

Account of Purley on Thames

The Purley Remount Depot

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When the First World War broke out there was an enormous demand for horses by the military. Hunters were wanted for use by officers, dray horses were needed to haul waggons and guns and mules and ponies were needed to carry loads. To address the problem Remount depots were set up around the country. At first the Berkshire Yeomanry took on the task and set up two depots in the Reading area, at the GWR hotel meadow and at Arborfield. The depots acted as collecting points for horses from farms, businesses and hunt and riding stables. For the most parts the horses collected were out of employment as their riders and drivers were going off to war. The depots were also collecting harnesses and tack for re-equipping the horses for their new role.

In Purley Cecil Aldin had been asked to take over as Master of the South Berks Hunt and though the hunt continued to function throughout the war it was on a reduced scale with all the hunt's own horses having been made over to the army. Aldin had been appointed purchasing officer for Berkshire, and, as there was considerable spare capacity he had been using the facilities to stable horses at Purley. Aldin hunting connections proved invaluable and he was able to both identify useful horses and persuade their owners to part with them. He had already set a good example by handing over the hunt's horses. The horses were put into four categories R1 - suitable for the cavalry and officers chargers, R2 - smaller horses for riding, HD - for heavy draft work and LD - for light draft work. Soon he had exhausted the supplies in Berkshire and began to get horses from all over Britain and even from Canada.

His wife, Rita, and daughter, Gwen, were roped into help with the cleaning and feeding of the horses but with most of the hunt staff away at the war the work load was too much for them and when he tried to recruit local men they knew almost nothing about horses and were not young and fit enough anyway. He realised that there were many women around who were expert horsewomen so he began to hire them to help out, giving them a week's trial before appointing them as stable hands and riders. He was assisted at Purley by A J Munnings who was later to become President of the Royal Academy but who was also an expert horseman. He was unfit for active service owing to the loss of an eye and chose to work with horses rather than go with a labour battalion to France. He proved a dab hand at treating many animals and spent much of his time at Purley looking for mange and applying a foul smelling oily mixture supplied by the Veterinary department of the War Office.

As there were many more applicants than jobs at Purley Aldin decided to experiment with an all female Remount Depot which he set up near Maidenhead and which opened in September 1915. To run the enterprise he hired a notable writer from Lancashire named Eleanor Horricks who took over some thirteen of the female staff and recruited further local women reaching a peak of 20. This staff was supplemented by dozens of volunteers, mainly titled ladies and the daughters of farmers and hunt servants who all worked well together despite the enormous class differences.

Eleanor was described by Cecil Aldin as very efficient and enthusiastic. She was paid £2 a week and the other women 25s. She was injured by the horses on at least two occasions, once when she was kicked on the head and once when she was crushed against the side of a stall. She seemed to have been very unlucky in this regard as prior to working for Cecil Aldin she had been working with

the King's trainer at Newmarket and been laid up for five weeks after being kicked. Then she took a job as a driver for a west end firm and fell under the horse when she was thrown from the van. However she overcame all her injuries and used to carry on despite the pain. Eventually the supply of horses had dwindled to the extent that the new depot had to be closed in 1916. Eleanor was out of a job.

She was very keen on continuing with the work she had been doing and many of her women also wanted to carry on. She contacted the Rev HDS Sweetapple and borrowed money from him to provide a guarantee to the War Office that she could continue to run a remount depot in Holyport near Maidenhead. She also borrowed money from other people on the same basis. She had been living in Horsham and also offered her services as a buyer for the local War Hospital Supply Depot and wrote to many firms using as her address the Remount Depot in Holyport and marked her letters OHMS. She received money from the committee of the Hospital Supply Depot but instead of paying the suppliers she pocketed the money.

The reasons why the depots had closed were basically the same in Purley as in Maidenhead. Horses were being replaced by lorries for hauling, tanks were being introduced and many of the cavalry units were being dismounted as being unsuitable for modern warfare. Thus the War Office was not interested in her proposals and were not prepared to even accept the guarantees let alone promise to repay them at the end of the war. The result was that one of her creditors sued her for the return of the money and found there was no money to repay the loan. So a criminal prosecution was started and Eleanor was taken to the Quarter Sessions in Reading on Monday 2nd June 1917. She pleaded guilty and was sentenced to three months in prison whereupon she collapsed in the dock.

Purley now and 60 years ago

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On the main Oxford Road in Purley, stands an immaculate maintained, attractive Georgian house with white walls and a grey slate roof. A decorous notice board at the main entrance announce G. Percy Trentham, Ltd.

The Company bought the 15 acre site in stages between 1951 and 1958 and has, since extended and modernised the buildings, replacing some with completely modern structures. These have been designed to harmonise with the older properties so that each sits easily amongst its neighbours whatever its age.

The previous owners were the South Berks Hunt and they called the place: "The Kennels" as it was here they kept their foxhounds,, A little terrace of cottages where the Hunt servants lived recall the past With their present name, Kennel Cottages. They were built of local brick in 1902 when the hounds were. first moved here from a place with the unlikely name of "Worlds End", and only recently have their slate roofs been replaced with red tiles.

In 1914 the Master of the South Berks Foxhounds was one Cecil Charles Windsor Aldin, an artist, who earned his living largely through sketching animals and inns. Many a country pub has one of his prints on the wall and his fox hunting pictures tingle with reality. Devoted to hunting, Cecil Aldin took up residence at "The Kennels" shortly after becoming Master, the better to look after his hounds.

The World War was soon to break out and, as we tend to forget in these days of troop transport Planes and personnel carriers, the prime means of transport for the world's armies in 1914 was the horse. In the months leading up to the outbreak of the first World War each regiment appointed a number of Remount Purchasing. Officers whose duty was to find and despatch a sufficient number of mounts to keep their regiment on the move.

Cecil Aldin was an R.P.O. and he set up "The Kennels" as a remount depot. Before long he had charge of several depots and, at one time, had 500 horses and mules available. One of his assistants was a certain Alfred Munnings who could not only look after horses but could paint them as well.

As the war dragged on and men became scarce for this kind of work, he took an exceedingly bold step of initiative. He persuaded some of the "huntin' ladies" of his acquaintance to keep their hand in and "beat the Kaiser" by acting as grooms at the remount depot. Before long the place was almost completely run by women and run most successfully.

Cecil Aldin continued hunting until prevented by arthritis. Then he moved to Mallorca where he sketched and wrote until his death in 1935.

In the Imperial War Museum are two magnificent canvasses by Cecil Aldin. One shows the interior of one of the oldest buildings in Purley - the tithe barn which is at least 500 years old, and stands on the Trentham estate. Tradition has it, however, that this barn once stood down near St. Mary's Church near the Rector's house. At harvest time each cart passed through its two open doors to leave a tenth of its load as the Great Tithe.