

10 - The Mid Twentieth Century

Decline and Fall

Ernest Skuse served Purley at a time when its church struck rock bottom. For the first time the full impact of the move from real property to cash was felt in the parish. Hitherto the living of Purley had been sufficient to maintain the rector in some style. Now the parish had to come to terms with its rector being poorer than most of his parishioners. The Second World War brought even more profound changes than the First. The age of the bureaucrats and technocrats had dawned and there was little room left for scholars or saints, particularly if they happened to be a rector.

The post-war period was continued austerity and rationing. The Beveridge Report, from which the Welfare State grew, convinced the majority of the population that the church no longer had a role in social affairs and although the population of Purley was rising steadily, congregations decreased almost to nothing. The make-up of the congregation also changed. Before Ernest came the church's affairs were dominated by the well to do and established families. By the time he died they had almost vanished from the scene to be replaced by newcomers, professional and working class, few of whom actually worked in the village.

Ernest Skuse

Ernest Edwin Skuse became rector on 22nd December 1931. He had been a great traveller and had ridden all over Australia on horseback. He was known as a walker and used to tramp the lanes for miles around composing his sermons as he went.

He was born in 1876 in Bantry, County Cork, Ireland, the son of The Reverend Thomas Edmund Skuse. He married Cicely Edwards, the daughter of The Rev A W Cribb in 1906. He was educated at Bruce Castle School, Tottenham and St John's College, Armidale in Australia until 1899 and at the Australian College of Theology where he obtained his LTh with first class honours in 1900, when he was ordained. He became associate curate of Quirindi, NSW until 1902 when he set out for England seeing a great deal of Australia and the world on the way.

He obtained a post as curate of St. Saviour's at Stoke near Guildford in 1904 while he was studying at the London College of Divinity, from which he graduated in 1905. He left Stoke in 1907 to become Curate of Wisley, Winchester Diocese which he left in 1911 for a further bout of travelling. He became curate of Monk Sherborne from 1912 to 1913 and obtained a Licence to Officiate in the Winchester Diocese from 1913. He became perpetual curate of Braywood from 1919 to 1931 when he exchanged with Arthur Harris-Rivett and came to Purley.

Pre-war years 1931-1939

Just after he arrived he wrote a Missionary Pageant which was performed at the Greek Theatre in Bradfield College in 1932. It was entitled "The Beautiful Gate" In 1933 he started the Parish Magazine which lasted a few years before becoming defunct in 1938. He used to sell it from door to door around the parish.

During the 1930s there were a number of bishops who visited Purley. In 1933 the former bishop of Madras, Bishop Whitehead, held a confirmation and two years later the bishop of the Yukon performed a similar ceremony.

Edward Oliver Farrer died on 20th Feb 1934. He had been a member of the PCC and a sidesman for many years as well as serving as Mayor of Reading and Alderman for the Borough. As a



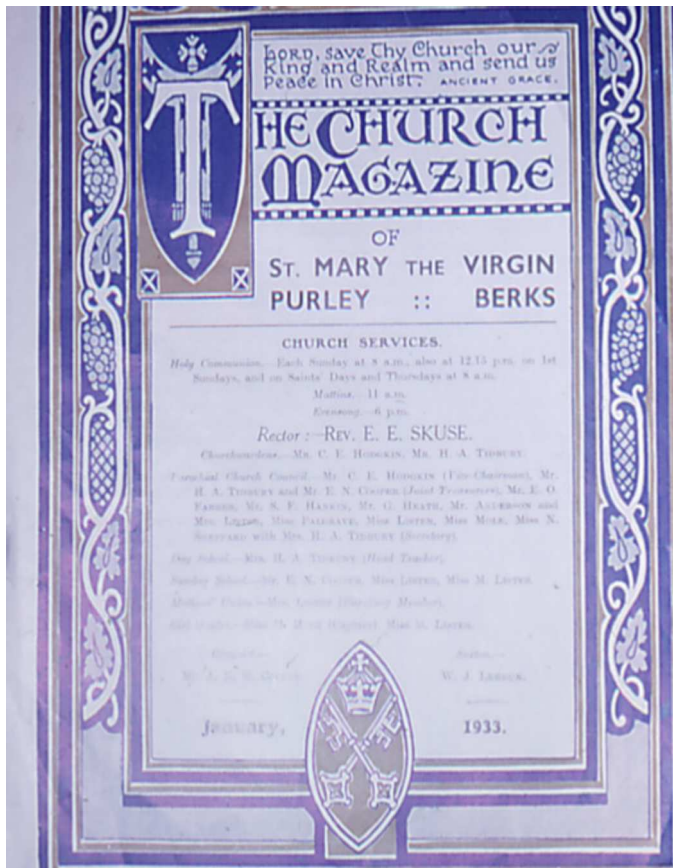
Ernest Skuse- Churchwarden and local farmer Arthur Bucknell is behind him to the right [M20144]

