

Account of Purley on Thames

Settlements, Manors and Parishes

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Introduction

Land tenure has always been a difficult concept because it means different things to different people. We can start from two opposing points of view. First from the family - a related group of people working together to survive. Second from an overlord who seeks to control territory and tax families offering them protection. The overlord himself will have an overlord with the King as the ultimate overlord. But the king will always be under threat from those immediately below him in the hierarchy who will be seeking to displace him.

Nowadays we have a relatively straightforward system of tenure. With Freehold you own your bit of territory and, within limits you can do what you like with it or with Leasehold you pay someone else for the right to use the land. In either case you look to the state for protection and have to pay your taxes to a hierarchy of local and central government.

In this article we are going to look at a number of different ways in which land was allocated and used from the Saxon to the Victorian eras and see how these applied in the case of Purley.

Settlements

A settlement is based on the concept of an empty landscape into which someone moves to establish themselves and their family and survive. In Purley's case we can identify four places where we have reasonable grounds for believing people settled. These can only be identified by reference to present day development and the names we give them are those which appear around the time of Domesday:-

Purley - a mound of solid ground in the marshes forming the south bank of the Thames, roughly where St Mary's church stands. It is likely that this spot was settled from the river and would have provided a base for fishermen and hunters and also craftsmen using the timber resources on the steep slope to the south.

Westbury - a spot in the middle of the Thames valley. Where Springs Equestrian now stands. This could be seen as prime land for grazing in the meadows immediately adjacent to the Thames and arable on the south side. They would share some of their meadow land with La Hyde and Whitchurch.

Hyde - a spot on the banks of the Sul brook. Where Home Farm Sulham now sits. The brook would have provided a site for a mill and there would be limited scope for exploiting the woodland and arable land to the east. To the west are the marshes of the Pang valley

Lething - a point on the main road between Reading and Pangbourne where tracks from Theale joins. This would have provided an opportunity for craftsmen such as wheelwrights, farriers or woodworkers to ply their trade to passing travellers.

We can pinpoint three other settlements that lie just outside of present day Purley which fill in the scenario, ie **Sulham, Kentwood and Stoneham**

Parishes

By the 10th century Christianity had firmly established itself in the area and we had four churches in the vicinity:- at Purley, Pangbourne, Whitchurch and Mapledurham. It had always been seen as the obligation of Christians to give one tenth of their income to support the works of the church, but this was somewhat chaotic as it was difficult to identify what works the church was doing to need support. So in 909 the King decreed that the works to be supported were The Church fabric, The Poor and the Pilgrims. He required each church to appoint wardens to determine who was liable to pay, collect the tithes and distribute the proceeds.

In the case of most parishes this was relatively easy as the church served a single settlement area; but in Purley's case it was very complicated by the fact that there was only one church but five settlements had an interest in the land. It was the produce of the land that formed the basis for the tithe and there many arguments as to whether the tithe applied only to the first crop or to all crops.

As far as Purley and Lething were concerned there was no problem - tithes were due to Purley church, but some of the meadow lands surrounding Hyde and Westbury were shared with Whitchurch and Sulham and both these churches demanded a share. Pangbourne had no stake in this.

So when the Purley wardens came to agree boundaries with neighbouring parishes there was no problem with dealing with Tilehurst whose church was due the tithes from Kentwood and Stoneham and there was little problem in dealing with Pangbourne and Mapledurham but the solution they came up with Whitchurch and Sulham was to identify specific tracts of land with one or other of the parishes with the area of Saltney Mead shared between Purley and Sulham. This is still the same today as far as the ecclesiastical parish is concerned by all the lands were transferred to Purley as a result of the 1892 Act which separated Civil and Ecclesiastical functions of Parishes.

