

## ***Account of Purley on Thames***

# Congregationalism in 17th Century Purley

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*An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 113 published in PPN March 1993*

### **113. Congregationalism in Purley in the 17th Century**

Mention the Civil War and Commonwealth period (1640 - 1660) to people and many will still declare their support for either the Royalists and King Charles I or Oliver Cromwell and Parliament. If feelings still run so high after more than 300 years, they must have been terrible at the time, putting family members and close friends on opposing sides. The Civil War was sparked off mainly by religion and led to the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the exile of his son, later Charles II, to the Continent, as well as the disestablishment of the Church of England and the ejection of many clergy in the 1640s. During the ensuing fighting, the opposing armies ranged up and down Berkshire demanding recruits, horses and provisions from the inhabitants. Reading was besieged, there were 2 major battles at Newbury and the population was impoverished.

The records for Purley are deficient for this period - there are no parish registers or Bishop's transcripts, no known wills for parishioners or manorial records, so one can only guess what was happening in the village. Few of those found in the records pre-1640 were still in the parish in 1660. Among the many changes that took place nationally during this period was the spread of nonconformist Puritanism, but after the death of the "Protector", Oliver Cromwell, in 1658, Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660 and the Church of England was re-established.

Rev. Richard Watts, who was rector of Purley from 1623 until his death in 1659, survived the various enquiries during the Civil War period when many clergy were ejected. He was succeeded by Daniel Reyner, BA, a Puritan clergyman and graduate of New College, Oxford. After 4 years as a "Fellow" at Oxford, he became rector of Buttermere and then vicar of Cliffe Pypard, both in Wiltshire, and came to Purley in April 1659. He had 2 sons, William and John, and 2 daughters, Ann

and Sarah. His father William, vicar of Egham, Surrey, was buried there in 1666, and his brother, Samuel, was vicar of Sonning, Berks from 1657 until his ejection in 1663. After the Restoration, Daniel was officially "instituted" to Purley on 10th October 1661 but was ejected from the living the following year for his non-conformist views and his refusal to take communion in accordance with the rites of the re-established Church of England. When the Declaration of Indulgence for non-conformists was announced in 1672, the subsequent enquiry reported that Daniel Reyner was licensed as a teacher, his house (his father's?) in Egham, Surrey was a Congregational meeting place and that he "lived wholly upon the charity of his friends"; he died in 1685.

One member of Mr. Reyner's congregation in Purley may have been Robert Hanscome, a yeoman of the parish, who left him 20 shillings (£1) in his will dated 29th September 1675. Apart from the details in the will, nothing else is known at present about Robert but it is possible that all those he named held the same religious beliefs. He left 2s 6d. (12.5p) each to "all my fellow servants" (? in Christ) and 1s (5p) to "my brothers and myne owne sisters". Two Purley inhabitants and possibly fellow worshippers, Richard Baker and Richard Osman, were to have 5s each and Richard Baker was also to have his old coat.

Robert was possibly betrothed (engaged) to Ellinor Wickins, a spinster of Tilehurst, as he appointed her his Executrix and left her the residue of his estate "for the love I bare unto her". He gave his mother "Sibel" £12 for her "owne use for the terme of her life and what remains at her decease shee shall give it to Thomas Hanscome, my brother Thomas' son". Brother Thomas was to have his best "sute of cloaths" and his father-in-law his "ordnery sute of clothes" as well as a chest each. John Wickins - was he "Ellinor's" father or brother? - wrote and witnessed the will, together with James? Heddidg who signed with his mark.

Despite persecution, non-conformists continued to meet for worship, mainly in market towns such as Reading. However, by the late 1700s, there was a sufficiently strong group of Congregationalists in Pangbourne for Joseph Harper's house to be registered for worship with the Clerk of the Peace for Berkshire on 10th July 1792; it was registered again with the Archdeacon of Berkshire on 26th August 1819, still in Joseph Harper's house. The Trustees that year were Joseph, Edward and Elizabeth Harper. The early chapel registers from 1819 to 1837 are now in the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane, London.

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