

# **Account of Purley on Thames**

## **A Tithe dispute over Clover**

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*An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 42 published in PPN May 1984*

### 42: A TITHE DISPUTE ABOUT CLOVER, 1711

One tenth of all the produce of the land, whether grain or fruit, belongs to the Lord. (Lev.27, v 30).

The custom of paying a tenth, or tithe, of all produce to the Church was established in the 6th century. Farmers reluctantly paid their dues on the regular crops, which in Purley in the 16th and 17th centuries were mainly wheat, barley and rye. The introduction of new crops into England in the 17th century led to many disputes in the Church courts which continued until the Tithe Act of 1836 commuted all payments to a Rent Charge on land.

Although clover was introduced into this country from Flanders about 1650, its adoption as a farm crop was slow. Farmers are naturally cautious and very few could afford a crop whose value as cattle food and soil improver was then poorly understood.

In 1711, Mrs. Mary Blagrove, a wealthy but tetchy old widow and daughter-in-law of a previous Rector of Purley, was the tenant on St. John's Farm in Purley Magna. She had grown a crop of "broad clover or three-leaved grass" in a field called "Goodboyes-Wheatham", and then, unwilling to start a custom of paying tithes on this particular crop, she carried off the Aftermath (second crop) without giving the Rector his due. It was thought

that she was trying "to save ye mony" and the furious Rector, Rev William Gostwick, threatened to sue her. Her son Thomas, an attorney in Reading, intervened and offered to establish the legality of the situation. After more than a year's delay, Mrs. Blagrave finally paid the 15s (75p) demanded on a crop that even the Rector admitted was "stained and much damnified by wett weather".

In the record about this dispute, from which the above information is quoted, the Rev Gostwick also wrote that although the previous tenant, Mr. John Brooks, had grown a clover crop, it was "an improvement not long used among us". Unaware that clover puts nitrogen into the soil he "averred and testified" that he thought the "Aftermath improverishes ye ground, impaires and lessens ye next yeares crop".

This interesting memorandum written in Purley's Parish Register provides one of the earliest known references to clover in Berkshire.

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