Estates

By the end of the Saxon era overlords had gathered areas of land together to form estates. The size of the estate depended very much on the status of the overlord. For example the whole of Berkshire formed part of the estate of the Godwins, Earls of Wessex. But it was subdivided with lesser lords having estates of varying size. In general these estates took very little notice of parish boundaries and could comprise bits from several parishes or parts of a parish or complete parishes. We get a brief snapshot of the situation in Purley at Domesday when we find that in 1066 Westbury was held by Edward, Burley (Lething) was held by Leofwin, Purley by Brictward and Hyde by Baldwin. It is not really clear however who held what from whom.

Honours and Hundreds

When King Alfred set up his defensive network against the Danes it was based upon the Roman army. Purley was included in the Honour of Wallingford which built ramparts and safe shelter for all the settlements allocated to it. The size of the ramparts was determined by the number of settlements defined. As settlements were of variable size they were grouped together and each settlement or group had to provide five, ten or fifteen men to guard the rampart. It would appear that the four settlements of Purley were grouped together and required to provide one unit of five men, ie a man at arms and four retainers. Thus Purley was rated as five hides.

The basis of the Roman army was the century which consisted of either 80 men or 160 in the case of the premier century of a cohort. So in Alfred's organisation settlements from Reading westwards were referred to as Reading Hundred and as it was the premier Hundred it had 160 hides.

In later years when the threat of the Danes had gone away the headquarters of the Honour moved from Wallingford to Ewelme and the Reading Hundred was split with Theale Hundred, including Purley, being hived off. The Hundred became an administrative and legal area beneath the Shire until Victorian times.

Manors

The concept of a manor was similar to that of a unit of an estate but after the Conquest King William made sure that all his followers who were allocated land, had the parcels of land scattered around the country so that his barons could not act as sub-kings as was the case on the continent and which caused so much turmoil in European history.

Basically each settlement became a manor so Purley had three well identified manors, Purley Magna (old Purley), Purley Parva (old Westbury) and La Hyde (old Hyde). Tenants held their manors from one of William's followers so we now had:-

Purley Magna part of the lands of Ralph, son of Siegfried

Purley Parva part of the lands of Theodoric the Goldsmith

La Hyde part of the lands of Miles Crispin

Burley part of the lands of Henry of Ferrers and still held by Leofwin

When a holder of a manor died his heir, provided he was over 21, could take over provided he paid a fine. If he was under 21 the manor was put under the guardianship of some other baron who generally took everything he could from the manor and left it in a pitiful state when the heir came of age.

The system of manors persisted until the late eighteenth century when holders often got into deep debt and sold off their holdings to the new generation of rich merchants who built new grand houses and developed a very different approach to managing the land. Titles of Lord of the Manor are still sold, often to unwary Americans, although they have no current status.

In Purley's case Purley Parva came to be part of the Hardwick estate which relinquished its rights only on the death of Bernard Theobald when it was sold to the owner of Springs Farm. Purley Magna came to the Storer's in the late 1700s and was gradually sold off after the death of Major Anthony Morris Storer in 1902. La Hyde became part of Sulham estate after the Wilders were granted Sulham and after Bosworth and purchased La Hyde later. Burley eventually became the Purley Rise and Beech Road estates in the early 1900s.

A further twist was when the landholder died and his widow was entitled to a third of the estate as her dower. In the case of Isabella de Siffrewast, she donated her dower to Reading Abbey in the late 1100s removing a large tract of land from Purley Parva.

Common Land

In the early Saxon settlement of England, land was all essentially 'common' in that technically it was thought of as 'owned' by the king and leased or occupied to lords, tenants and under-tenants in return for customary service. Certain tracts of land were set aside for the king's exclusive use and these were known as forests. In a forest special laws applied and it was the application of this 'Forest Law' which defined a forest, it had nothing whatever to do with trees.

Over the years however other individuals began to acquire rights over pieces of land which were exclusive to them and in order to assert the difference they would enclose the land with a fence or hedge. The remainder of the land was subject to common rights which could be exercised by residents of villages or occupiers of pieces of land.

