Account of Purley on Thames

The Mediaeval Village Economy

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The development of the village economy from ancient times to the end of the feudal period with special reference to Purley on Thames.

The Ancient Legacy

The village as we know it today can never be thought of as a viable economic unit. This was not always so. In the period of that ancient village which most colours modern nostalgia for England's past, it was indeed a very self contained economic system. In this essay we shall look at the structure of that system and glimpse at the evidence provided by Purley on Thames.

The Saxons were farmers who moved into Britain in search of land. Where they settled they maintained a central area of habitation farming the lands around as a community. When pressure of numbers forced a new settlement it was usually adjacent to the original, but spaced to provide both with adequate land. Central Berkshire became settled in this way spreading out from Reading in the early 500s reaching the Purley area about three generations later. Social structures developed around the new village leadership, but obligations and links with former settlements remained.

A pattern of parishes, hundreds and shires and a society based on mutual obligations was well developed before the Norman invasion which caused the supplanting of ancient ruling families by newcomers and the replacement of mutual obligation by 'fees' (hence 'feudal'); but the basic structure remained and dominated the village economy for over a thousand years.

The AncientVillage

The ancient village had four distinct parts. There was the central area of settlement clustered around church and manor house. In essence each cottage was a small mixed farm with around an acre of land to provide fruit and vegetables and a compound for the family animals and poultry. Second there was the meadowland, jealously guarded and never allowed to be ploughed. Third there was the woodland and finally the great fields which produced the main crops.

This pattern was maintained in Purley until well into the nineteenth century as shown in an estate map of Purley Magna dated 1786. The church was sited on a slight mound near the river with the manor house and its barns to the south. To the north were a number of cottages roughly scattered along the village street, each with their small parcel of land. Purley had two great fields, the West or Yonder field and the East or Common field. The meadows were adjacent to the Thames and there were upland pastures and enclosed piddles, on the slope of the hill to the south. It was also well endowed with woodland.

The economy of the village was relatively self contained. It produced almost all its own food, it had its own sources of fuel, water and building materials and it had its own craftsmen. Itinerant merchants would bring trade goods from far afield and trade them for surplus goods from the village. Salt was a key commodity and the salt traders had well established routes across the country. The

final factor was the availability of a market and in this respect Purley was well placed being only four miles or so from Reading, a relatively easy journey. This enhanced the opportunities for selling produce and acquiring finished goods from the craftsmen of Reading.

When we look in more detail at the 1786 map we see quite a complex of buildings adjacent to the manor house. There were barns, pig styes, poultry sheds, cowhouses, stables and a dovecote. Most of the other dwellings in the village were much more modest although there were other larger houses like the rectory which had an orchard as well as barns and stables.

Also in the village was a hop garden, used no doubt to produce the raw material for ale, a village green, a village pond, an area for coppicing on the side of the hill and a number of other buildings such as the forge which did not form part of the central cluster.

On the slopes of the hill there were warrens where rabbits were encouraged; to produce a welcome addition to the food supply as well as fur for clothing. Nicholas Carew, the Lord of the Manor at the time, was granted a licence of free warren in 1375. The marshes alongside the river would be a source of reeds for thatching and mud for making bricks and for pasting over the wattles which formed the main part of most structures. The river also provided a rich source of food; fish and eels to be caught; ducks and geese who provided food and feathers as well as a good supply of eggs.

There was a road across the marsh which would have been used to carry corn to and flour from the mill at Mapledurham. It was undoubtedly also the route whereby chalk and flints from the pits on the hillside were taken down to the river to be carried on barges to other riverside towns and villages.

The Common Field System

The usual arrangement for a mediaeval village was the three field system. Purley however seems only to have had two such fields. The larger West field and the smaller East field. The boundary between the two was what is now Westbury Lane. It is possible however that the East field was an amalgamation of three great fields of Purley Magna and the West field an amalgamation of those of Purley Parva. By 1786 when we have our earliest detailed map, Purley Parva had virtually disappeared as a settlement. It is worth noting that the fields of all three manors of Purley together with parts of Whitchurch and Sulham were inextricably inter-mixed.

Within each field the land was divided up into strips which would go from one side of the field to another so that each strip had a fair share of good and poor land and allocations of strips were scattered for similar reasons. At the time of ploughing the strips would be marked out afresh with a committee to decide any boundary dispute which were frequent and often very bitter. The 1786 map however shows that many of the strips went in different directions and did not extend the full width or length of the field, lending weight to the idea that by 1786 the existing fields were an amalgamation of earlier fields.

