

Account of Purley on Thames

A Riot at the Red Lyon

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37 - A Riot at the Red Lyon

On 13th November 1774, John Sherman a labourer of Purley, was caught poaching and arrested by William Southby a servant (probably the game-keeper) to Philip Worlidge, Esq of Purley. Twenty-five year old John was accused of the illegal possession of a gun and of planting a wire snare to kill and destroy game. As no Magistrate was immediately available to deal with the offence, the prisoner was taken for the night to John Emmon's, the victualler's house called the Red Lyon in Purley, where he arrived at 6 o'clock in the evening. There he was placed under the care of Thomas Heath the Tithingman (probably the deputy constable for the parish) and Benjamin Jerum, a labourer, both of Purley.

Only a privileged few were allowed to possess guns and shoot game and increasingly during the 18th century landlords employed game-keepers to protect their property and shooting rights. This social privilege was much resented, especially by the rural labourer who poached rabbits, etc, to supplement his meagre diet and in a close community he could be fairly certain of sympathetic support from his neighbours.

During the course of the evening a group of friends came into the Red Lyon. It is not known if any ale was consumed but between the hours of 11 and 12 midnight they "began to make a riot ... by dancing etc." In addition to the prisoner, at least five other people were involved: they

were the landlord's wife Elizabeth Emmons, aged 45, their daughter Lucy aged 18 and the wife of Richard Wellman, Thomas Newberry aged 23 a footman to Rev Benjamin Skinner, Rector of Purley, George Newberry aged about 44 and Thomas' father a cordwainer, and Jemmy Martin aged 18 also a cordwainer. All lived in the village.

In the ensuing rough and tumble, someone put out the candle and would not allow it to be relit. Thomas Heath immediately placed himself in front of the closed door in order to prevent the prisoner escaping, but Elizabeth Emmons insisted upon opening it and pushed Heath aside: whereupon John Sherman promptly escaped into the night ...

Two days later, Thomas Heath and Benjamin Jerum made a statement before two local Justices and accused the five participants in this "riot" who were all committed to appear at the next Quarter Sessions on a surety of £40 each ...

But, like many another story that appears in the records, the immediate outcome of this event is not known: the case does not appear in the next Sessions records and it is not known if John Sherman was recaptured. However, what is known for certain is that he ended his days in Purley receiving Parish Relief of 3s. 6d. (17½p) each week plus some wood for his fire. More than half a century after this brush with authority, he died at the ripe old age of 79 in April 1829, and the Parish bore the cost of £2. 3s. 5d. (£2.17p) for his funeral.

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