

3 The Pre-Reformation Church

On the Record (1180-1280)

Around 1185 we have a record of a gift of land in Purley to the Abbey of Reading by Isabella de Sifrewast. It is contained in a charter preserved in the cartulary of Reading Abbey. Isabella grants a half virgate of land (approx 15 acres) which was tenanted by Osbert, son of Godwyn the fisherman and his sons. We have identified this as the land between Purley Lane and Glebe Road and between the main road and north side of the Purley Lodge grounds. She left it to the Abbey to decide whether to allow Osbert to continue tenancing the land on the same terms. It seems the land remained in the hands of the Abbey until dissolution as when the assets of the Abbey were catalogued in 1538 there was a holding of land in Purley by William Fuller paying an annual rent of 6 shillings. One of the witnesses to Isabella's Charter was John the chaplain and it is conceivable that he was acting as vicar of Purley at the time.

In 1230 persons who qualified as 'tenants-in-chief of the Church of Sarum' were declared to be free of all tolls and other customs in Reading. The Lords of the Manor of both Purley Parva (William Sifrewast) and Purley Magna (Thomas Huscarle) were both specifically listed as exempt.

The earliest record of the clergy in Purley was in 1248 when John, vicar of Purley, was in dispute with Roger of Hide over a quarter of an acre of pasture in Great Purley. Roger claimed that John had unjustly prevented him from grazing his cattle on the land which formed part of the free tenement in Lething, whose nature and location is not known. John was convicted of acting unjustly and fined two pence

Walter Fachell (1280 –1360)

Walter Fachell (or Vachell) was the son and heir of Roger and Alice Vachell who were major landowners in the area. He is recorded as being rector of Purley as early as 1280 and still holding it in 1332 when he had gone blind and a curate, Ralph Scarp had to be appointed to look after the parish. Ralph, a priest of Reading had acted as proctor for Roger de Sifrewast (Rector of Clewer and related to the Lords of the Manor of Purley Parva) in 1324 and for Henry Rector of Sulham in 1328, both times in cases involving claims on money. While there is no proof that this was the same Ralph Scarp it would appear very likely that it was.

In 1306 Bishop Simon of Ghent visited Purley at least twice whilst he was staying at his palace at Sonning. On June 6th he held an induction at Purley when Richard Hagman was made rector of Swindon. Just over a month later on July 11th when he was on his way back to Ramsbury, Simon stopped off in Purley and instituted James Honneycombe as vicar of Uperne in Dorset.

Walter Fachell was recorded by Bishop Martival in 1329 as owing 22 marks to Master James de Ispan who was Chamberlain of the Exchequer. Roger managed to get Walter to pay one mark but there was still a debt of 21 marks a year later. James de Ispan had been prebend of Lyme Regis since September 1302 and had exchanged with the prebend of Chester-le-Street in County Durham in December 1330 whence he had almost certainly moved. It seems he had asked his bishop to collect his debts for him as Bishop Martival was also chasing after several other debtors, including William Dore of Lyme Regis who owed £30.

From 1332 when Ralph Scarp was appointed curate to Walter Fachel until 1361 there is a curious omission of Purley from the records of institution by the Bishop of Salisbury. For this period most other parishes have a continuous record of their clergy and the Registers of Bishop Robert Wyville who was Bishop of Salisbury from 1330 to 1375 are reasonably complete except for a gap towards the end of his life in the late 1360s and early 1370s. It is quite inconceivable that Walter Fachel remained as rector as he would have been at least 100 by 1361. It is however just possible that Ralph Scarp became Rector without the need for a further entry in the Register and stayed for another 30 years.

In 1340 Edward III devised a new tax known as the 'ninth' to finance an army to invade France. This was levied mainly on corn, wool and lambs but also on church revenues. The king appointed a number of collectors who were made personally responsible and Sir Thomas Huscarle, Lord of the Manor of Purley Magna, was one of those for Berkshire. Many people tried desperately to avoid paying this tax, but Sir Thomas, who was probably still holding the advowson of Purley, would have had little option but to pay up. This could provide the reason why the advowson fell into the hands of the College of St Edmund, as the College would be exempt and Sir Thomas would be rid of the liability and have earned himself a favour in the sight of the church.

