

Account of Purley on Thames

The Story of Frances Ann Hawes

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A talk given by Ben Viljoen to Project Purley 15th November 1996. Published in PPNL 43

The Story of Lady Frances Anne Hawes of Purley Hall, Later Viscountess Vane, was told on November 15th by member Ben Viljoen. As a background to the story we were shown a scenes of colour slides being a tour of the garden and grounds of Purley Hall as it is today. Francis Hawes started his working life in the Navy and in later life became a director of the South Sea Company. The Company was extremely successful and the list of subscribers included the King himself. In those days there were very few companies controls or safeguards and corruption was rife. Francis Hawes made a small fortune for himself and was able to purchase Purley Hall. At this time his daughter Frances Anne was 5 years old and we imagined her walking in the gardens of the estate. However, as we know, the South Sea Bubble burst, and Francis Hawes was declared bankrupt. Eventually Frances Hawes' brother Thomas, purchased Purley Hall for £1080. Thomas always regarded the property as really belonging to his brother. Thereafter both brothers lived at the Hall. Frances Anne described herself at the age of thirteen, 'as remarkably tall for my years". In that year she went to Bath where she was introduced to the world as a woman. Many proposals of marriage were made to her parents, but they came from people that Frances Anne did not like and she rejected them all being determined to refuse every man who did not make his addresses to herself in person because she had no notion of marrying for anything but love. When Frances Anne fell in love it was with Lord William Hamilton a young man who was not considered by her parents to be a suitable match. She agreed to elope with Hamilton. The Gentleman's Magazine published an announcement of the marriage in May 1733. A stillborn child was born of this union and sadly in 1734 her husband died. She was left an unprovided widow with no home. In 1735 she embarked on a loveless marriage to Viscount Vane. It is from this point that the life of Frances Anne, now Viscountess Vane, started on the downward spiral.

In 1737 an advertisement appeared in the Daily Journal, enquiring of the whereabouts of Viscountess Vane. She had absconded from her husband. Circumstances became desperate and in 1743 she asked her father for a loan but was refused. Because of her loveless marriage, she resorted to making a living any way she could. A number of men shared her life and her bed but permanence and security eluded her. In 1751 the general advertiser carried an advertisement for a publication by Tobias Smollett titled *Peregrine Pickle* which was to contain the *Memoirs of Frances Anne*. When the book appeared it shocked fashionable society. She eventually returned to Viscount Vane and died in 1788. [RD]