Common rights included gathering timber, grazing animals, planting crops and catching game,

although these rights were very prescribed and were jealously guarded. Enclosure took away these rights and was generally bitterly opposed.

The Black Death reduced the population severely in the 14th century and this removed many of the objections to enclosure. Enclosure was much more suitable for sheep farming and with the boom in wool that took place in the 14th and 15th centuries in the area we may assume that many fields were enclosed on this account. Particularly in Purley one notes the abundance of enclosed fields to the south of the parish with names such as Shepherds Pightle.

The Enclosure Movement

The argument about enclosure of arable land was one of yield and efficiency. It was rightly observed that if the complete field was managed as a whole, sown evenly and looked after by one individual, the yield would increase and it would be much easier to manage than a series of random strips separated by considerable distances. The contra-argument was of course that to enclose meant that the good and bad land were unevenly distributed, that the rich, with the good land, would get richer and the poor with no land would get even poorer.

To some extent it was the people in the middle who decided the matter. Their argument was that they could make a better living from farming the poor land than from the old system which was very inefficient.

Arable farming was transformed by the process of enclosure. Instead of the great fields of several hundred acres, much smaller fields were created by planting hedges, building walls or fences or by digging a ditch. In Purley, on the whole, hedging was used for this purpose with quick-growing hawthorn as the preferred choice.

There are indications however that initially ditches were dug to separate holdings and then a landholder would plant a hedge on his side of the ditch. Eventually the ditch would be abandoned and become filled in but the property boundary remained a foot or so beyond the hedge.

Now a single field of perhaps five to thirty acres would be used for a single crop. It would be ploughed by one owner, sown evenly and harvested. There was no need to leave uncultivated furrows between strips although this gain was offset by the land needed for the hedge. The hedges provided shelter to the crops and made them less susceptible to wind and weather, they provided habitats for birds and animals who would both eat the crops and hunt other vermin.

In the 15th and 16th century enclosure was effected by enrolling a Chancery Decree but by the 17th century this process was replaced by a private bill in Parliament. Only 8 such Acts were made in the 17th century and only 2 in the reign of Queen Anne. Between 1714 and 1720 5 Acts were passed. Then the numbers soared. From 1721-40 67 were passed; from 1741-60, 205; from 1761-80, 4039 and from 1781 to 1800 900.

In 1845 the final nail was driven into the Open field system with the General Enclosure Act. This removed the need to take a special Bill through Parliament to effect an Enclosure. A petition could be presented and advertised, a Commissioner would be appointed to investigate and he would make an award which became binding.

Rights and Obligations

When the enclosure petitions were presented each individual householder was required to claim his rights in writing. This posed considerable difficulties for most people who were illiterate and only the richest were able to employ their own lawyers. This made things even worse because most of these lawyers would approach the other villagers and offer to make their claims for them. They would then understate the claims or leave loopholes which they would later exploit on behalf of their

main clients to ensure that the smallholders were cheated of what few rights they had.

Many costs were assessed on a per capita basis, rather than on a usage basis, so for example every person would bear an equal share of fencing in the common land regardless of the size of field allotted to them. Then in order to pay the legal costs of making their claims they were effectively forced to sell their allotments.

Land Tenure

We may characterise the end of the medieval period by the disappearance of the view that all land was held of the king to one in which land was owned. However the old legal framework remained and even though the concept of ownership was well established, the methods whereby that ownership could be transferred were still relatively crude.

Land was seen as an asset from which a profit could be made. It could support a knight or baron as he pursued his private passions, it provided food for a small although growing population and it provided a base for taxes and public responsibility.

Particularly in the 18th century land was seen as having an aesthetic value and 'gentlemen's residences' were built on a grand scale. In Purley's case we saw the ancient manor of Purley Magna with its farmhouse acquired by the Storer family more as a place to live than a farm to be exploited. Almost all the land to the east of what is now Mapledurham Drive was emparked and all the cottages pulled down and their owners or tenants deprived.