The College of St Edmund (1361-1383)

From 1361 we begin to get a complete picture of the sequence of clergy in Purley as the Bishops of Salisbury recorded appointments in their registers and these have almost entirely survived. Robert Younge was made vicar of Purley in 1361 and later in the same year was replaced by Robert Farnethy. Both were presented by John de Arnhald, Prior of St Edmunds.

This same John de Arnhald had been condemned by Bishop Martival in 1326 for committing adultery with Isabella Fynk of Childrey, who was the wife of John de Hereham. He appealed to the archbishop but failed to sustain his case. He was ordered to purge himself to ten priests but complained he couldn't find ten priests in his vicinity so instead he was ordered to do penance on the 26th May 1326 but never did it, as again he had the sentence commuted, this time to a public distribution of bread to the poor which he duly undertook. In 1355 The Pope granted John a plenary indulgence on condition that when his time was near, he should find a priest and confessor and be truly penitent.

The 14th Century was a time of considerable tension between church and state. For most of the century England was ruled by King Edward II (1307-27), Edward III (1327-77) and Richard II (1377-99) and they sought to lessen the jurisdiction of the Pope within the realm of England, particularly by limiting his right to nominate clergy to benefices, and most particularly his right to appoint bishops, who thereby had a seat in the House of Lords and therefore a powerful voice of the raising of taxes. Edward III in particular invented new taxes, many of which were styled 'grants' which were levied in quite new ways. In 1371 he got Parliament to make him a grant of £50,000 which was to be levied equally on all the parishes in the Kingdom. It was thought that the number was 40,000 which would have meant 25s per parish, but in fact there were only 8600 parishes which meant nearly £6 each. This was considerably more than the value of the living of Purley, which was then valued at £ 4-6-8.

In the National Archives there is a file of excommunications by Robert Wyville and his successor, spanning the period 1353 to 1390. It is interesting to note that only one of these, for 1373, carried a schedule of persons excommunicated. The prime reason for the punishment was that they had omitted to pay even the smallest part of the annual subsidy of £50 granted by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. Among those named was Walter, rector of Purley. Also on the list were the rectors of Appleton and of Sunningwell in Berkshire and a number of laymen, described as 'usurpers' of clerical revenues in Berkshire and Wiltshire. The use of the term 'rector' may be taken to mean the Patron, for by this time the advowson of Purley had fallen to the College of St Edmund in Salisbury and its Prior in 1373 was Walter Childenham. The

appointments to Purley in 1361 and 1383, the nearest ones to 1373 in the bishops Register were both styled as Vicar.

The Renaissance

By the end of the 13th Century the effects of the Renaissance were beginning to be felt. The founding of Oxford University had provided a centre for questioning traditional views and its scholars, many of whom were ordained, roamed around the region preaching and teaching the new ideas.

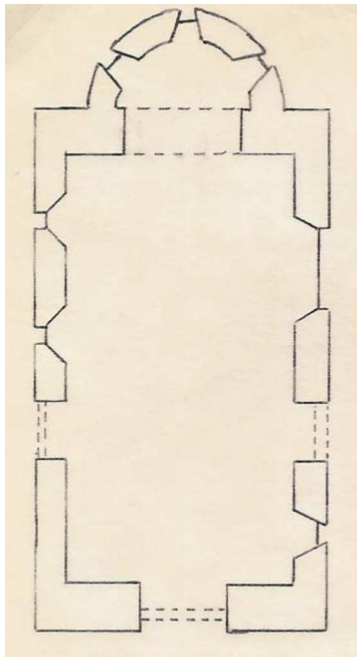
John Wyclif became a strong influence in the area towards the end of the 14th century and his followers became known as Lollards. The movement was particularly strong in the Newbury area and in the Chilterns although the church hierarchy did all they could to suppress what they saw as heresy.

