

Account of Purley on Thames

Oral History - Elizabeth Pryor

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MORE MEMORIES OF THE OLD DAYS IN PURLEY

In July 1984 the late Mrs Elizabeth Pryor and her daughter Sybil were interviewed and the conversation recorded on tape and subsequently transcribed. It is fascinating account of Purley and its people from around 1926. Sybil Pryor has given permission for parts of the transcription to be included in The Newsletter.

Mrs Pryor's connection with Purley began in 1926 when her widowed mother, Mrs Lister, brought her family of seven children to live at the old Rectory. Much later, Mrs Pryor, who had moved away after her marriage in 1933 but then lost her own husband in World War 2 bought the house from the rest of the family and lived there from about 1948 with her children, including Sybil until it was sold in 1964, and demolished in 1966.

It was the late autumn of 1926 when we moved into the old Rectory. The first thing that comes to mind is walking to church on a summer Sunday morning, starting early so as to pick the mushrooms in the meadow on the left along towards the church, and hiding them behind one of the big trees until one came out of church and picked them up hoping no one would see you. Another is going with my mother Mrs Lister up to the little cottage on the Oxford Road, just about where the bus shelter now is opposite Trenthams (which was then the Aldins, to visit Mrs Kirton still in bed with her baby Charlie, the first newly bom baby I've seen.

Another was sitting in the shade, and not many I think can remember this, on a hot day under the row of huge chestnuts in the field just above the lock on this side of the river. I think I have pulled the ferry across on its chain above the church where the towpath had to cross back to our side of the Thames, after the coming of the railway had caused it to be moved along the bit from the little ferry house above the Roebuck.

I remember we were still allowed to dive off the lock piers below the lock, and good deal of showing off was done, and I think we were allowed to swim in the weir pool. Certainly we were allowed to swim in Whitchurch weir pool by the Swan in the late 1920s until someone got drowned, when both pools were banned for bathing. Funnily enough, returning to Purley as I often do, I am much more conscious of how it still gives me the same feel, than of the changes.

Of the old Rectory itself my early recollection is of seeing the backs of my mother and my Auntie Evelyn Palgrave who built Lane Cottage to be near her, bending over the great and beautiful rockery which sloped steeply up from a little stretch of lawn and crazy paving outside the drawing-room window. How grateful we were to the Rector, now unknown, who took the drive round to the north side of the house and left that lovely secluded south side in peace. We had good old Mr Heath to do the garden. He and his wife lived in the near side of the Rawlins' house, which was then two cottages, the further one being the school teacher's cottage.

When we came at the end of 1926 there was no electricity in the Street, and there was one engine in the annexe in the backyard of the rectory to make enough light for the house, but otherwise it was all gas. Old rectories were always perfect for bringing up large families. We were seven of us children when we first went there. My father was a doctor in Aberdeen and died in Alexandria in the first World War, and my mother had the job of bringing us south and finding a roof for us. We had

an old vicarage in Dorset for seven years where we had a happy childhood, the vicar then being a bachelor. Then came a vicar with a family so we had to turn out. After endless hunting the old rectory at Purley was found, which made another roomy home for us. That was at the end of 1926.

The point about old rectories, and very much so in this case, is that there are always two staircases for playing hide and seek, lots of little boiler rooms and boot rooms and lamp rooms, all with unspoilable brick or flag floors, for storing wellingtons, mending punctures, and nursing sick cats, or for use as dark-rooms. Huge old cellars, too, with vaulted wine stores where the big old coke boiler lurked, and its coke. We couldn't afford to have it on very much so the house was often cold, though never damp, because we were told that the gravel was just below the surface ... except when the roof leaked in the lead gullies; there was hardly a time when it didn't leak somewhere.

After losing my husband in the last war I was able to bring my six children to this old rectory when we had to leave our rectory in the midlands so it made a good continuity from 1926 to 1964. The garden was also a perfect family garden with room for biking, sledging, gardening, and playing not-at-all Wimbledon tennis on the rather bumpy tennis court. A little point of interest perhaps was that, when I read the deeds of sale when I bought the old Rectory off the rest of my brothers and sisters after my mother died at the end of the war, I found that it was an agreement between the Archbishop of Canterbury and my mother, Mrs Sybil Lister, because it was passing for the first time out of ecclesiastical hands.

I also remember the smell of soot on all the curtains on the south side of the halls because of the puffer trains, which it took years of washing to get rid of, and the great yew hedges for hiding Easter eggs in, and the huge old elms. The tallest of all was blown down on the night of the 17th March 1947, right across the road bringing down Mr Bucknell's electric wires and shutting off one end of the farm from the business end... the farmhouse - for a fortnight, because of the terrific floods that were right up to the front gate of the old Rectory.

The children were all very small and they relished walking across the floods on the great elm. My mother always maintained it was the tallest in Berkshire. There's a lovely picture of it by Elliot Hodgkin, before it came down. Willy's got it I think.

At this point Mrs Pryor was asked how much the smell and the smoke from the railway affected them. Certainly the picture cords in Lane Cottage wore out much quicker than they did with us because of vibration from the trains, and they all had to be inspected often.

Mrs Pryor went on to explain that the drive was originally on the south side of the house but was moved to the north side. It probably had been ever since the drawing room was built, you see. It would have been too narrow for turning a carriage and pair. The old folks' houses in Lister Close is where the old drive was, and the bank behind them is where the rockery was. It's the same bank still. I don't know who's got that ancient photograph. I dare say I have it in what I call the archives.

There was much discussion at this point about the house. Mrs Pryor thought that the new part of the Rectory was built in about 1806 which they considered to be late Georgian. But the kitchen and offices were two storey and old and there were cellars underneath the hall and study. The oldest part of the building was erected circa 1743 by the Rector in Purley at that time.

(To be continued)

