

Account of Purley on Thames **Purley Parish Council**

Part 1 Background to Parish Councils

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R200613 23/2/19

Parish Councils are by far the oldest form of local government. In this two part article we look at the background to parish government and then in January to the achievements of Purley Parish Council in its formative years.

Government comes from two directions: down, from a central authority such as the King or a parliament who tell people what to do or what not to do: or up from the grass roots who decide the rules for their community. In Saxon times communities were governed by a gathering of all eligible villagers at what was known as the Witangemot or Moot which met when decisions needed to be taken. One of the key decisions to be taken every year was what crops to grow and which strips each villager would use in the Common field.

After King Edgar decreed in 939 that tithes on the fruits of the land were to go to the church, pilgrims and the poor and required each church to agree with its neighbours which piece of land went with which church it soon became clear that some sort of organisation was required which assigned roles to individuals. This was essentially the start of the Parish system which was quite different from the Manorial system. In Purley's case this meant settling the boundaries of the parish taking into account the pieces of land in which Whitchurch and Sulham had an interest. This boundary enclosed lands from four manors, Purley Magna, Purley Parva, La Hyde and Lething.

In order to allocate responsibilities an annual meeting was held around Easter time which became known as the Parish Vestry. Initially the two chief roles to be allocated were People's Warden to represent the interests of parishioners and Vicar's Warden whose

key job it was to look after the parish church and represent the interests of the clergy. Gradually throughout medieval times decrees were handed down from on high for other roles to be covered. These included Constables and Tithing Men, Haywards, Surveyors of the Roads and Overseers of the Poor. In addition the running of the parish required the appointment of Clerks, Vergers and Sextons

By the 19th century there had been many changes, for instance constables were being absorbed into the police force and surveyors' duties taken over by Turnpike Trusts. The Parishes Act of 1884 was what triggered the start of the present parochial system which tends to be very confusing as it differentiated between Civil and Ecclesiastical functions. Parishes which started out the same soon became different as for example the order of 1897 which left odd bits of land with Sulham and Whitchurch outside the Ecclesiastical Parish but transferred most of them into the Civil Parish.

By this time there were other bodies taking over various duties. Purley was part of the Bradfield Union which administered the Poor Law. It was also part of the Bradfield Sanitary District which looked after health and sewerage matters. These had been formed in the mid 1800s and eventually overseen by Berkshire County Council formed in 1894 who took over education and highways.

The Parish Meeting

When Parish Councils were introduced in 1898 following the 1896 Local Government Act there was an option for smaller parishes to have an Annual Parish Meeting to transact business and to appoint two Overseers to look after things for the rest of the year. It was this option that Purley took and the Lord of the Manor, Anthony Morris Storer assumed the role of chairman of the meeting, continuing to exercise his dominat-



Anthony Morris Storer II who was Lord of the Manor in 1898 [M050271]

ing role until he died in 1902 after which the Rectors assumed the role of Chairman. The meetings were held regularly except in 1902 following the death of Major Storer and 1914 because of the outbreak of war.

Effectively one overseer acted as clerk and was paid an honorarium and the other represented Purley's interests on the Board of Guardians of the Bradfield Union Workhouse.

Formation of the Parish Council

In 1927 there were considerable reforms in Local Government being debated and it was felt that it was about time Purley had its own Parish Council. This was agreed by Berkshire County Council and the new Parish Council met for the first time on Monday March 28th 1927 at the school. The Rev C H Coe was elected Chairman and Horace John Turner was appointed as Parish Clerk at a salary of two guineas per annum.

At first the Parish Council had only 5 members. This was increased in twos to 13 but while Purley is entitled to go to 15 it has stuck at 13. However it was becoming increasingly difficult to persuade people to stand for election and existing members were usually left to co-opt people to the Council.