Some time in the 14th century work was done on Purley Church. A large perpendicular style window was built which has been reset at least twice and now forms a feature of the foyer. Also dating from this period are gargoyles which are now on the tower and not functional, and several features whose designs were reproduced by Street in 1870. Of particular interest are the floor tiles which were made at the Penn tiliary near Maidenhead who did a thriving business with communities all up the Thames from London to Gloucestershire.

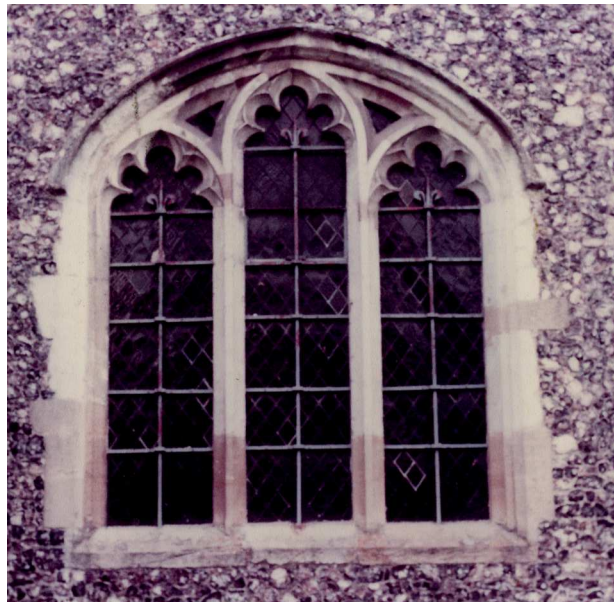
William Battesford (1383-1384)

In 1383 Bishop Ralph Erghum recorded that he had received a certificate from the Bishop of Winchester commissioning him to effect the exchange between Roger Watford, vicar of Purley and William Battesford, vicar of Wympering near Portsmouth.

William moved to become rector of St James the Greater, Tytherington (Glos) in 1384 and exchanged again in November 1388 to become Rector of All Saints, Littleton Drew near Chippenham in Wiltshire. Less than a year later in June 1389 he exchanged again to become vicar of St Mary's Maidenwell near Northampton. A William Battsford re-appears in Berkshire



Plan of the 14th century church (M30450)



The early English style window which was set into the south wall around 1350. Later moved to the old vestry and now in the foyer (M20006)

in October 1390 as vicar of Winkfield. There is no proof it is the same person but it seems highly likely it was.

Adam Wrockwardyn (1384-1387)

In 1384 the exchange with Tytherington brought Adam Wrockwardyn to Purley. Adam was a member of a long established family whose descendants were the namesake of Thogmorton St in London. There were branches of the family in Worcestershire and Warwickshire and their Gloucestershire seat was at Tortworth Court a little to the north of Tytherington.

Adam did not last very long as he exchanged livings in 1387 with William Smyth, vicar of All Saints, Hannington near Kingsclere, Hants.

William Smyth & Thomas Bonelythe (1387-1391)

William had not been long at Hannington, having moved there in 1386 from Bix (near Henley) in Oxfordshire. Three years after coming to Purley, in June 1390, William moved on to Chobham in Surrey in exchange with Thomas Bonelythe.

In 1391 Bishop Waltham made his first primary visitation to Berkshire, visiting Reading Deanery on 14th April. The return for Purley has not survived although those for Pangbourne, Sulham and Tidmarsh have. In view of later events one is tempted to think the vicar of Purley deliberately avoided the encounter. More charitably it could have been because Thomas Bonelythe was away negotiating his next move.

In 1394 on the 16th August, Isabel Seman of Purley confessed to Bishop Waltham at Sonning that she had been the concubine of William Smyth, former vicar of Purley for five years and had borne him sons, one of whom was still a babe in arms. She was made to give up William's company and do penance. Her punishment involved parading around Reading Market Place on seven convenient days, barefooted and bareheaded with her hair hanging loose and wearing only an undergarment. She had to do the same around Purley on seven festival days and the rural dean was ordered to certify to the bishop that she had obeyed. Presumably Isabel had moved with William to Chobham and when the affair was discovered she had been thrown out of Chobham vicarage and made to return to her own parish where she came under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Salisbury.

