

# Account of Purley on Thames

## Coroners Inquests

R200645 1/7/2019

*An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 34 published in PPN June and July 1983*

### FROM MY HISTORY NOTEBOOK

#### 34 - Some Coroners' Inquests - A. Elizabeth Coles 1814

The office of Coroner is an ancient one that dates from the time of the Norman kings. Although they had other official duties their main responsibility has always been to hold inquests in cases of sudden death. The survival of their records is patchy and references are often hidden among other records. In the 17th century the Reading Burgesses held a weekly Court to try minor offences, and they often included an enquiry into local deaths; these transactions are recorded and were printed (unindexed) in the 19th century. The records for the higher court of Quarter Sessions in Berkshire survive from the early 18th century, all earlier documents having been destroyed in a fire a long time ago. Among these papers are Coroners' reports relating to all parts of the County.

Tucked between the pages of Purley's 19th century Burial Register was preserved an Original Coroner's Warrant, dated 4th Oct. 1814, to permit the burial of Elizabeth COLES "who now lies dead in your Parish". The relevant entry in the Register on 5th October gives no clue how she died but noted that she came from Whitchurch, whereas the stone marking her burial place near the north wall of Purley Church Tower is more explicit. Armed with this information I visited the County Record Office to make a search through the Quarter Sessions Rolls which is a long and rather grubby task, and I found the following information.

It was on 2nd Oct. 1814, that Elizabeth COLES with two companions was driving along the road leading to Purley. Suddenly the black mare that was drawing their gig took fright and ran away. Elizabeth leapt out of the carriage and hit the ground with such force that from "one mortal blow and contusion on the head" she "then and there died". The Jury at the Inquest two days later brought in a verdict of accidental death, caused, they said, by the black mare which was said to be owned by John SIMEON, Esq. JP., of Whitchurch and worth 30s, (£1.50p).

The report does not state where the Inquisition was held but lists the twelve "good and lawful men of the said county" who were chosen and sworn to make enquiries. They were William WILLAN (the Foreman), George REYNOLDS, Joseph DEAN, John WHITE, James HOLMES, Michael LUKEMAN, William EVANS, James SMITH, Thomas RUDDLE, Samuel and Charles MUSGROVE, and the Rector Charles MANESTY. Several of these appear to be men of some standing connected with the village, and the numbers were made up from the villagers themselves.

The following day Elizabeth was buried and despite some weathering on her monument it is just possible to make out the inscription: "Sacred / to the memory of / Elizabeth COLES / who was accidentally killed / on the 2nd of October 1814 / aged 24 years / "Watch therefore Reader". There is also a footstone inscribed "E C 1814".

Jean Debney

An Act of 1752 required Coroners to submit bills to the Quarter Sessions and these later included details of the name of the deceased person, cause of death and the verdict. It is these latter papers which survive among the mass of Quarter Session material for Berkshire. Unfortunately there is no longer proper index to these records and the documents themselves are often not easy to handle being mostly stiff rolls of parchment which insist on noisily rolling themselves up again.

Some twenty years prior to Elizabeth COLES' death in 1814, two other Inquests were held in Purley. Again, no clues were given in the Burial Register and the reports were only found quite by chance whilst searching for other information in the Rolls. These Inquests relate to John GUTTRIDGE who died in 1792 and Francis HUMPHRIES who died in 1794.

John GUTTRIDGE seems to have been ill for some time and it is not clear why it was felt necessary to hold an Inquest two days after his death on 5th December 1792. The Jury brought together on this occasion seems mostly to be composed of villagers and included John BURGESS, Richard HOUSE, Richard PALMER, John SMITH, John CARTER, Francis HAINS, Richard MILLARD, James HANBLIN, James EMERY, Benjamin HUMPHRIES, Benjamin ALLUM and Thomas JEROM. They duly made their enquiries and decided that although John had been 'ailing and infirm' for some time, he had died by the 'Visitation of God in a natural way'; in other words, from his 'ailment and infirmity' and for no other reasons. Two days later, on 9th Dec., he was buried in an unmarked grave in Purley.

On a Spring day in March two years later, ploughing was in progress and Francis HUMPHRIES was driving a team of horses. The sudden noise from a falling tree startled the horses and, in an effort to control them, Francis was thrown to the ground and the plough went over his head. Despite a fractured skull and injury to his brain he lived for five days and died on 15th March 1794. The Coroner's Court was convened the following day and again twelve local men were gathered together to form the jury. This time they included John SMITH (foreman), William LUKEMAN, Benjamin GERHAM, Richard MILLARD, Bernard BALLARD, John GREEN, James SMITH, Jonathan BRAUND, John ILSLEY, Richard NEW, Richard SAUNDERS and Joseph GOLDRING. Their verdict was that Francis had died 'accidentally, casually and by misfortune'; but this time no mention was made regarding the ownership or value of the horses or plough which had caused his death, as in the Inquest in 1814. As soon as the enquiry was completed, Francis was buried in the churchyard at Purley and, like John GUTTRIDGE, no stone marks his grave.

Jean Debney



















