

# Account of Purley on Thames

## Newspapers

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### *Introduction*

There is a huge difference between the National Press and the Local Press and these days both are threatened by the Internet and Social Media which distribute 'news' of all kinds, much of which are specious to say the least. That is not to say that the traditional press were always reliable as all had their biases, but most readers were aware of the bias and took it into account.

### *The National Press*

Newspapers as we understand them today arose from the broadsheets of the late 16th and 17th centuries. These we would perhaps recognise more as political pamphlets or handbills and were printed and published by people who wanted to have their voice heard. They were usually single issue publications in both senses of the term. They addressed one subject and were one-off publications.

It is fairly certain that a number were circulated within Purley, especially around the Civil War period but we have no evidence of any specific instances.

In printing these sheets by commission local printers seem to have hit upon the idea that a regular publication, including news, public notices and the contents of the pamphlets might be a saleable commodity. And so the Newspaper was born.

Initially they were very local and were often circulated only to the printer's friends. Very quickly however a network arose and a copy of one newspaper would be sent to the proprietors of other newspapers who would copy items and send the result to more newspapers. Thus a single copy of a paper printed in London or Portsmouth would be rushed to Reading where the local printer would re-set articles of interest. Usually they would acknowledge the town of origin but not the actual publication.

The earliest newspaper in Berkshire was the Mercury which was launched in Reading by William Parks and David Kinnear in July 1723 as *'The Reading Mercury or Weekly Entertainer'* Initially it contained no local news and was in essence a national paper printed locally.

National newspapers arose from the London Gazette which was the government's principal method of communicating official news and announcements. This had been introduced in 1665 as the Oxford Gazette and it moved to London and changed its title in February 1665. It was followed by an extraordinary array of publications, usually weekly or monthly which were somewhere between a newspaper and a literary journal. Copies were usually saved and bound and thus a very large number survive. Examples are *Cobbetts Political Register* and *The Mirror*

These publications were very expensive and were circulated mainly by the stage coach services, being far too big to be classed as a letter. The government soon realised that the Post Office was losing revenue and slapped on a newspaper tax. Each copy was embossed with a seal to certify that the tax had been paid This also included postage which enabled the paper to pass through the post without further charge. The tax ranged from 2d to 5/- and was a great inhibitor of the press, not only because of cost of the duty itself but it also retarded the introduction of new printing techniques as the duty seal had to be affixed to a blank sheet before printing and this prevented the use of

continuous roll printing.

Eventually the government realised its mistake and not only abolished the tax in 1855 but also in 1870 it introduced a special newspaper rate whereby newspapers could be wrapped with a sheet of paper bearing the address and posted for a halfpenny.

*The Times* started in 1785 as the world's first truly national daily newspaper. It was known as the 'Thunderer' because of its editorials severely criticising government policies. Other publications followed but it was not until Lord Northcliffe introduced the *Daily Mail* at a penny in 1896 that the National Newspaper as we know it today came into its own.

National newspapers made use of the trains to speed copies all over the country and the great presses in Fleet Street would start rolling early in the evening to catch an overnight train for the farthest corners of the country. Further editions would follow timed to catch trains to closer destinations and the final editions would be on sale on the streets of London as people were arriving for work.

Britain soon came to top the league of newspaper readers and circulations soared. Top sellers like the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Express* reached peak circulations of 6 or 7 million but restrictive trade practices and rising costs forced rapid increases in prices in the 1970s and circulations fell dramatically. Many publications went out of business or merged and the decline continued until eventually the newspaper proprietors took on the print unions and forced the introduction of new technology. At the same time they moved out of Fleet Street to the London Docklands and used modern technology to transmit the text to provincial capitals for local printing.

Today there is a wide range of National papers which arrive at the local newsagents, and are sorted and bundled for delivery by a network of paper boys and girls. However in recent years distribution has been in the hands of major organisations who have given preference and priority to themselves and their friends so that small local newsagents often find their supplies failing to arrive in time for the paper boys and girls to deliver them.

