

Account of Purley on Thames

The Storers

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Two articles by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook articles 4 and 5 published in PPN September and October 1980

4 - The Storers of Purley Park

Inside the Church of St Mary's in Purley, there is a monument on the west wall to Anthony Gilbert Storer who died in 1818. In his book "Buildings of Berkshire", Nikolas Pevsner describes this monument as being a "good Grecian group of a family turning towards an urn on a high pedestal" on which is a "portrait of the deceased."

The inscription tells us that "Anthony Gilbert Storer, Esq., of Purley Park in the County of Berks, and of Belleisle and Frome in the Island of Jamaica, where he was member of the Assembly for the Parish of Westmorland, died at New Providence on 13th June (18th at the top of the memorial) 1818, and lies buried in a mausoleum erected on his estate at Belleisle, by his widow, Ann K. Storer."

Below the inscription is a commemorative poem in which the word "DEPORE" occurs - the omitted letter "L" has been squeezed in very small to correct the spelling, so that the relevant lines now read:

"Thy widow, children, friends, the loss DEPLORE,
Which fell on all when Storer was no more."

Anthony Gilbert was the nephew of Anthony Morris Storer (1746-1799) who purchased the manor of Purley Magna in 1793 with money inherited from his father, Thomas. Anthony Morris commenced to improve and ornament the grounds with the advice of Humphrey Repton, but he died before his new house could be built. He left £20,000 to build the present magnificent mansion of Portland stone in Italian style designed by James Wyatt. The site chosen was on high ground with extensive views along the Thames Valley. Unfortunately, it was also in the middle of the old Reading turnpike road, which had to be diverted to the South. The new house was also presumably much drier than the old red brick manor house on low ground near the church.

Anthony Morris Storer (1813-1902) - the second of that name - was only five years old when he inherited Purley Park from his father, Anthony Gilbert. As a retired Major, he spent the latter part of his life at Purley and gained the doubtful distinction of being an irascible character. Apart from being a JP for Berkshire, he was also Lord of the Manor. After his death, the estate passed to his only daughter, Mrs Leila Minna Gertrude Downing Fullerton, and the Lordship of the Manor lapsed.

Did you spot this monument with the two errors?
At present I do not know whether Anthony Gilbert died on 13th or 18th June 1918.

Elyham House, which was owned by the Storers, was known as Belleisle Farm after 1871, presumably named after the family estates in Jamaica.

Jean Debney

5 - The Wedding of the Century

"Of late there has been an entire absence of sunshine and the days have been marked by gloom, damp and a low temperature" read the weather report in the Reading Mercury in January 1889. The same paper reports that in the afternoon of Tuesday, 15th January, a "fashionable and very pretty little wedding" took place at Purley, between the daughter of the Lord of the Manor and a Captain of the Royal Irish Rifles.

Leila Minna Gertrude Storer, the 26 year old only daughter of Major Storer of Purley Park, was the bride. The groom was George Frederick Downing Fullerton, the 31 year old son of David Fullerton, gentleman of Pennington, Hants.

No expense seems to have been spared: dresses and bouquets came from London as did the Court hairdresser and the "bridecake." The bride's dress of the "richest, white duchesse satin" was trimmed with lace and embroidery; her tulle veil was held in place with five "diamond suns" and she wore at least seven other pieces of diamond jewellery. She carried a "gigantic" white bouquet which measured a fantastic 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ feet in circumference! (How did she manage it?)

The six bridesmaids wore "most becoming costumes" of eau-de-nil surah with matching hats. Two of the groom's nephews were pages and wore "pretty costumes" in "Henry VIII style": ruby velvet coat and cloak, black velvet cap, white silk vest with lace ruffles, white stockings and black shoes with steel buckles apparently completed the outfit.

The head gardener, John Seaton, and his staff built evergreen triumphal arches - bearing suitable mottoes - in the approaches to the house. Ivy was used everywhere as decoration. They filled the church, and the font, with ivy trails and red and white flowers. The long approach from the Park Entrance to the church was covered in and carpeted with red. (Surely not ALL the way along St. Mary's Drive?)

The Rev. Joseph Pitt from Rendcombe, Glos. conducted the ceremony, assisted by the Rector of Purley, the Rev. Canon Powley. Afterwards, the guests returned to Purley Park for luncheon and to inspect the "very valuable presents."

900 guests were invited and more than 300 gifts were on display, a list of which fills nearly four columns of small print in the Court Circular. Among the expensive silver and glass was a large revolving breakfast dish from the indoor and outdoor servants of Purley Park. The Parishioners gave an afternoon tea service, and the children of Purley School an opal and blue vase.

"The happy pair left Tilehurst Station in the afternoon (an express train having been specially stopped for their accommodation) to spend the honeymoon in South Devon. The auspicious occasion was, by the liberality of Major Storer, made one of rejoicing in the district. After the service Mr Wright (the organist) and the choir were entertained at the Home Farm; and at 7pm all the tenants and parishioners were invited to a dinner ... in the large barn at the Home Farm, some 200 sitting down. The feast, which was much appreciated, was followed by dancing, and a miscellaneous entertainment of comic dancing, etc."

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