

# **Account of Purley on Thames**

## **John Brookes**

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*An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 41*

### 41. John Brooks and the Disputed Pew

"A Peiw is a certain place in church incompassed with wainscott, or some other thing, for severall persons to sitt in together" wrote Richard Cough, the Rector of Myddle, Shropshire in 1701. Before going on to record the history of the occupants of each pew in his church, he explained how a pew could be occupied by one or more families, and did not belong to a person or land, but to a house. If the house was sold, the seat in church was included in the "appurtenances" and a new house did not automatically have a right to a pew. This may go some way to explain the decline in church attendance in the 17th and 18th centuries and the subsequent growth of nonconformity. By 1818, the Church Building Society was so worried about this trend they would only give a grant if some of the seats were "free for ever".

Before the Reformation few churches had seats; those that did had them mainly for the wives of important men. As more seats were provided, churchwardens exercised the extra-legal custom of allocating them in return for substantial rents. These rents formed an important part of the church income. In St Lawrence, Reading in 1607, men and women sat in separate sections; the rents charged and position of the seats are all listed. These benches were different from the later box pews built according to their owners' fancy and often kept under the lock and key. The paupers were crammed on to deal benches in odd corners.

The right to occupy a certain pew sometimes led to a dispute. In Purley, an old man called John Brooks was asked in June 1723 to testify that the "seat next to the pulpit in Purley Church belonged to Westbury Farm House". A few days later he added that he "would take an oath in any court of England" about this pew.

John Knap, a former servant (probably a farm bailiff) at Westbury Farm also supported the claim. The reason for this dispute and the outcome are unfortunately not known.

At the time of making his statement John Brooks was almost certainly the oldest inhabitant of Purley and had known the parish for more than 40 years. Until he ceased farming in the parish about 1707, he had been the second largest farmer. He came from Burghfield in 1677 to marry Elizabeth Justice, a rich widow of Purley. From this marriage he held by right all the land which she had inherited from her first husband: it was assessed in 1699 at £25 which was 30% of the parish total.

By the 19th century the interior of Purley church was "encumbered with large high pews". They were all swept away when the church was rebuilt in 1870 and replaced with "modern fittings" which were all free. Today, those hard bench seats have been replaced with comfortable modern chairs, but the churchwardens, or their deputies the sidesmen, still exercise their right to allocate people to their seats - this time without payment of rent.

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