### *The Mercury*

As was noted above the first newspaper printed in Berkshire was the *Reading Mercury* which began life on 8th July 1723 as a weekly at a cost of three halfpence. It consisted of twelve pages and as the pagination ran from one issue to another it thereby evaded being classified as a newspaper and was taxed as a pamphlet. The government soon caught on to this dodge and changed the rules in 1725 and by June of that year it had changed its format to four pages printed on a single sheet priced at tuppence and bearing a duty stamp. It continued in operation as Berkshire's principal paper for over 200 years, gradually including more and more local news so that eventually it became just a local paper.

By 1727 the paper had been renamed *The Reading Post or Weekly Mercury*. By the end of 1736 it had changed its name again to the *Reading Mercury or London Spy* and after another change of ownership to the *Reading Mercury or Weekly Post* by January 1738.

A further change of ownership and a merger saw it become the *Reading Mercury and Oxford Gazette* in 1745. This was further extended in 1792 to add the words '*and General Advertiser of Berks, Bucks, Hants, Oxon, Surrey, Sussex and Wilts*' which gives some idea as to the area of circulation.

By the 1830s it was in considerable competition and a further name change to the *Reading Mercury, Oxford Gazette and Berkshire County Paper* in May 1831 indicates perhaps a somewhat reduced area. In 1839 it read '*Reading Mercury, Newbury Herald and Berks County Paper*'.

Throughout the rest of the 19th century and early 20th, the paper flourished under one variation of title or another but essentially as the *Reading Mercury* until the 1950s when it ceased publication.

In the mid 1980s it reappeared as the *Berkshire Mercury* from the *Evening Post* stable as a freebie. (see below)

### ***The Chronicle***

The principal competitor of the *Mercury* has been the *Berkshire Chronicle*. This started life in 1825 as the *Berkshire Chronicle and Forest and Vale Advertiser* as the brainchild of John Blandy of the well known family of solicitors in Reading. It soon branched out to take in Windsor and added the subtitle ' *Windsor Herald* ' in 1827. By the end of that year it had become the '*Berkshire Chronicle, Bucks and Windsor Herald*'

The paper held its own as the only serious rival to the *Mercury* throughout the 19th and early 20th century and eventually it changed its name to the *Reading Chronicle*, producing a Midweek edition as a freebie.

For many years Honor Gutch was the local correspondent of the *Chronicle* and she would submit small items of local news. In the 1980s it produced a number of area editions and has always insisted on putting Purley news in the Tilehurst and Calcot edition, whereas the version which circulates in Purley is mainly the South and West edition. The net result is that most of its reporter's efforts have been wasted.

It now forms part of Reading Newspapers Company Limited which in its turn forms part of the Argus Group of Newspapers. It moved from being a broadsheet to a tabloid around 2005.

### ***Reading Standard***

The *Reading Standard* started life as the sister paper to a competitor to the *Newbury Weekly News* ie the *Newbury Express*. Both papers were printed in Newbury from 1886 to 1890 when they were transferred to Reading They were basically two variants of the same paper with the *Newbury Express* appearing on Thursday and the *Reading Standard* on Fridays.

The *Newbury Express* gradually lost out to the *Newbury Weekly News* and folded in 1899. A year later there was a change of ownership and Walter Rivers who had been badly treated when on the staff of the *Reading Observer* set out to drive them out of business.

The *Berkshire Telegraph* seems to have begun publishing in April 1860 and lasted until July 1873 when it was absorbed into the *Reading Observer*. This seems to have been a new venture which simply absorbed the earlier paper as the *Reading Observer* and *Berks Telegraph*

Rivers eventually succeeded as in September 1924 he took over the *Reading Observer* and absorbed it into the *Reading Standard*

### ***Newbury Weekly News***

The *Newbury Weekly News* was founded in 1867 by Thomas Turner and Walter Blacket. It has remained very much a family run paper and covers most of Newbury District and parts of North Hampshire. It does not regard either Purley or Tilehurst as within its catchment area and has only recently addressed Pangbourne and Theale.

