

Account of Purley on Thames

Social Life in Purley 1932-1938

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Article by Bill Fisher - These notes were hand written at the end of the 1980s and the originals are in our archive. - We have moved some of the paragraphs around and added headings.

Radio

No one possessed a wireless set to my knowledge in the early 30s in Glebe Road although it was not unknown for a few families to experiment with crystal sets. The first wireless possessed by my family was resplendent with a horn speaker, divorced from the wireless cabinet which was powered by a 120v HT battery a 9v grid bias and a 2v accumulator. This was late in 1934. There was no electricity laid on to Glebe Road at this time.

Christmas

My two sisters and I were taken to Santa Claus grotto at McIlroys or Bulls in Reading as a special treat at Christmas and also to a pantomime at Reading County Theatre, now Woolworths Mall in Friar Street.

Outings

During the Summer holidays a choir outing was eagerly looked forward to which was usually Southsea, by coach. Annual holidays away were financially impossible. Even with a GWR employee's allocation of two free annual railway passes, unless a family possessed relatives living at the coast who could alleviate the cost of subsistence, the passes were of little use other than an occasional day trip.

Pangbourne School did organise a day excursion to the coast during the Summer which was payed [sic] for by the child's parent sending a few coppers to the headmaster weekly.

Purley School did not arrange a summer trip during the early thirties.

Guides

The Girl Guides at this time were Phyllis Rawlins, Phyllis Leath, Mabel Tidbury, Joan Tidbury, I am not sure about Betty Tidbury - she was 16 years old in 1932. Scouts Cubs and Brownies did not exist in the early 30s

Social Gatherings

Very occasionally a social was organised by the school; whist drives occurred from time to time. Once, the Rector, the Rev E E Scuse, showed a series of religious slides at the school which was very well attended. His son Noel operated what I believe was a glorified magic lantern. The Rector delivered the accompanying monologue from the rear of the school room, his son operated from the front of the audience. The slides had to be inserted by hand and the Rector had the ingenious method of thumping the floorboards with his walking stick when he required his son to change a slide.

The Mothers Union met regularly in the school and sometimes in the old rectory and sometimes at the new rectory.

The Women's Institute was not inaugurated until 1936 but met thereafter at the school.

Sunday School

Sunday School was held at 10 am in the school. the rector appeared at 10:30 for closing prayers and allowing those children who wished half an hour to get to the church for 11:00am Matins. The three teachers were Miss Mary Lister, Miss Elizabeth Lister and Mr Nelson Cooper (also organist) The two ladies resided at the Old Rectory and Mr Cooper at 133 School Road Tilehurst (his wife still lives there) We each had attendance albums and were given a religious stamp for each attendance. Nativity plays were performed in the school and were well attended.

Each Easter the Sunday School children were invited to the Old Rectory to search the grounds for hidden Easter eggs (chocolate), there were always sufficient for one each. Afterwards we had to locate and catch a dangerous burglar in the person of Hugh Lister, suitably unshaven and wearing a knotted kerchief. We were always successful in catching him.

Winter

The village pond, reputed to be a legacy of three wells, was always stagnant and during the hard winters, frozen and a focal point for skating. The Lister, Tidbury and Farmiloe families and Doreen Long were the only skaters who could afford skates of those who used the facility. All the rest of us were quite content to slide around using our ordinary boots, which in most cases were the only footwear we possessed.

I feel it would be remiss of me not to mention that during the winter months the chalky section of Glebe Road used to become severely rutted. We were very glad to see Bert Kirk come home mid day for his lunch when working locally. He always arrived complete with his enormous road roller and its passage over the ruts ironed them out nicely.

Pocket Money

On Thursdays, my father's payday, each of us three children received a penny to spend on sweets. The boiled sweets in particular were sold to us by Mrs Colyer in a cornet shaped bag. Incidentally on our first visit to the shop after moving to Glebe Road we each received a free cornet of sweets.

Aeronautics

I hope I may be forgiven for introducing the subject of the Great Melbourne Centenary Air Race, which although an International Event, the excitement this event caused was in no small measure, shared by the people of Purley. The race started at dawn on the 20th October 1934 from Mildenhall, Suffolk, destination Melbourne, Australia - a distance of almost 12,000 miles - about 20 planes started, competing for a 1st prize of £10,000. Mrs Mattison (Amy Johnson - incidentally Jim and Amy Mollinson were based at Woodley Aerodrome) took an early lead but engine trouble forced her to land. Mrs Mollison said she had spent all she had to get her new aeroplane ready for this race, only to be let down by engine failure. Capt Scott pushed ahead, Lt Gilmore and Capt Baines crashed in the Italian mountains, immediately people rushed to the spot but both men were dead. It was alleged the most dangerous part of the flight was crossing the Timor Sea because of the presence of sharks. Even Scott thought he was coming down crossing it. The winner was Capt C W A Scott and co-pilot Mr Campbell Black in a D H Comet taking only 2 days and 23 hours 18 seconds. The second arrival was the Dutch Airliner piloted by Messrs Parmentier and Moll, The foregoing was taken partly from my 1934 school composition book.