Enclosures in Purley

The switch from open field to enclosed farming has been going on since early Saxon times. Field names from the 13th century such as Heggescroft indicate that some land at least in Purley had been enclosed by then.

By the mid-18th century most of Purley was already enclosed and only the two main fields, the Hither and East fields and the Common Meadow were farmed in the old ways. The General Enclosure Act of 1803 had made it easier for the Lords of the Manor to take over and enclose land, driving off the peasants and turning them into agricultural labourers in the process.

In Purley the process was spread over a long period but finally in 1855 a petition was submitted for the two Great Fields and the Common Meadow of Purley to be enclosed and a plan for enclosure was drawn up by George Easton. The plan was on view at the house of Savory Griffin (Westbury Farm)

The effect was to consolidate the land into three major holdings, roughly corresponding to the three ancient manors and a few minor holdings. The major holdings were:-

The Storers of Purley Park. - Anthony Morris Storer held 93a, 1r, 27p and a further 4 acres which had been retained by the executors of Anthony Gilbert Storer.

The Powys family of Hardwick - Henry Philip Powys had 78-0-9 in his own occupation and he leased 5-2-7 to Edward Sherwood and 1-2-33 to Thomas Newbury

The Wilders of Purley Hall. - Frederick Wilder held 2-2-29 in Sulham Parish, 59-2-39 in Whitchurch Parish and 33-1-21 in Purley Parish. However it should be noted that these lands were all in Purley's Great fields and meadows and were all transferred to Purley in 1894.

The remaining 21 acres were divided among two landholders, The Rector Richard Palmer who had 17 acres 3 roods and 15 perches of Glebe and John Engelberts Liebenrood with just over 3 acres (3-1-18), a further xxx acres was described as wastelands and roads, ie Westbury and Purvey's Lanes

The Effects of Enclosure

In almost every case the enclosure of land increased wealth. The wealth that always increased was that of the person doing the enclosing. In some cases, eg when waste land was enclosed, no one suffered but mostly it was the peasants and labourers of the village who suffered very badly.

Once a single person had control it was inevitable that there would be experimentation. Good ideas could be put into practice without needing to be debated and assented to by the whole community. New crops could be tried and if they proved successful would be copied by neighbours. More importantly perhaps there was incentive to put in proper drainage. Many ancient fields suffered badly from water lying in the furrows and waterlogging the seed.

By the 1760s the yeoman farmer with his own small holding, rights of common and a real say in what happened, had virtually disappeared as a class to be replaced by tenant farmers, agricultural labourers and employed craftsmen. The few that managed to retain their land prospered under the new regime and were soon indistinguishable from the landed gentry. The remaining population were forced, or chose to flee to the towns.

Without the rights of grazing it was no longer feasible for a family to own a few cows to provide milk and butter. Without the fuel for fires it was difficult to cook and the diet reduced to little more than bread and cheese supplemented by the odd item of fruit. Many families were able to cook meat no more than once a week and it was not possible to keep houses warm.

The Moral and Economic Issue

The issue of Enclosure was one of great moral debate. Preachers, pamphleteers and social agitators railed against the practice and the effects it had on the poorer classes but viewed from a National perspective, or at least from the point of view of the landowner, enclosure had become an economic necessity. Gone were the days of abundant land, prices had soared between 1500 and 1560 and they were faced with a choice of raising rents to levels that the peasants could not pay or increasing profitability. The alternative was ruin. In all three cases the peasants suffered but perhaps they suffered least.

By the end of the 19th century, farming had moved from a subsistence activity which barely fed its local population to a state where it was regarded as a profitable business, based on sound scientific principles, mechanised and employing less than 5% of the total population. In many areas it was even able to export food. That this situation could ever have been arrived at without Enclosure is very doubtful.

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