

Account of Purley on Thames

William Sheppard - Lock Keeper

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Just over 230 years ago, in 1777, the newly formed Thames Commissioners constructed a turf sided pound lock on the River Thames between Mapledurham and Purley. It replaced the old flashlock which was slow and wasteful of water.

Only a "watchbox" was provided initially to protect the keeper until a cottage was built in 1816. It was probably to this house that William Sheppard brought his new wife, Mary Anne. A more substantial toll house was built on the north side of the lock in 1849 and remained in use until 1931 when the present house was erected on the Purley bank.

William Sheppard was born in Streatley in 1804. He was one of nine children of John and Mary (Nee Day). Both he and his brother John became lockkeepers, William at Mapledurham and John at Whitchurch. William was appointed to Mapledurham Lock in June 1828 following the resignation of the widow, Cecil Geddes. For a monthly wage of 70 shillings per month, he collected the tolls at the lock and had oversight of the ferries at The Roebuck and at Purley.

William's wife, Mary Anne was born in Northampton and it is likely that she was one of the boat people on the Thames. Over a period of 17 years they brought eight children for baptism at Purley Church. Sadly, of their six sons, three died as babies, two other sons grew up and married; Ferdinand, a ship's carpenter in Liverpool brought two of his children back to Purley for baptism. He was drowned in the Thames at Purley in 1898. His younger brother Edward, a fisherman by trade, remained in the parish to raise a family of seven children; two of his sons, Charles and Edgar George, are commemorated on the First World War Memorial in the church.

Competition from the railways after 1840 badly affected trade on the river - by 1853 tolls were suspended and William's wage were halved. In the following years his wages were further reduced to 24s per month (i.e. approximately 6s a week to support his wife and children) It was another 12 years before his wages were restored to 52s per month.

A strong minded character, he was involved in a dispute with Mr C Blount of Mapledurham in April 1868 and as a result Mr Blount forbade him to land on his property to obtain supplies. Following this upset, Sheppard was transferred to Hambledon but he was back in Purley a few months later - no doubt to Mr Blount's annoyance.

In his book *Summer Days*, Dean Church wrote of William Sheppard that he was the most inveterate destroyer of fish that the Thames has ever known. He rented the rights to netting and skinned the river relentlessly. With his bagnets and fluenets and other diabolical contrivances of misplaced ingenuity he cleared the river of everything that was much above the size of a sprat. He would sometimes send as much as half a ton of fish to Leadenhall Market. This is probably an exaggeration but must have some basis of fact.

After 54 years of service at Mapledurham Lock, William Sheppard retired to Caversham in April 1882. He died on 17th April 1889 aged 85 and was buried beside his wife at Purley. A stone on the north side of the church marks the last resting place of William and Mary Anne Sheppard.

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By Jean Debney

