

Account of Purley on Thames

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An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 47 published in PPN December 1984, January and February 1985

47 - INSIDE PURLEY PARK

It is relatively easy to find an architectural description of the outside of a building especially when, like Purley Park, it is "listed". But it is much harder to discover a description of the rooms themselves or their contents as they might have been in the past. Apart from two wills drawn up by members of the Storer family, the information given below has mostly been obtained from some sale catalogues dated 1920, 1923 and 1926. With the assistance of Mr Harris, the present Principal of Purley Park, it has been possible to identify the current use and names given to the main rooms on the ground floor.

When Anthony Morris Storer I, the first owner of Purley Park, died in 1799, he requested in his will that his "household goods, furniture, plate, china, glass and all the books in or about the capital messuage at Purley" (i.e. the old manor house) and from his house in Devonshire Street, London, should "go with the estate at Purley as heirlooms". It therefore seems possible that much of the contents of the new mansion house built about 1800 would have consisted of these items which would have remained there throughout the 19th century. His descendant, Mrs Leila Minna Gertrude Downing Fullerton, and the last 'Lord' of Purley Magna, died in 1918. She bequeathed the contents of the main rooms of Purley Park amongst her four children, but, except in one instance, she does not detail any of these items. The house itself and the residue of the estate were left to her youngest daughter, 22-year-old Myra Ada Violet Downing Fullerton. Within two years of her mother's death, when the house was probably devoid of its contents, the Trustees put the estate on the market. An advertisement appeared in the Times in February 1920 and it was put up for Public Auction in London in June that year.

Alexander Macandrew bought the house and much of the surrounding park land by means of the substantial mortgage from the Trustees of the Storer estate. The house had been modernised by Mrs Fullerton in 1912 when

new bathrooms, modern sanitation and electric lights were installed and other improvements made. Further improvements and interior decorations were carried out by the new owner in 1921. Unfortunately his connection with the property was brief and it was up for sale again in 1923. This time the Sale Catalogue was more informative and contained photographs of several of the main rooms with their sumptuous furnishings. It is not known how many of these might have been original to the house and perhaps sold with it and how many were the possessions of the current owner.

Today the walls of the rooms are bare of the heavily framed pictures which once adorned them, and the ornate furniture has been replaced with the sturdy but plain items required by the folk who now live there.

(To be continued)

Jean Debney

47 INSIDE PURLEY PARK (Part 2)

From the gravel drive on the south side of Purley Park Mansion, the pillared portico entrance encloses double front doors of mahogany. These lead directly into the large lounge-hall which is ensuite with the four main reception rooms of the house. The main features of these five rooms are the 15' high Adam decorated ceilings and two Adam fireplaces.

The Lounge-Hall had a stone floor which by 1926 was covered with parquet teak, whilst the others had oak floors. The rooms are all connected by their original doors of Spanish mahogany with ormolu gilt fittings. Each room was heated by a coal or wood fire in an open fireplace, except for the Hall which had a "stove" for a short period in the 1920s. During the modernisation of the house carried out in 1912, a single central-heating radiator was placed in each room and more were added in 1921. They were heated from a boiler in the basement.

There are two niches in the Lounge-Hall which formerly held statues. This room measures 26' x 20' and the Adam ceiling here is supported by fluted Ionic columns and pilasters.

The first room to the right of the hall is now the Staff Room: formerly it was the Morning Room or Boudoir and is the smallest room in the suite measuring a modest 23' x 18'. The fireplace in here was removed before the sale in 1920 and was later replaced with one of polished

mahogany having a tiled hearth.

From here you pass into the Junior Lounge. Used as the Drawing Room in 1920, it was converted into a Billiard Room by 1923. The photograph from the Sale Catalogue in that year shows that it contained heavily patterned wall paper and a tiger skin rug lurked under the huge billiard table. This room which measures 30' x 22' has one of the two Adam fireplaces, with ornamental iron sides and back and a marble hearth.

The next room, which was formerly the Saloon or Small Drawing Room, is now called the Caversham Room. This was the main reception room and is the largest measuring 31' x 20'. It lies directly opposite the front door and has large bay windows and French doors leading on to the verandah overlooking the Thames Valley. The Adam fireplace in this room is the most valuable in the house; it has a white and sienna marble mantelpiece, an ornamental iron back and a sienna marble curb. Through the communicating door you pass into the final room in this suite which was the Dining Room and is now the Senior Lounge. The measurements of this room are 30' x 22' and the fireplace is made of Italian marble with a tiled surround and an ornamental iron back.