Whether a two or three field system was in use the pattern was roughly the same. The land would be considered as three portions which could be three full fields or one full field (fallow) and two half fields. Of the three portions of field, one was ploughed in the autumn and sown with wheat or rye, the second was ploughed in the spring and sown partly with spring wheat, barley or rye, part with vetches, peas or beans and part with rootcrops such as mangolds or turnips to fix nitrogen. The third portion would be left fallow. The uses would be rotated from year to year. Grazing on the fallow field also allowed the animals to deposit manure and further replenish the soil.

The areas and the crops to be sown were determined by the village moot. The seed would be spread by broadcasting across several strips at a time and as it tended to spread well beyond the intended area, harvesting could be very difficult at times. The average yields were very low, grain crops might yield perhaps ten bushels per acre from a sowing of two to two and a half bushels, thus

at least a quarter of the crop had to be retained for next year's seed. An attempt in 1366 to improve the yield by building an irrigation canal was frustrated by the owner of Mapledurham Mill who complained about loss of water.

After harvesting the grain would be stored away in barns and root crops in clamps. Straw would be used for several purposes including bedding, fuel and insulation. Once the crops had been removed the animals would be turned out to graze and fertilize the ground.

Animal Husbandry

In the Spring the animals would be taken up to the higher ground as soon as the weather allowed. It seems that the plateau between Purley and Theale was used for this purpose as is evidenced by a number of ancient field names. The mediaeval term 'cattle' included all cloven hoofed animals such as cows, goats and sheep so it is not always easy to distinguish one from the other in mediaeval records.

Once the females had dropped their young they would begin lactating but the milk was used mainly for the young animals at first. After the young had been weaned the best milkers would be brought back to the lower pastures where their milk could more easily be handled for drinking and for making butter and cheese.

In the spring the sheep would be shorn of their wool which would be spun and made into cloth. Initially this was very much a home industry but with the establishment of Reading and Newbury as great wool centres it was much simpler to take it to market and purchase the finished product.

Pigs were also a very important domestic animal. They could be grazed in orchards or in the beechwoods on the slopes of the hill, or they could be kept in pens adjacent to dwelling houses. Almost every part of the pig could be used. Its meat provided pork and ham, its skin was a tough material for shoes and protective clothing, its bristles made brushes, its bones glue. The fat made lard and cooking oil and all the remaining portions from trotters to liver were considered great delicacies.

When winter set in the animals would be brought home where they furnished both food and warmth. Some would be slaughtered for meat when feeding them became a burden. The hides were used for making leather or parchment. The horns had plenty of uses from drinking cups to decorations. The sinews provided thread and the bones could be made into needles. At the appropriate time, the females were mated ready for the spring lambing and calving.

Most of the villagers could afford to keep only one or two animals, usually females thus there was a need to provide stud animals. It was often the parson who was charged with keeping either a bull or a boar for the use of the parish. George Blagrave brought a suit against the rector in 1707 for failing to keep a bull but lost his case because the custom had not been recorded in the Court Roll.

Meadows and Grazing Rights

The meadows were treated very much as the great fields except that they were never ploughed and grew only the one crop - hay. This was a matter of life or death for the animals for unless there was sufficient hay to enable them to be fed all through the winter some of them would have to be slaughtered unnecessarily and this could cause a severe drop in the prosperity of the village. Each villager would have his own strips of meadow which he would mow at an appropriate time and cart away to make a haystack.

The right to graze either on the common grazing lands, the meadows or the great fields was a very precious right. The number of beasts you were allowed was strictly limited and depended on the size

of your land holding. There were numerous disputes over grazing rights, one of which in Purley was serious enough to be considered at the Court of the Berkshire Eyre in 1248 when Roger of Hyde was given back the grazing rights on an acre of pasture alleged to have been taken away from him by the vicar named John.

In a late sixteenth century glebe terrier the parson's right to graze six beasts on the meadow of the common marsh was recorded in the same way as the actual land holdings. In the terrier for 1634 this was spelled out in more detail as the right to graze six kine on the marsh at commonable times and also to graze the same six cattle at and after the feast of St John the Baptist on a meadow called Loarscroft which belonged to the Lord of the Manor. It is not entirely clear whether this should be regarded as an obligation rather than a right.

The more one looks into the details, the more one realises how false is the nostalgic picture. Life was an unremitting grind for all but the richest. It was a fight for survival. Cooperation and mutual obligation was not an exercise in social graciousness - it was a matter of life and death.

Bibliography

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