memorial his wife gave £120 to pay for new heating in the church and a brass plate was erected to his memory in the nave by the south door.

The church had been heated by a very primitive hot air system. There had been a fire box with a flue leading under the main aisle to a chimney in the vestry. A grating in the nave had to be raised to stoke the fire which was apt to send fumes billowing through the church. A new solid fuel heating system with hot water radiators was installed by Messrs Goodman. Also in 1934 there was an appeal for funds to repair the north wall of the church which had deteriorated and was badly pitted. Improved drainage was also required. The Wessex Electricity Company was asked to lay a cable to the church but this was not done until well after the Second World War.

Car parking had become a problem and Mr Farmiloe was approached to see whether he would let the church have some additional land. He refused and Mr Saunders was approached, but nothing came of it.

It was decided to apply for a faculty to level all unknown graves and Mr Keen of Pangbourne was asked to prepare a plan to record the positions of graves.



The church magazine introduced by Ernest Skuse. [M20105]

Cecil Aldin died in 1935 and a memorial tablet was installed below that of his son on the south wall of the nave. It was paid for by a collection among his friends and after the cost of £20 had been met there was £19-10-0 left over which the churchwardens invested in War Savings Certificates.

The new rectory was badly in need of repair in 1935 and a mortgage of £110 was taken out to pay for them.

The Rural Dean made an inspection of the church and suggested many items for attention. Of particular concern was the floor which was suffering badly from damp and decay. Offensive odours were noted after the church had been closed for a while. A contract was given to Messrs Collier and Catley in October 1936 and work was completed by the end of March 1937 at a cost of £115. The PCC tried to get a grant from the Incorporated Church Building Society but the Bishop had refused on the grounds that grants could not be made where a faculty had not been obtained beforehand. Despite an appeal from the PCC for a change of heart he remained adamant.

In 1937 Ernest Skuse's income was reported as being £423 gross, made up of £272 from Queen Anne's Bounty, £142 from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, £3 from fees and £6 from the Easter offerings.

One Sunday no one turned up to the evening service so the rector wrote a letter to the local paper asking what should be done with his empty church. For some weeks later a representative of the press was present to see if it happened again, but to no avail.

The ivy which had graced the tower for many years was removed by the Sexton, Mr Rawlins in early 1938.

The return of Neville Chamberlain from Munich in September was greeted with relief by the PCC who resolved 'That as the crisis is now over, an appeal can now be asked for as a thank

offering to God for the blessing of peace' The appeal that was launched was for £49 to pay for repairs to the organ.

The War Years 1939-1945

When war broke out there was pressure from ratepayers to build a shelter at the school; but Mr Skuse vigorously opposed the demand on the grounds that the village had been designated as a reception area and was therefore to be presumed safe from air raids; and that anyway the experts had examined the school and had found that the arrangements already made were satisfactory. As things turned out he was proved right and the nearest Purley came to being bombed was when some incendiary bombs were dropped over Pangbourne.

Proposals for a new rectory were made in 1941 but did not come to fruition until 1971.

The lead covering on the tower had been severely damaged when the trapdoor had been wrenched away. A new sheet of lead 3 ft by 4 ft was ordered. Around the same time in 1942 damage was reported to the coat of arms on the tower.

In April 1942 the bishop of Oxford sent out a circular giving guidance on the removal of iron railings from churchyards for the war effort. In the event however it does not appear that any railings were removed from around graves in Purley churchyard for this purpose.

