

Account of Purley on Thames

Purley in Norman Times

R200513 15/1/2018

An article by John Chapman originally R000027

One wonders how the residents of Purley celebrated the dawn of the past millennium, or were they even aware of it?. We have no real evidence of anything in Purley before the conquest but we can make a few reasoned guesses as to what life was like at the time. There were actually three villages in what we now know as Purley: Great Purley sitting in marshy ground by the banks of the Thames; Little Purley occupying the middle of the flood plain and Purley La Hide on the banks of the Sul Brook just below the escarpment. They had been created as families moved out westwards from Reading to farm the Thames valley in the 6th or 7th centuries. There may also have been a small settlement astride the road from Reading to Oxford west of the junction with Long Lane.

Great Purley had a church, where the present church stands and priests used to come out from the Minster in Reading to hold services. The manor was held of the King at the time of the conquest by Brictward and answered for 4½ hides. We may assume it had been part of the lands of the Godwin family, earls of Berkshire, at the turn of the century. King Harold was the last of the Godwins, so the land was forfeit and King William made it over to Roger, son of Siegfried who also held Clewer and Fulscot. Within a few years it had passed to the Huscarle family who were to hold it until 1369.

Little Purley was centred around where Westbury Farm now is. It was quite small answering for only half a hide. It was held by Edward at the Conquest and was given to Theodoric the Goldsmith by King William. It came into the hands of the de Sifrewast family who held it until 1302.

Purley Hide answered for one hide. It was given, with Pangbourne, to Miles Crispin who was the son in law of the keeper of the castle at Wallingford. It too changed hands and came to the de la Hide family until 1234 when it passed to the Sifrewasts.

Wallingford figured strongly in Purley's early history as it was our local Burgh, where the villagers could seek refuge when the Danes attacked and throughout the mediaeval period the holders of Purley's manors had to provide men to fortify Wallingford. During the anarchy of Stephen's reign, Wallingford was in the hands of Queen Matilda and her knights used to foray out burning and pillaging. We believe that Purley suffered one of these raids and its ancient church was burned to the ground to be replaced by a Norman church around 1150, traces of which remain to this day.

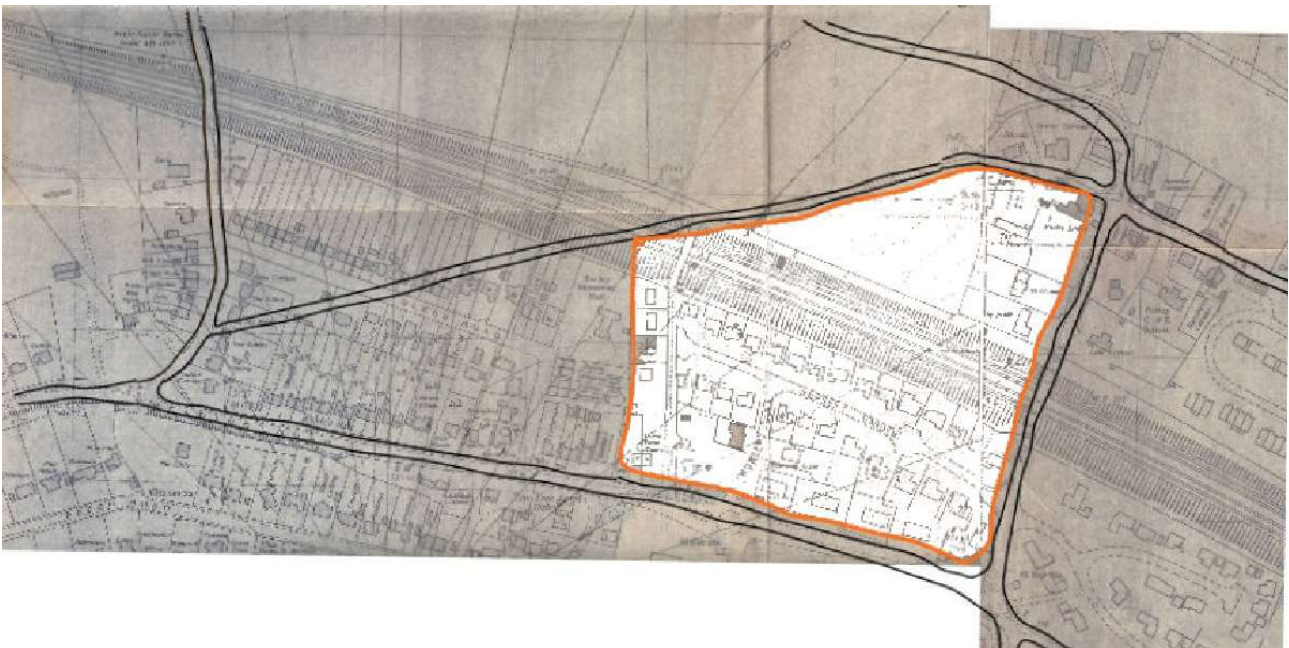
The first record of a resident priest in Purley crops up in 1248 when John, Vicar of Purley was accused by Roger of Hyde of having dispossessed him of a quarter of an acre of pasture. Roger was one of the Sifrewast family and was given his land back after a court case. The de Sifrewasts seemed to be suing everyone and everybody, including their own family members, mostly about land and especially about who was to inherit what. One of the family, Nicholas, was granted a licence in 1266 to hunt for badgers, foxes, hares and cats throughout the counties of Berks, Oxon and Hants.

As well as disputes about land there were continual problems between fishermen, millers and boatmen on the Thames. All wanted to use the river for their own purposes and their requirements were not compatible. Millers wanted to erect weirs to keep up a good head, fishermen wanted to set traps in free-flowing water and boatmen wanted all the obstructions removed. In 1205 however they all suffered as the Thames was frozen over from the 1st January to the 20th March. So cold was it

that wine and beer were sold frozen by weight in Reading market.

The picture we have of Purley is that of a typical feudal village with probably 100-200 villagers carrying on with their lives regardless of the activities of their lords of the manors. They would have small family holdings of an acre or two to grow food and keep a few animals. They would be required to work on the manorial estate and to take their animals to manure the meadows after the last cut of hay of the season. They would all have a variety of skills and a few would be specialists in particular trades such as fishing, smithing or brewing. Spare produce would be taken to Reading market to exchange for goods made by the guildsmen there or imported from other parts of the country.

By the end of the 13th century Reading had largely taken over as Purley's main centre. It was the founding of Reading Abbey in 1121 that gave the main impetus. The Abbey took over many of the rights of the ancient minster and the pension of 2s a year from Purley was granted to the Abbot, but it was made quite clear that this did not grant the Abbot any rights over Purley church. Sometime towards the end of the 12th century Isabella de Sifrewast gave a virgate of land to the monks of Reading. It appears we are talking about the land upon which Purley Lodge was built as it had a quite different subsequent history from the rest of Purley. This land was occupied by Osbert, son of Godwin the fisherman and Isabella left it to the monks to decide how to treat Osbert. It would appear that he was found a post on the estate of the Huscarles in Surrey and helped to forge the initial link between the two Purleys.



The lands donated by Isabella de Sifrewast superimposed on a modern map. In those days the village street ran through to join Westbury Lane.