending Jan 5th there had been 12.36 inches of rain in the Thames Valley equivalent to 3.015 Billion tons of water spread over 3812 square miles. Another inch had fallen up to the 16th. This was well over twice the average for this period.

The Mercury published a table of statistics for Caversham Lock which read:-

Date	head	tail (feet-inches)
Nov 1894	12-6	4-6
Feb 1900	10-11	3-8
June 1903	10-9	3-1
Feb 1904	10-10	3-6
Dec 1910	10-11	3-6
5 Jan 1915	10-9	3-6
6 Jan 1915	10-9	3-5 ½
7 Jan 1915	10-8 ½	3-5
8 Jan 1915	10-9	3-7

Flood Control

Coping with Emergencies

An Article by Jean Debney

Published in Purley Parish News June 1980

FROM MY HISTORY NOTEBOOK - 1

1. Floods

As I sit writing this article, the weather outside is very hot and the possibility of a drought becomes daily more imminent; so it is very difficult to recall the heavy rains last winter which caused the river to flood Purley.

Purley with its low-lying land is vulnerable and old maps are often marked "liable to flooding". Some historically-minded Rectors of Purley have recorded some of these floods inside the covers of the Parish Registers.

The earliest flood that I found recorded seems to have taken the villagers by surprise. On 11th March 1774, the Rev. Skinner, Rector of Purley, noted that "the greatest flood in the River Thames remembered to have happened within the knowledge of the oldest inhabitants. The water ran into the Church: which is an event of which there is no tradition ever to have happened before. The water in the church was ankle deep and continued there for several hours".

Richard Powell, Rector of Purley until his death in 1874, recorded notes about the weather, local and international events inside the covers of the Baptismal Register:

29 October 1848 - There was so high a flood this day, that the congregation were conveyed to and from church in wagons.

14 November 1852 - A very high flood, the church road impassable. Divine Service in School room two Sundays.

1862 - After a very dry and mild winter, a high flood in March. Not so high as '48 or '52.

Mrs Leila Downing Fullerton of Purley Park recorded towards the end of her life, the following:

January 1873 - Church walk raised from farm gate owing to constant floods,

25 October 1875 - the highest flood ever known here, rather higher than the great flood of 1852.

Last winter's (1980) flood cut off several houses, especially along River Walk, and boats had to be used for access. Many houses on the lower Purley Park Estate are built on artificial mounds and these became moated properties. The river rose 2 feet above the normal summer level in the head water above the Lock - nevertheless this was still one foot less than the high water mark recorded in 1947. The level in the tail water below the Lock rose 7 feet above normal. The river was on amber, and then red alert for several days.

The flooding cannot be averted as a lot of water flows into the upper reaches of the Thames and rushes headlong for the sea - locks and sluices are opened where possible - but the water cannot be restricted to safeguard certain areas.

Jean Debney.

Mrs Jean Debney (whose hobby is researching local history) has several ideas for future articles on old Purley. She hopes that these articles will generate interest in the village and that others may become interested in contributing and perhaps forming a local history group.

At the moment she is in the process of transcribing the Parish Registers before they are deposited in the Berkshire Record office and wonders if there is anyone (with the use of a typewriter) who would be willing to help her with this. It is her intention that the church should have their own copy to retain - the Record Office will make their own photocopy in order to save wear and tear on the originals.

Any contributions of A4 copy and bond paper, carbon paper, or pennies towards same would be of help.

Would anyone interested in helping with this project please contact:

Mrs Jean Debney, 8 Huckleberry Close,
Purley. Tel: 413223

110. Recalling My First Article - Floods in Purley

During the winter of 1980, the then Rector of Purley, Rev. David Evans, allowed me access to the 19th century parish registers so that I could transcribe the entries. The older registers from 1660 to 1812 were already deposited in the Berkshire County Record Office and there I made copies during a number of visits. Without the advantage of modern technology, i.e. a computer, I typed the information on my grandfather's old typewriter and then, with the assistance of a team of helpers, wrote out index slips for every entry. Copies of the typescript from 1812 - 1900 are now in Purley Rectory, Reading Central Library and the County Record Office. From the index slips of all the baptisms, marriages and burials I was able to match husbands with wives and children and compile numerous "family group" records which form the basis of much of my subsequent work on the parish records.

As well as the official entries, some incumbents have used empty spaces in the registers to record various items of interest to them. These entries were used in my first "From My History Notebook" article published in the Purley News in June 1980 when Mrs. Joan Wilcox was editor. As there may be many reading this who were not living in Purley at the time and others who were but may have forgotten the article, I thought I would start the New Year with a resume of that piece which was about floods - always a potential problem in Purley - plus some additional information from other sources.

The Rev. Benjamin Skinner, Rector 1766 - 1788, wrote that on 11th March 1774 there occurred in Purley "the greatest flood in the River Thames remembered to have happened within the knowledge of the oldest inhabitants. The water ran into the Church: which is an event of which there is no tradition ever to have happened

before. The water in the church was ankle deep and continued there for several hours."

The winter of 1794-95 was particularly severe with a hard frost which lasted for three months from November, made the River Thames un-navigable and ended suddenly with a thaw on Tuesday, 27th January 1795. The consequent rush of water down the Thames not only swept away Hartslock near Basildon and made the new bridge at Whitchurch impassable when some new ground disappeared, but also put the whole of Pangbourne "under water". Although no mention was made of Purley in the report in the "Reading Mercury", it is almost certain that the village would have been badly affected.

The Rev. Richard Powell, Rector 1844-1875, who included notes about international as well as local events in his registers, wrote that on "29th October 1848 there was so high a flood this day, that the congregation were conveyed to and from Church in wagons. 14th November 1852: A very high flood, the Church road* impassable. Divine Service in School room two Sundays. 1862: After a very dry and mild winter, a high flood in March. Not so high as '48 or '52. 1867: A long dreary winter; 25th March a high flood, water over the Church road."

Mrs. Leila Downing Fullerton (nee Storer), who lived in Purley Park all her life until her death there in 1918, also made some notes concerning floods in Purley. "January 1873: Church Walk* raised from farm gate owing to constant floods. 25th October 1875: The highest flood ever known here, rather higher than the flood of 1852."

George Fielder, lock-keeper at Mapledurham Lock, supplied information about later floods from his records: "18th November 1894 was the highest recorded flood (4 feet 4 inches) on the Thames; on 20th November 1947 it was 3 feet 6 inches and on 31st December 1979 it was 2 feet 2 inches."

The northern part of Purley lies on the flood plain of the River Thames and the south portion on higher chalk ground. Areas near the river bank are marked "liable to floods" on many maps. Cottages** close to the church until circa 1800 and part of the old village were built on slightly higher ground but would still have been flooded occasionally. Many houses in Purley Park River Estate are now built with living accommodation on the first floor. Basildon, which lies on a similar curve on the river north west of Purley, abandoned their old village and church and moved to higher ground some time ago.

* St. Mary's Avenue

** Disappeared by circa 1800