Mr Price died in 1942 and left a bequest of £25 to the church. It was agreed that the money should go towards the provision of electric lighting; but there was a bitter dispute as to whether the churchwardens or the Parochial Church Council should be responsible for the money until it was spent. It was eventually agreed that the PCC would invest it in Savings Certificates.

Post-War Years 1945-1956

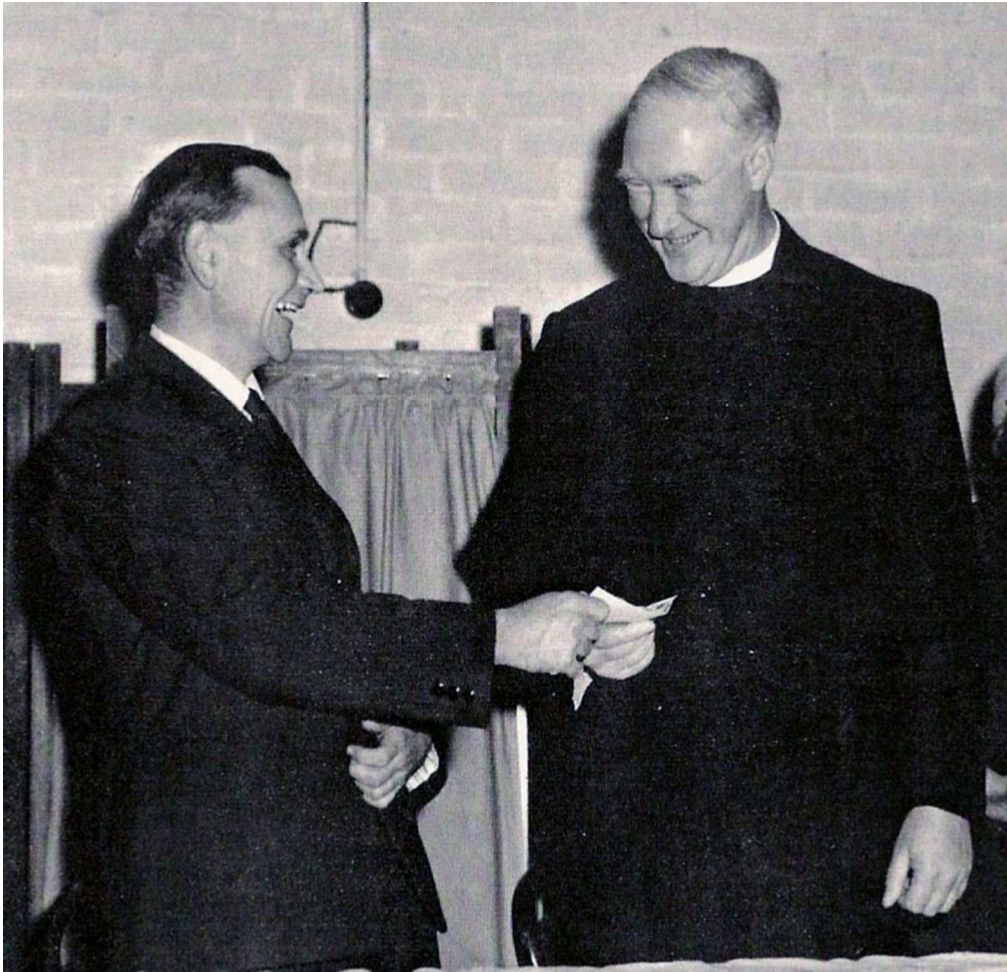
Ernest Skuse served briefly on the Parish Council from March 1946 until April 1947, serving as chairman until he resigned. He seemed to have fallen out with the Parish Council as in 1953 he demanded that they stop meeting at the school which had been their venue since founding in 1927. The Parish Council flatly refused and the dispute dragged on until the Memorial Hall was used as the meeting place in February 1955.

Soon after the war a former bishop of Reading decided to revisit his flock by boat and held a progress down the Thames. Starting at Abingdon in a borrowed launch, he visited riverside parishes over a period over several months. At Purley he was met at the Thames and conducted to the Church in a procession. Lead by Peter Tapham on trumpet they sang hymns as they went but after a short distance a dog joined in and reduced everyone to tears of laughter. There was a short service at the church and then everyone retired to the hall on Wintringham Way for a social evening.