Sometime in 1935/6 we were thrilled by an air display staged in the field south of Dark Lane, Tilehurst by Alan Cobham and his flying team (before he was knighted for his service to aeronautics) There were Aerobatics, Wing Walking, planes looping the loop and the display culminated in a parachute descent. Also short flights for 5/- - The Leaths had one. Although not held in Purley a large

percentage of the population were present, including myself.

The Empty Church

During Evensong on a Sunday in the middle 30s only the choir was present. The Rector commenced the service. Mr Herbert Tidbury, people's warden arrived late after the service was well advanced and sat in solitary state in the nave. Rev Skuse in an effort to shame the residents of Purley sent an article, complete with photographs, to the local Reading paper which was duly printed. For the following two Evensongs a reporter attended to see if he could witness a repeat performance; he was unlucky since the attendance improved slightly.

Purley Park

At some point in time 1934/5 we were told the Park as we knew the area now occupied by the River Estate, had been sold and a large house was to be built on the site. Subsequently it transpired this had been abandoned due to the possibility of flooding. There were the other motives.

Option 1 - If sufficient funds could be provided the Park could be purchased and used as a pleasure ground for the people of Purley (Mr Farmiloe volunteered to provide one half of the cost if Purley residents could provide the other half).

Option 2 - The land could be sold piecemeal in £5 lots.

However with unemployment still rife option 1 was not possible and option 2 prevailed.

This was the basis for the initial hostility experienced by the owners of the £5 lots. The Purley people saw the disappearance of their beautiful park due to lack of funds and resented the transformation. I do not believe the antagonism really extended to the newcomers by the majority of Purley people. Nevertheless this was felt by the PPPA members and in 1935 in an effort to promote integration the PPPA held a social evening in Purley school. It was organised by Mr John Dare, their secretary and attendance was approximately 50% on each side. I cannot remember many of the PPPA who attended. Certainly Mr Kelly and I believe Mr Mann, Mr and Mrs Skerrit, Mr Troutham and Mrs Rixon were there.

It was an unqualified success and Mr Dare in concluding an address intimated there could be more to follow. One of the songs "*The worlds alright, its the people living in it*" was rendered by a PPPA member in a beautiful baritone. I think the natives got the message.

The Thames

Much of the summer was spent swimming in the Thames and we often tried to pick up the ferry chain and traverse the river with it but it was too heavy.

The film "Sailing Along" has no doubt been mentioned on many occasions. I still have my autograph book with the stars and directors autographs. The film was featured in a Reading cinema for one week commencing on Monday the 22nd August 1938. Jessie Matthews, Barry Mackay, Ina Scarlett, Roland Young took part and Sonnie Hale directed.

Sulham Woods

Walks through Sulham Woods were popular which usually took us past the statue locally known as "Cane and Abel". This was unfortunately stolen during the war years; part of the surrounding railings still exist.

It was always possible to collect quantities of chestnuts in these woods during Autumn and I still recall calling on the Rev Henry Wilder to ask permission and being issued with a signed chitty by him in case I encountered any estate staff.

Coronation 1937

The 1937 Coronation year produced a sports day - the usual track events were held at the rear of Mr

Wells' house "Hedgerows", Long Lane. Other items included a slow bicycle race, a decorated bicycle won by R Rawlins converted to a thatched house.

The meadow on the south side of St Mary's Avenue continued the sports in the evening, culminating with a tug of war. An amateur film was made and later shown in Purley Garage which had just been completed and was still an empty shell, by kind permission of Mr Charles Edwards, proprietor. In addition to the sporting events the voluntary organisers preparatory efforts were filmed and in the re-take the film was speeded up to show them working like demented beavers.

Purvey's Railway

The land now occupied by a house and the Memorial Hall was used as a store area for a large quantity of narrow gauge rails, gravel dumpers and a cylindrical grading sieve. There was also a defunct donkey engine. These items were possibly relicts from the period when gravel was conveyed to the river for transportation to Reading. I can still recall the narrow gauge track in situ just crossing the railway bridge. It is probably still there to this day. There was a gravel pit at the rear of Beech Road.

However the local children, especially those from Glebe Road, spent many happy hours re-laying these rails sometimes in tandem and mounting the trucks on the rails and gleefully riding them down the track towards the main railway cutting. In retrospect I can appreciate the danger, although I cannot recall anyone being hurt. The site was eventually cleared by Mr Purvey of Pangbourne.

Philosophy

I have mentioned elsewhere Shep Page, who lived opposite the school and feel it to be pertinent to these notes to record his basic philosophy to life which he liberally applied to workmates and associates alike when they became despondent or fed up. Shep used to say quote "You dont want to worry, the time will surely come when the sun will shine on both sides of the hedge unquote.

Menpes Fruit Farm

Menpes Fruit Farm situate in Long Lane provided work for a number of people in Purley who were very shocked when the firm was suddenly declared bankrupt. They learnt this during the week ending Saturday 2th November 1938.