In her Will in 1918, Mrs Fullerton, as the last real owner of the Manor of Purley Magna, stated that the pictures from the Saloon and Dining Room were to go in Trust to the Trustees of her father's estate as heirlooms and the remaining contents were to go to her eldest daughter, Mrs Ivy Leila Evans. The contents of the Drawing Room were left to her elder son George and of the Hall to her other son Richard. At that time George was serving in the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Berkshire Regiment which was stationed in Dublin, whilst Richard was with the Hussars in Mesopotamia.

Next month I will describe the upper floors of the house and the domestic regions. One of these latter rooms contained an extremely interesting item ...

Jean Debney

FROM MY HISTORY NOTEBOOK

47 - Inside Purley Park (Part 3)

The world of Upstairs-Downstairs was a reality when Purley Park was built about the year 1800. The part of the house lived in by the family was kept separated from the servants' quarters by closed doors, etc.

The upper floors of the house are reached by a stone staircase which runs from the paved inner Hall up to a 38' Long Gallery. There is a wrought iron balustrade with a mahogany rail and it is in direct contrast to the small plain staircase that runs parallel to it on the other side of the dividing door; this one was for the use of the servants and perhaps also for the children of the house. There is a third staircase in the nether regions of the house leading from the kitchen area up to the servants' bedrooms etc.

At the top of the main staircase the Long Gallery is lit by a "lantern" that originally had Adam decorations: these unfortunately "fell off" under the attention of an enthusiastic workman some years ago.

There were 22 rooms on the 1st and 2nd floors, most of which were used as bedrooms. Of the seven main bedrooms leading off the Long Gallery at least two were used as dressing rooms. When Mrs Fullerton wrote her Will in 1918 she described these rooms by their colour schemes of purple, blue and rose; there was also a ribbon bedroom. Two years later the sale catalogue also listed a green and a red bedroom; there is no mention of the ribbon room which may have been redecorated.

Upstairs on the second floor were eight more bedrooms which were probably used for visitors or as part of the Nursery Suite. At a lower level on the 1st floor were six "good bedrooms for servants". Some, but not all, of these rooms were heated by open fireplaces. By 1923 the central heating had been extended so that there were radiators in the Gallery and also in the rooms on the "cold side of the house".

Built without running water or sanitation, Purley Park required an army of servants running up and down the back stairs to serve the family in their bedrooms and the other main rooms. All the hot and cold water for washing and bathing was carried up in cans and the dirty water and slops carried down again for disposal. Heavy buckets of fuel had also to be brought up from the coal and wood cellars in the basement.

Piped water had been available from the Tilehurst and Pangbourne District Water Co from the 1890s but it does not seem to have reached Purley Park until the modernisations carried out in 1912. Then three bedrooms and five toilets (with one in the basement for the servants) were installed with "modern sanitation" draining to a cesspool. Further bathrooms etc, and wash basins in many of the bedrooms were added in the 1920s. The house was not connected to the main drains until the 1970s. Today, many of the upstairs rooms have been sub-divided to create more bathrooms and a sick bay etc for the use of the residents.

In 1871, when the house was occupied by Major Storer, his wife and daughter (later Mrs Fullerton) and three other relatives, there were nine living-in servants including a Prussian nurse, and several others who came in from the Village on a daily basis. By the 20th century, fewer boys and girls were prepared to go "into service". Many preferred the relative freedom of an office or factory job which at least gave them a regular day off each week. Many servants were expected to be on duty almost 24 hours a day and only had an irregular half-day off when they might be expected to return at 10 pm prompt. After the First World War the "servant problem" was reaching crisis point as far as the gentry were concerned. Fortunately, technology was coming to the rescue, houses were being up-dated and fewer servants were needed to carry out the tasks than formerly.

The organisation of the Victorian household was carried out under the strict rule of the housekeeper who reigned supreme from her own quarters. The exact location of the housekeeper's room in Purley Park is proving somewhat elusive. It appears to have been on the ground floor at the front of the house - where she would have been able to see anyone coming to the front door of the house. During the reorganisation of the house some time prior to 1926, her room had become the butler's pantry which

to a room known as the smoking room in 1918, the billiard room by 1920 and the library in 1923. In the original housekeeper's room in 1918 there was stored in the top right-hand cupboard a Sevres china dessert service of 33 plates and 26 fancy dishes. They had been given to Anthony Morris Storer I by Queen Marie Antoinette of France when he visited Paris as Secretary to the Legation at the French Court in 1783. In her Will Mrs Fullerton bequeathed it all to the Trustees of the Purley Park Estate as heirlooms. It would be interesting to know where this china - and other impressive contents of this mansion house - now reside.

Jean Debney