



Account of Purley on Thames

The Purley Park River Estate

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This article seems to have been written around 2007. Source unknown.

The Purley Park River Estate stands on the south bank of the Thames and originally formed part of the estate of Purley Magna which was broken up in the 1920s, the main part being purchased by Mr Farmiloe, including the park lands north of the railway and what is now the line of New Hill and Mapledurham Drive. As this included the ancient parish church there was a track leading from the bottom of New Hill to the Church known as Church Walk and the area including what is now Church Mews and Waterside Drive was the enclosed kitchen garden of the estate.

In the late 1920s he sold off the portion of land north of Church Walk, west of the kitchen garden, east of Mapledurham Drive and south of the meadow belonging to the Mapledurham Estate; to the Mountayne family who planned to build a mansion there. However in December 1929, before work could commence, there was a flood which was slightly more severe than the one in January 2003. The Mountaynes then tried to get Mr Farmiloe to buy it back claiming it had been sold under false pretences. He refused and so the Mountaynes divided the land up into small plots averaging 11 feet wide and varying from 60 to 120 feet deep, selling them off at £5 each as camping sites for fishermen and caravanners and laying down a network of access tracks which is essentially the road network of today.

At first the plots had been used as either camp or caravan sites and could easily be vacated in the event of a flood. However many residents did erect shacks and sheds, pretending they were caravans by nailing wagon wheels to the sides. The developments on the estate caused great tensions in the rest of the village. There had already been complaints about traffic churning up the village roads and in January 1936 a petition was raised in the village seeking the closure of the estate. Parish Councillors Horace Pocock and John Rain were deputed to take the matter up with the County Council. This was all well before planning law was established in 1947 and such planning as there was, was mainly in the hands of the County Council who issued a stern warning to plot holders that any temporary buildings erected on the plots were liable to be demolished without compensation.

The plot holders got together in 1936 to form the PPPOA (Purley Park Plot Owners Association) and in 1939 the deeds of all the roads were made over to the PPPOA to hold them in Trust until such time as the Local Authority adopt them. The plot holders were required to maintain their bit of the road and they owned a share of the whole in proportion to their frontages.

During the second world war many of the plots were used as accommodation for refugees, mainly from London and when the Church of England school opened for the Autumn term in September 1939 no less than 100 children from the estate turned up to register. By this time many of the plot holders had established themselves as more or less permanent residents and there was a thriving social life developing. They built a recreation hut on Wintringham Way to hold gatherings and this was nominated as Purley's temporary mortuary in March 1940. The residents formed about 10% of the church electoral roll in May 1940 and were becoming a force to be reckoned with in the village when they realised that, when they all voted together for Parish Councillors, they could easily get their nominees elected. In 1946 they did just that and as a result Messrs H Haworth, W J Halsey and T J Rackliffe were elected leaving only Messrs AW Bucknell and H A Tidbury to represent the rest

of the village.

There were virtually no services for the River Estate. Water could be obtained by drilling a hole and installing a pipe and hand pump and people had to keep a supply of water to hand in milk bottles to prime the pumps when they wanted more water. There was no sanitation and a man known as Dan the sanitary man used to tour the estate in the morning to collect what was euphemistically termed 'night soil' which was kept in buckets and tipped into his portable tank. There was no electricity, no gas and no telephones. In 1947 the County Planning Committee again considered the problems of uncontrolled development on the estate. They resolved to acquire all the properties, clean up the area and install water and sewerage services. However the cost of sewerage alone was estimated at £40,000 and so the matter was let drop. In August 1949 the Parish Council made representations to the Post Office as the River Estate was getting only one delivery a day. There was no refuse collection service as Bradfield Rural District Council was one of the early champions of recycling and collected only recyclable materials. The bulk of refuse was, as was common at the time, coal and wood ash and this was used to repair the surface of the roads which were in a dreadful state with huge pot holes. It was so bad that most Reading taxi firms refused to allow their cabs beyond the bottom of New Hill.

In 1960 about a third of the properties on the estate were connected to a new water main and Bradfield RDC served notice on all the other plot holders requiring them to stop using ground water and connect to the main. Sewerage was installed in 1967 which required a pumping station to be installed at the corner of Chestnut Grove and Brading Way and this pumped the sewage to the sewage farm at Pangbourne.

One facility they did have however were shops. At one time there were as many as five on Colyton Way but over the years this was reduced to one. In March 1953 Peter Fitchew tried to set up a kiosk on St Mary's Avenue but when the matter was discussed at the Parish Council he was accused of having a pecuniary interest and the other plot holders also had to declare an interest and no comments were made. However Bradfield RDC turned down the proposal anyway.

In 1959 it was reported that there 285 properties on 33 acres, most of the houses being built of asbestos on metal or timber framing. It was decided to do a proper survey of the estate. Since the original plots, sold off in 1934, were only 11 feet wide, most plot holders tried to buy adjacent plots so they could erect a reasonable sized house. At first the accommodation was often old railway carriages or buses around which walls would be built. In one case two double-deck trams were used with a gap in between. Many of these, 'first generation' dwellings lasted until well into the 1980s.

As a result of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act and the survey conducted in 1959, Bradfield RDC produced the first version of the Purley River Estate Guidance Plan which was published in 1969. This acknowledged that plot holders had established rights prior to the 1947 Act and that very few could be described as uninhabitable under public health powers, this 'guidance' would be offered to ensure that things did not get worse.

This Guidance plan has proved to be one of the most effective planning tools ever devised. It forbade the issue of any more caravan licences, requiring any new caravans to be located on the caravan site on the south side of St Mary's Avenue. A minimum width of 30 ft for a plot was established although a pair of semi-detached could be built on a 50 ft plot. These and other restrictions were used to prevent plots from merging so as to isolate a sub-standard plot. Initially many of the new dwellings were chalets designed by Bob Skerritt who lived on the estate and was also a parish councillor. These were gradually replaced by more permanent brick dwellings which had to be built so that living areas were all above the 1947 flood level. Now there are only a handful of sub-standard plots and dwellings remaining.

By the mid 1960s the roads were not just a disgrace they were a real hazard to motorists. Most of

them looked a bit like a road within a coal mine, such was the amount of ash and slack that formed the surface. It was agreed therefore that four of the roads would be adopted by the Highway Authority and plot holders facing these would be required to make a contribution to the costs in proportion to their frontage.

Work on making up Wintringham Way, Colyton Way, Chestnut Grove and Brading Way started in 1968 but the remaining roads were too narrow to be adopted and so were left as they were. The new made up roads made a huge improvement to the look of the area and it was not too long before buses began to provide a service into Reading. Now, in 2007, it would be difficult to distinguish the estate from other housing estates although the individuality of the buildings is still striking.