It covered the activities of Newbury District Council and later West Berkshire Council and has occasional references to Purley. However in recent years it has had a good circulation in Purley as the *Chronicle* has pretty well given up on village news to concentrate on area wide matters.

### ***The Evening Post***

In 1878 the *Reading Express and Berkshire Independent* commenced publication and despite the name had no connection with the earlier *Berkshire Independent* (see below) It was published initially once a week. The same publisher, George Smith also started the *Daily Mail and Evening Post* from March 1880 as a daily paper although it seems not to have appeared on the same day as

the *Express*, nor on Sunday. This venture lasted until about March 1880 when it folded and Smith published the *Express* thereafter on Thursdays and Saturdays. until it too folded in December 1882. The titles lapsed until around 1980 when Thames Valley Newspapers was formed and re-introduced the *Evening Post* as a daily. Initially it was a broadsheet but later switched to being a tabloid. It incorporated the *Berkshire Times*, The *South Oxfordshire Weekly News* and the *Reading Observer* .

Its main claim to fame was that it was the first paper in the United Kingdom to be totally electronically produced. All its copy was typed in directly on computers and it never had need of compositors or many of the other printing trades. As such it met with considerable resentment from traditional papers but after the Fleet Street revolution by the Nationals its techniques became accepted practice.

In 1990 the Saturday edition was dropped and the Friday edition was retitled *Weekend Post* . It printed a mixture of national and local stories and gives good coverage to Purley. However in recent years it has become an electronic only paper available via the internet only.

### ***The Freebies***

Popularly called 'freebies' a new phenomenon in the newspaper business hit Britain in the 1970s. It started with Eddie Shah who began publishing a newspaper which was financed entirely from its advertising and given away to its readers. His efforts soon ran foul of the print unions and his plant called 'Grunwick' became a symbol of hate for the whole trade union movement. He eventually won his battles and the furore created by the intimidation and mass picketing spurred the next conservative government to completely reform trade union legislation. He also set in train the electronic revolution which had been pioneered by the *Evening Post* in Reading and which transformed the newspaper industry.

In the Reading area the theme was taken up by all the newspaper groups who revived many old titles which they had absorbed years ago. The first on the scene was the *Mercury* which name was owned by Thames Valley Newspapers and was re-launched as the *Berkshire Mercury* and delivered to every home in designated areas, chosen usually for their social grouping. The same group also owned the *Post* and the *Herald* names and a few years later the *Reading Post and Herald* appeared carrying a lot of text repeated from the *Evening Post* but with a few features of its own.

The Argus Group responded with a *Midweek Chronicle* and later also revived the *Reading Standard* title . It also launched the *Property Chronicle* (delivered with the weekend *Reading Chronicle* and *Midweek* ) which featured the property market and carried the bulk of its house advertising.

The Thames Valley Newspapers group responded with *Thames Valley Property Week* which later became simply *The Property Paper* and which was delivered with the *Herald and Post*.

A slightly more up-market response was made by the *Newbury Weekly News* which produced *Out and About* , an occasional magazine which was distributed with the newspaper. This has featured Purley on several occasions, mainly relating to the Vineyard.

These free newspapers were always very conscious of their circulations which depended far more on their ability to deliver than on their attractiveness as a paper. In the week ending October 2nd 1992 the *Herald and Post* declared it was 'carefully delivered to 85192 homes in Greater Reading every week'. the *Weekend Post* claimed '59000 readers every day', *The Property Paper* gave three quite different figures 'VFD 80516 copies July-Dec 1991'; 'Currently delivered to over 165000 homes' and 'This edition is carefully delivered to over 89000 homes in this area'

The *Property Chronicle* claimed 'Over 85000 copies carefully distributed every week giving the highest distribution of any property publication in the area' and *Midweek* claimed 'carefully delivered to over 80000 homes in greater Reading every week'

## Other Local Papers

Numerous other local papers have been launched in the area but none lasted more than a few years. Many were launched in the years immediately after 1855 when the stamp duty was abolished.

