

Account of Purley on Thames

Parish Registers

R200590 10/7/19

An article by Jean Debney in her series From My History Notebook article 6 published in PPN November 1980

FROM MY HISTORY NOTEBOOK

6 - Parish Registers 1813-1900

When you read this, a typescript copy of the Parish Registers of Purley (1813-1900) should be in the Rectory, and both the Berkshire Record Office and the Reading Reference Library have made copies for general access and research. I am indebted to the Rector, Rev. David Evans, for giving me permission to copy these unique documents before they are deposited in the Record Office for safe keeping.

Sue Matthews and Evelyn Smith have given me unstintingly of their spare time to assist in the long, and sometimes tedious, task of checking and indexing: and to them I offer my grateful thanks. In the process of this task, we all became very interested in the village families, the events of whose lives we were recording - their happy occasions and their tragedies.

For the statistically minded, there were 487 baptisms, 97 marriages and 266 burials - producing over 2,000 names from a village whose population was mostly under 200 at this time. Baptisms exceed burials because many children left the village to find work when they grew up, and whole families sometimes moved on: nearly all the names of the 19th century are now gone from Purley. An exception are the descendants of William Pocock, a carpenter who came here in 1831 from Compton.

Agriculture was the main occupation and most men were labourers in the early period - apart from the blacksmith and lock-keeper. Purley Hall became the largest employer by the end of the century with a large number of servants in the house and on the estate. The railway had little influence on the local work-force. The first "commuter" appears in 1877: a "packer at the biscuit factory" (? Huntley & Palmers in Reading); he lived at the School Cottage.

At first Ann, Elizabeth or Sarah were the baptismal names most often chosen for girls, and William, John or Charles for the boys. But by 1900, two names were often given,

and Roland Daniel. The most unusual names we found were Parthenia and Thuringen.

Four children was the average per family, but some had more. Richard NEW had 12 children, and the last was born when he was 65 years old. John COX, the blacksmith, also had 12 children born over a period of 25 years. But the prize must go to Jesse LEWENDEN who fathered 16 children (by two wives) - the eldest was 33 when the youngest was born!

Unspecified infectious diseases and poor conditions took their toll and not all these children survived to adulthood. 1 in 10 died before their 1st birthday, and 1 in 3 before their 10th. Those who grew up and remained in the parish often lived to be over 70. Ann SHERMAN was 100 years old when she died in 1822.

About half the men and women were unable to sign the marriage register at first, but the literacy rate improved as the century progressed. There was a school in existence for some years before the present school was built and opened in 1875.

The next projects are the checking and indexing of the earlier Parish Registers from 1662 to 1812 - plus some Bishop's Transcripts which date from 1607 - and the Census Returns of 1851, 1861 and 1871. If anyone is interested in coming along to join in this project you would be very welcome. We meet usually on Wednesday evening at 8.00pm at my house - 8 Huckleberry Close, Purley (Tel. Reading 413223).

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