In 1947 there was a review of salaries and the remuneration of the cleaners was raised from £7-15-0 to £10-0-0, that of the organist from £26 to £35 and the Sexton from £38 to £40.

The sanctuary carpet was stolen in 1948 and a new one was purchased using the £25 compensation received. Also in 1948 the church tried to purchase some of the land in what is now the Moorings as an extension to the churchyard, but in the end the former owner decided to sell it to a third party. The old oil lamps were both difficult to replenish and very smoky so in 1949 the Parochial Church Council decided to install electricity for lighting. However wartime austerity had not yet been overcome and the Ministry of Fuel and Power refused to sanction lighting for a church so Calor Gas had to be used instead and, as a result, new Calor Gas lamps were installed by Messrs Callas, Sons and May at a cost of £82-5-0 using the money bequeathed by Mr Price.

Towards the end of his ministry in Purley Ernest Skuse suffered from poor health which was not assisted by a drinking problem. He had a very bad splutter caused partly by a false eye tooth which did not stay in position. Many words were impossible for him to pronounce and many people were quite incapable of understanding what he was saying. He refused to live in the



William Morton receiving his retirement present from John Bucknell [M20145]

rectory as he could not afford the cost of upkeep so he lodged in Tilehurst. During and after the war the congregations had dwindled to almost nothing.

He could not afford to retire and he died in 1956. His wife had died earlier but he left three children, Jean, Ernest Noel (b 1910) and Christopher. Jean appeared on the scene again many years later when she came to talk to Project Purley.

William Henry Morton 1956-1961

William Henry Morton became rector on 7th November 1956. He was born in 1904 and took a BSc degree at London University in 1925. He studied Theology at St Stephen's House Oxford and was ordained in 1933. He had spells as curate of Eckington and St Thomas's Derby and as incumbent of Milford, West Walton and Abbots Ripon. During the war he became a prisoner of war of the Japanese and incurred a serious leg injury which made it impossible for him to kneel, although it did not impede him riding around the parish on a bicycle.

He made an immediate impact on Purley and the people flooded back to church. He was described by one parishioner as handsome and tall and was well loved as a pastor. The congregation were shattered and many moved to tears when he announced his resignation only five years after his appointment. He explained however that he felt that after more than four years in a parish, his major work was done and if he stayed any longer he would become stale.

There had been an old man on the River Estate who was an atheist and who never wanted to see Mr Morton when he came around visiting but he always made it plain that he had come around to see how he was rather than persuade him to come to church. When the old man fell very sick and was on the point of death he called for Mr Morton and asked him to say a prayer for him, because he felt that if he had been able to persevere for so long then there must be something in it.

After his spell at Purley he was successively Vicar of Arthington and Rector of Collyweston before he retired in 1969. He remained in the Peterborough Diocese until 1974 when he moved back to Derby.

Harold Frederick Hawkins 1961-1969

Harold Hawkins was ordained in 1927 and served as curate of St Luke's Maidenhead until 1929 when he obtained his L.Th. from the University of Durham. He served successively as curate of Brandon (1929-30) and the Church of the Venerable Bede, Monkwearmouth (1930-31). He returned south in 1931 obtaining a licence to Officiate. He had a longer spell as curate of St Peter's Norbiton from 1932 to 1935 when he obtained his first parish as vicar of Farndon in the diocese of Southwark. He served there until 1950 when he was made vicar of Nazeing where he stayed until his appointment to Purley.

One of his first acts was to restart the parish magazine. He and his wife Nellie became very well known and did a lot of visiting around the parish together. They were a very sociable



The church interior in the 1950s. Note the memorial to Charles Ernest Hodgkin to the left of the chancel arch. He died in 1949. The font is located to the left of the entrance, the old hot water radiators and the pews are still in place. The church is lit by Calor gas lamps which were replaced when electricity came later. [M50053]



Nellie and Harold Hawkins outside the rectory on the site where now Allison Gardens stands [M20146]

couple, well known for their humour and prowess on the piano. Harold wrote a short history of the church in 1966, putting together material gathered by William Fisher, a former secretary of the PCC. During the latter part of his ministry it was decided to build a new rectory and sell the existing site for building what became Westridge Avenue and Allison Gardens.