The *Reading Journal* started in September 1736 and in 1743 it spawned a Winchester edition. In 1746 the title was modified to be *Henry's Reading Journal or Weekly Review*. and it ceased publication around 1748.

The *Looker On* appeared briefly in 1845 as a satirical journal but only three issues are known.

The *Berkshire Independent* appeared in November 1850 but nothing more has been heard of it. It was subtitled *A Journal Devoted to the Advocacy of Progress and Reform* and appears to have been a Liberal organ despite its title.

The *Berkshire Journal of Agriculture and Commerce* started in June 1855 as soon as the Duty had been abolished. It came from the same stable as the *Mercury* in November 1855 it transferred to Newbury as the *Newbury Telegraph and Berkshire Journal* and ceased publication soon after. It appears to have been superseded by the *Berkshire Guardian* which was published in Reading and stated it incorporated the *Newbury Journal* when it first appeared in Feb 1856. The title was revived as a freebie for the Newbury area as the *Newbury Journal*.

The *Reading Advertiser and Monthly Calendar* appeared in December 1871 but was essentially merely a free advertising sheet to be pinned up in public places.

The *Reading Times* commenced publication in September 1868 and was reputedly a successor of the *Newbury Times*; but when this started is not known. It lasted until November 1868 when its joint proprietors fell out and went their separate ways. Henry Ford published the *Reading Standard and Newbury Guardian incorporating the Newbury and Reading Times* This was still in operation in 1878 but seems to have no connection with the modern *Reading Standard* which started in 1886.

The other proprietor was Francis Lock and he founded the *Reading Herald* in November 1868. This became the *Reading and Abingdon Herald* in 1870 but issue numbers were continued from the latter rather than the former. The *Abingdon Herald* had started in July 1867 and the joint paper reverted to its original name soon afterwards, continuing in existence to 1910.

The *Reading Examiner* appeared briefly in 1874 and the *Reading Templar* in 1873

## Local Organs

Many local organisations produce newsletters. All three political parties have done so from time to time but the Conservative *Purley Progress* has been the most often produced. The Liberal *Grape Vine* appears mainly around election time and the Labour Party's *Reading Banner* has been seen only one or two occasions in Purley. In addition Frank Lewis the County Councillor produced his own *Progress Report* on a much more regular basis.

All the local schools regularly produce newsletters for parents as have the Scouts, the Pangbourne Volunteer Centre and Purley Park League of Friends although most of these have a fairly limited circulation.

The Church has had two attempts at a newsletter; the first: *Purley Purpose* ran to three editions and the second: *Whats News* only saw two. Both very much duplicated the Parish Magazine.

Outside bodies such as the Community Council and Newbury District Council have produced newsletters for the more limited audience of Councillors and the like and a newsletter entitled *The Berkshire Governor* has been circulated to school governors.

Project Purley have produced a newsletter for several years now as have many other local societies which are either Reading or Berkshire based.

The *Purley Parish Magazine* is by far the most widely read of local organs and is a valuable source of reference material.

Neighbouring Parishes also produce magazines. In Pangbourne the *Pangbourne Magazine* is produced every other month and funded by the Parish Council and donations. St James Church Pangbourne also has its own *Vision* and the Roman Catholics have the *St Bernadette Chronicle*. Sulham and Tidmarsh also produce their own magazines.

### ***Bibliography***

As well as the titles mentioned above the following are useful references:-

The Early Newspaper Press in Berkshire (K G Burton 1954)

Radio Luxembourg - The Station of the Stars (R Nichols 1983)