Stephen atte Walle (1391-1401)

In August 1391 Stephen atte Walle came from Henfield, Sussex in exchange for Thomas Bonelythe. Stephen had been rector of Frilsham in 1389 when he had exchanged his living for that of Henfield.

In early 1394 Bishop Waltham held his second triennial visitation but while no records of his visit to Berkshire have survived it would seem that the absence of a proper return in 1391 caused him to take a closer interest in Purley's affairs than might otherwise be the case. Not only did he learn of Stephen atte Walle's concubine, he was undoubtedly made aware of William Smyth's transgression as well.

On 17th August 1394 the archdeacon of Berkshire, John Yokflete was ordered to give Stephen a formal warning to remove his concubine Rose from Purley vicarage within three days. At the bishop's court it was alleged that he was keeping a lady known as Rose as his concubine, but Stephen maintained that he had not touched her for 6 years. The bishop ordered him to abjure her completely under pain of deprivation of benefice and ordered him to attend at Sherborne for penance on September 1st. Presumably he obeyed and Rose was made to leave.

In 1405 he moved from Purley to St Peter's church at West Cliffe near Dover, exchanging livings with John Midderhill. Stephen remained at West Cliffe until 1416.

John Midderhill & Richard atte Water (1401-1413)



The remains of Sherborne Castle in Dorset where Stephen Atte Wall was summoned to do penance [M00292]

John Midderhill had come to West Cliffe from Ronyngton in the diocese of Lincoln in December 1401. In 1406 he moved on from Purley, exchanging livings with Richard Atte Water, vicar of St Rumwold, Winchester. John did not stay long at St. Rumwold's either as he exchanged again on 31st March 1407 to become Vicar of Durnford. He was soon involved in a dispute over the roof of his church. His parishioners claimed he had been negligent but the Dean of Salisbury decreed it was the fault of the parish and ordered them to mend the roof and the tower before Easter 1408 or pay a fine of 20 shillings. John did not stay long at Durnford as he moved on to Ridge in the diocese of Lincoln in December 1409.

The next exchange was in 1413 when Richard Atte Water moved to St Peter's church, Stantonbury near Wolverton in Buckinghamshire. Richard stayed there a while and then moved on to be vicar of Little Gaddesdon in Hertfordshire, which living he resigned in 1424.

Thomas Geoffray & John Ferby (1413-1435)



Little Bookham Church in Surrey. This is where John Ferby came from in 1433 and where Thomas Geoffray ended his days (M20109)

Thomas Geoffray came to Purley from Stantonbury in 1413 and stayed 20 years in Purley, something of a record for the time, however in 1433 he too moved on exchanging livings with John Ferby of Little Bookham in Surrey. Thomas remained at Little Bookham until he died in 1466.

By the early 15th Century exchanges seemed to cease. One can speculate why they occurred so frequently during this period. The answer may be that one of the taxes introduced was the 'First Fruits'. What this meant was that in grateful thanks for being appointed to a living the person concerned donated the whole of the first year's income to the bishop. Thereafter the tax was only a tenth. It was thus very much in the bishop's interest to keep his clergy on the move and especially to move them to a different diocese so that he could appropriate most of the parish income. It is noticeable that almost all the exchanges involved a change of diocese and many involved proctors, who were essentially livings brokers who acted as a clearing house for clergy who wished to move. The bishops have been recorded as being very opposed to the practice but this is not very evident from their registers.

William Bolton & Richard Cotton (1436-1444)

In 1436 the vicarage of Purley was vacant, it having been served by clergy from Pangbourne and St. Laurence, Reading. The position was eventually filled by William Bolton who resigned in 1439. William eventually became the prebend of Major Pars Altaris in 1486 but had died by 1489. This was a post which had special responsibility for the offerings at Pentecost at Salisbury Cathedral. In January 1486 he sent a proxy to the election of Edward Cheyne as Dean of Salisbury.

