

Account of Purley on Thames

Holidays at Home c 1880

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An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 14 published in PPN August 1981

A hundred years ago, the annual fortnight's holiday was a luxury for a few wealthy families. The mass of the population worked six days a week all year round (that is, if work was available), and the level of their wages left little or no margin for holiday expenditure.

Christmas Day and Good Friday had long been public holidays, and in 1871 the August Bank Holiday Monday was introduced; but few were able to take advantage of it because holidays without pay were not always welcome.

Ten years later the Mistress recorded in the Purley School Log Book (1 Aug 1881) that "attendance (was) not quite so good on account of the Bank Holiday." Purley children had about 7-9 weeks annual holiday from school: one or two weeks at Christmas and Easter, and 4-6 Weeks Harvest (summer) holiday. By contrast, the public schools, e.g. Eton had 14-16 weeks holiday. Purley also had several half or whole days off - such holidays were granted by "kind permission of the Rector" who controlled the school. On these occasions the children might be given a tea treat by the Rector's wife, Mrs Travers, or some other kind person.

The long summer holidays were definitely "working holidays", for the children were expected to work alongside their parents in the fields. If the harvest was late, the school might not break up until as late as 15th August, and could be extended for up to six weeks holiday. When the harvest was in, a tea was given to all the parishioners by Mrs Storer and the children were given a half-day holiday to attend. During June and July there were frequent references in the Log Book to children absent from school "owing to their mothers being out haymaking."

Sometimes people took the day off to attend a local event, such as the horse and cattle fair held in Reading every September. When the market was over there was a two-day pleasure fair, and the School recorded a "small attendance as many children (were) taken to the fair."

Robert Stone, the miller from Pangbourne, wrote in his diary of a visit he made one evening to a Band of Hope Temperance Fete held in Purley Hall grounds (Wed. 28th June 1871); The fete commenced around midday visitors -arrived by special train to Pangbourne, in vans from Coley, Caversham, etc. Cricket, archery and football were played in the afternoon, followed by tea, bread and butter and cake. The adults ate in a large tent and the children sat outside on:the-grass. "When Robert Stone had finished his day's work he arrived in time to hear the "musical entertainment, and temperance addresses" --but he does not appear to have taken part in the dancing or playing of "kiss-in-the-ring" which the Berkshire Chronicle mentions.

On the whole I think that our ancestors enjoyed their infrequent leisure activities - also, there was no media to tell them what they might be missing!

STOP PRESS: Since my article last month, John Titterton has pointed out to me that the coat of arms on Purley Church tower are those of Oliver St John (d1630), an uncle of John St.John and great-uncle of Ann Hyde.

Jean Debney