Harold's health deteriorated and he retired to live in Pangbourne in May 1969. As a leaving present he and his wife were presented with a new carpet. He died a few years later and in 1984 his children gave a pair of candlesticks to the church in his memory.

In 1967 the solid fuel boiler which had provided heating via radiators was finally replaced by an oil burning boiler at a cost of £350. Although the estimated running costs would increase from £35 to £40 pa it would no longer require the sexton to keep stoking the old boiler. Towards the end of 1969 mains water finally came to the church and a tap was installed adjacent to the Lych Gate.

Charles Derek Taylor 1970-1975

Derek Taylor became rector in January 1970. He moved into the new rectory completed in July 1969, with his wife and two children. Born in 1936 he had been brought up on a Nottinghamshire farm and after National Service went up to Cambridge. After graduation he went on to Ripon

Hall Theological College in Oxford and was ordained in 1961. Prior to coming to Purley he was curate in charge of St Catherine's Stoke Aldermoor in Coventry, having previously served as curate at All Saint's Nottingham, and at Binley.

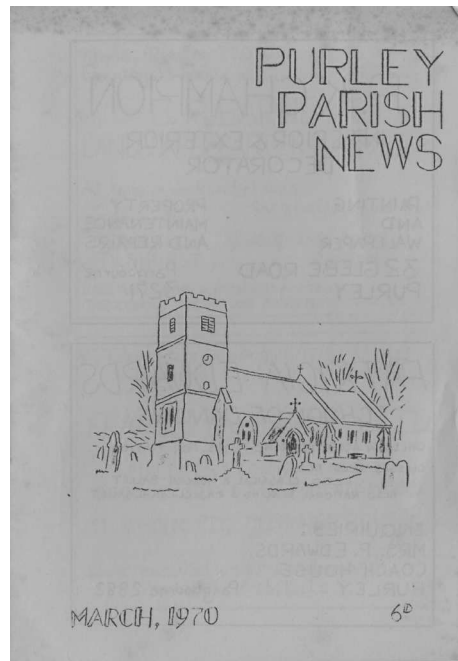
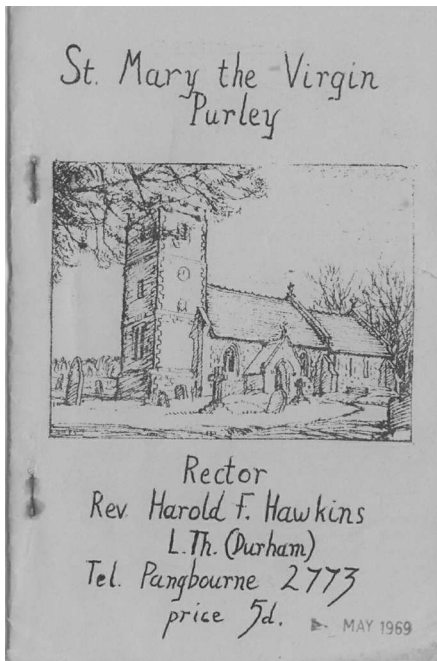


Derek Taylor [M20158]

He was keenly interested in getting a new church hall built and began his ministry by establishing a five year development plan which clearly identified the shortcomings of the existing buildings. His first idea was to demolish the old church and re-assemble it at the corner of New Hill and Oxford Road. This was greeted with horror and the impracticability of it was soon evident. However Colonel Hugh Duncan, the owner of Purley Park, gave the church a quarter of an acre on which to build a church hall. Derek launched an appeal for funds and while he raised a considerable sum of money, no start was able to be made during his rectorship.

Derek reinvigorated the parish magazine, turning it into a lively community based magazine with a wide following and vastly increased circulation.

A number of bitter disputes broke out about several matters and eventually the Sunday School broke away from the church, moving to the Memorial Hall as the Young Followers of Jesus and a new one was reformed at the church. It took many years for the bitterness to subside.



The Parish Magazine as relaunched, first by Harold Hawkins in 1965 (left) and again by Derek Taylor in March 1970 (right) [M20401 & M20402]