Richard Cotton was appointed on 24th September 1439 and he too resigned in 1444.

John Braace & Richard Fesant (1444-1472)

John Braace became vicar of Purley in 1444. He had previously been vicar of St Mary in the Butts in Reading to which living he had been appointed on September 12th 1426. In 1458 he was chasing Henry Cooper for a debt of £17. Henry, described as a husbandman of Purley, was pardoned for not appearing as summoned before John Pryscoth, the Chief Justice, to answer the debt allegation. John Braace died in 1463 and his deputy, Richard Fesant was appointed perpetual vicar.

John Strete & William Stele (1472-1505)

Prior to 1472 John Strete was vicar of Purley. He resigned in 1472 and in 1476 he was granted a Papal Dispensation to hold the living of Hinton St George in the diocese of Bath and Wells, together with one other benefice.

In 1472 William Stele was instituted as John Strete's replacement. During his period of tenure Purley was left two separate bequests of one mark. The first was in 1493 when Henry Kelsall, a clothier of Reading, also left 6 marks for the mending of the road between Pangbourne and Reading which would have been well used by the Abbots of Reading travelling to and from their country house at Bere Court in Pangbourne.

The second bequest was by Margaret Twynhoo in 1500. Margaret was the widow of Nicholas Carew, the Lord of the Manor of Purley Magna from 1458 to 1466 and she asked to be buried in Greyfriars Church in Reading as near to the tomb of her mother and father as was convenient. She left 6s 8d to be placed on the Beadroll of Purley Church so that prayers would be said for herself, her three husbands and her parents. Giving money for the Beadroll was one of the ways in which people could buy privilege in heaven after they were dead. This was the simplest as the names were inscribed in a roll and someone was employed to recite a set number of prayers on a regular basis. The prayers were counted out on a rosary which is essentially a string of beads and the person so employed was known as the beadsman and could be lay although frequently this was a job given to religious brothers. The next most expensive method was to pay for Masses to be said (see John Leke in 1544) but this required the services of a priest. The

most expensive was to build a small chapel or chantry where not only a priest would say Mass, but the public could come and add their prayers. So far as we know there was never a chantry at Purley.

William Stele seems to have been a resident priest as Purley was specifically listed as being exempt from the clerical tithe in April 1487, November 1491 and February 1492 on account of the rector being resident and the living assessed at 12 marks or less. The parish was not excused in March 1489 when it had to pay two instalments of 3/4. William died in 1505.

Richard Davy & Thomas Edmundes (1505-1544)

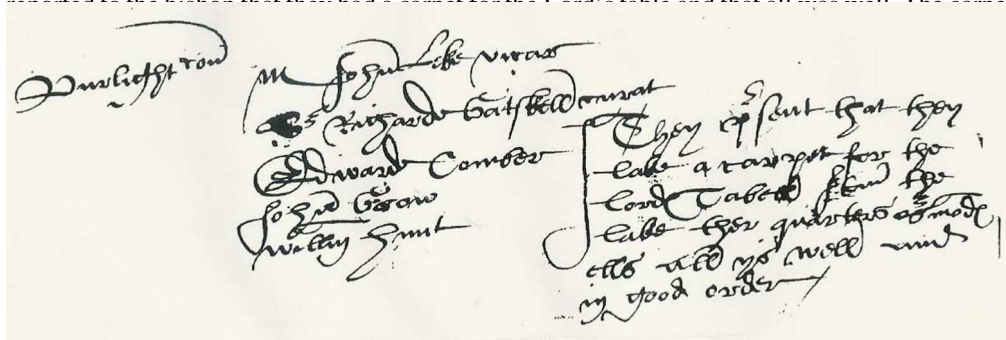
Richard Davy became vicar in 1505 and lasted 35 years until his death in 1540. Richard was witness to the momentous changes which occurred as Henry VIII made the break with Rome in 1533 and ordered all churches to make an English bible available in 1538. One would suspect however that most of the changes passed Purley by and they simply did what they were told. Thomas Edmundes became vicar on 4th April 1540 but died shortly afterwards. On his death his deputy John Barnaby acted with the consent of the patron until 1544.

