

Account of Purley on Thames

The Geography of Purley

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General Description

The Parish of Purley on Thames is situated approximately four miles west of Reading on the south side of the River Thames, in Berkshire. The ancient parish was 874 acres. This was increased to 1663 acres in 1891 by the addition of those parts of Whitchurch lying to the south of the Thames. In 1934 this was reduced to 1154 acres by the transfer of land between Purley and Sulham. There were approximately 3 acres of water in these totals.

It is bounded by the Borough of Reading to the east, by Tilehurst and Sulham parishes to the south, by Pangbourne to the west and by Whitchurch and Mapledurham parishes across the Thames to the north.

The Parish has two distinctive geographical parts. Alongside the river the land is flat and forms part of the Thames flood plain with gravelly subsoil. The floodplain rises gradually as it goes west and around to the Pang valley. The land rises sharply to the south up the north slope of the chalk hill which separates the Thames and Kennet valleys. The rise is sharpest in the east of the parish and begins at the banks of the Thames at the extreme east end. Here the Thames runs on the south side of its plain and it swings away to the north in a wide arc reaching the northern extreme of its plain from Mapledurham to Whitchurch.

The slope is much more gentle to the west of the parish where it rises to a plateau which eventually ends on the escarpment above Nunhide.

The east of the parish is now densely populated with a definite suburban aspect, but there is virtually no development in the west which lies in the designated 'North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' This land is mainly agricultural, both arable and pasture with a number of small woods. At the southern boundary of the parish lies Sulham woods.

Parts of the Parish

The Parish of Purley is comprised of a number of areas each with their own particular character. They are identified by names some of which are historic, others are more modern.

The Ancient Manors

The very ancient major divisions of the parish were the ancient manors, three of which are recorded in Domesday; however there is a fourth manor referred to which we believe lay within the present parish. As a very rough guide one can divide the parish into four quadrants based upon Long Lane/Purley Lane and Oxford Road/Purley Rise:-

Purley Magna - This was the principal manor of the parish which was broken up and the land sold for building starting in the 1920s. As a generalisation it forms the two eastern quadrants.

Purley Parva - this was a settlement centered on Westbury Farm. It has remained mainly agricultural and was deserted in the eighteenth century. It roughly corresponds with the north-west quadrant. In the 12th century a strip to the east was donated to Reading Abbey.

La Hyde - This occupied roughly the south-eastern quadrant of the parish. It joined up with Sulham and Nunhide after the 15th century and now forms part of Sulham Estate.

Burley - The fourth manor is recorded in Domesday as Burley and is thought to have been the area occupied by the present Beech Road.

The Meadowlands

The meadows bordering the Thames and Sul Brook in the western quadrants were shared with Sulham and Whitchurch for many centuries. As a consequence, as tithes were paid by control of the land, part of the parish of Whitchurch in Oxfordshire reached over to the Berkshire side of the river Thames. It was transferred to Purley in the late nineteenth century. But for many years it caused many disputes, particularly over the apprehension of criminals between the two counties

Modern Developments

In modern times the areas have come to be associated with the name of a building estate. Some of these are:-

Marsh Farm - the council development between the Sul Brook, the railway, Reading Road and Pangbourne. This takes its name from the farm which this used to be part of. The name reflects the very low lying marshy nature of the ground which continues into Tidmarsh. It was transferred to Pangbourne in 1984.

Purley Rise - this was the first of the modern estates built in the 1920s it includes what is now Beech Road, Glebe Road the southerly end of Westbury Lane and the main road between Westbury Lane and the roundabout

Purley Copse - this is the land to the south of the Oxford Road between the Knowsley Road roundabout and the Roebuck. Originally part of Purley Magna it was mainly wooded. It was first developed as a strip development along the south side of the Oxford Road. Later the land behind these houses was used to build what is now the Oregon Avenue area. The name is used in 'Copse Close' and most of the southern part was transferred to Tilehurst in 1984.

River Estate - the fields sold from Purley Magna to build a major house in the 1920s but found to be liable to flooding. It was sold off as camping plots in the 1930s and has developed piecemeal ever since.

Purley Gardens - the part of the Purley Magna estate which formed the kitchen gardens of Purley Park beyond the railway. This covers what is now the marina, Thames Reach, Waterside Drive and Church Mews.

Purley Village - the lands on either side of the ancient main street of Purley to the west of New Hill. The lands to the east were cleared in the early 1800s to form Purley Park and its gardens. This includes the lower part of Purley Lane, Lister Close and Farm Close.

Purley Beeches - this is the main gardens of Purley Park which were sold off for building in the 1970s to sustain Purley Park Trust. This includes Hazel Road and the roads leading off it.

Lower Long Lane - the houses on the lower part of Long Lane and the two estates leading off it. This includes Cecil Aldin Drive and Orchard Road/Highfield Road complex

Wimpey Estate - this was built progressively during the 1970s and 1980s. and comprised most of the land formerly occupied by the Menpes Fruit Farm. It filled in the space between the Purley Copse and Long Lane Developments.

Crown Green - The estate built mainly by Bryants which replaced Trenthams

Smaller Developments

There are a number of other developments which are not so clearly identified, the chief ones being:

Westridge Avenue area - formed by redeveloping the lands of a number of houses on the north side of the Oxford Road in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Nursery Gardens - formed from the redevelopment of Westfields and the Nursery run by Mr Gutch from the Garden House.

St Mary's Avenue - the developments to the east of New Hill reaching from Primrose Close to Thames Reach on the south side of the Avenue.

Shanley Estate - the latest development along the south side of the Oxford Road.

Field Names

From earliest times each field bore a name and many of these names survived until quite recently. However none are in use today. Many of the ancient field boundaries can be clearly identified and remain in use today. There have been significant alterations due partly to changes in ownership and partly to changes in agricultural practice.

