

Account of Purley on Thames

Drowned in the Thames

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An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 21 published in PPN March 1982

FROM MY HISTORY NOTEBOOK

21 - Drowned in the River Thames

On the right hand side of the path leading to the south porch of Purley Church are the gravestones of two young people who drowned in the river Thames. Despite the fact that the river forms the northern boundary of the parish, there are no references to death by drowning in the parish documents. The Parish Registers do not record a cause of death except in one instance when Giles Blagrove was murdered in 1738. It was the inscriptions on the two stones that led us to look elsewhere for more information, which was found in back copies of the Berkshire Chronicle and Reading Mercury.

"Sacred to the Memory of George Viner who was accidentally drowned while bathing August 31st 1854 aged 20 years. This stone is erected by his afflicted parents as a lasting tribute of their affection to their son."

George Viner was a footman with Alexander Popham, Esq., a tenant at Purley Park from about 1847 to 1858. In 1851, Mr Popham had a living-in staff of ten, while his coachman and gardener and their families lived elsewhere on the estate.

It had been a week of beautiful weather, and early in the morning of 31 August, George and another servant went to bathe in the river near the church. He could swim and had almost reached the Oxford side when he appeared to be sinking and called for assistance. As his companion was a poor swimmer, he went for help, but by the time he returned from the house with the coachman, George was lying in seven feet of water. At the Inquest held later that day a verdict of accidental death was recorded.

It was almost two years later that the same Coroner, Rupert Clarke, Esq., was called to investigate another sad case of drowning at Purley.

"In memory of Francis Affleck who was accidentally drowned while bathing in the river Thames on 24th July 1856 aged 9 years."

Returning from school with a friend one Friday afternoon, Francis Affleck decided to bathe in the river near the Pound House, Mapledurham. Being only 9 years old, he was probably not a very strong swimmer and almost immediately got out of his depth. Before assistance could be procured he was unfortunately drowned; as before the verdict was accidental drowning.

The Affleck family had arrived in the parish a few years previously when James Affleck obtained work as a Farm Bailiff. During the short time that James and his wife Mary were living in the village, two children were born to them and baptised in Purley Church: James in 1854 and Samuel in 1857. There were probably other children, but as they lived here so briefly I have not been able to find out more about the rest of the family.

Another sad case is that of the Rev. Matthews who was drowned in 1914 of whom I will write more next month.

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