John Leke (1544-1553)

John Leke was appointed perpetual vicar of Purley on the 5th of August 1544. This was the last time the College of St Edmund presented to the living of Purley. John had taken both his BA and MA at Oxford University in 1520/21 and been recorded, in 1541 as a stipendary priest at Farnham, his stipend having been paid by Mistress Mores, a widow of Farnham. However according to the register his previous appointment was as a vicar choral at Salisbury Cathedral.

This was a very useful method for the clergy to earn a living as he would have been paid by the relatives of a dead person to sing regular masses for the repose of the soul of the dear departed at frequent intervals. It would seem that John was married as he was one of the first to be ejected by Queen Mary.

It is from John Leke's time that we have the first of a long series of Churchwardens' Presentments. One isolated return has survived from 1553 and in it we learn that Richard Gatskyll was John's curate, he had three wardens, Edward Comber, John Carew and William Hunt. They reported to the bishop that they had account for the Lord's table and that all was well. The account



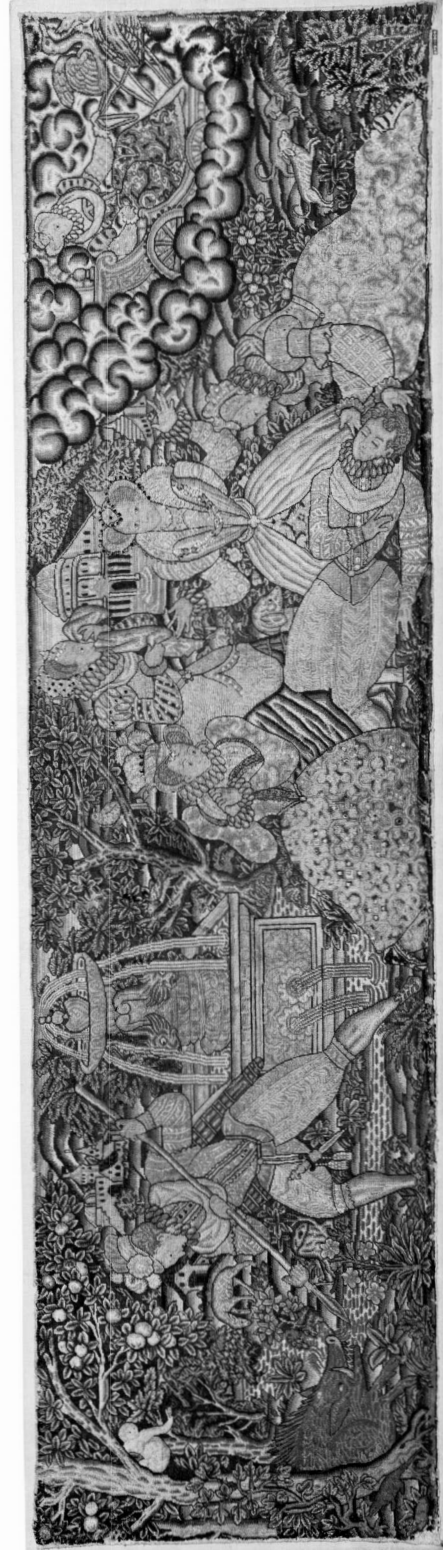
The earliest surviving churchwardens' presentment dated 1553. It reads:-

Mr John Leke, vicar

Richard Gatskyll Curate

Edward Comber, John Carew, Wally Grant Churchwardens

There is a font ... A tapistre for the lord's table ... All is well and in good order (M30456)



The ancient tapestry referred to in 1553, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum (M30623) - see chapter 18

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