

Account of Purley on Thames

Charles Prater

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Two articles by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook articles 80 and 81 published in PPN May and June 1988

80. Charles Prater and the Shoes

The story of 17-year old Charles Prater is brief because his stay in Purley was probably very short. Like many other country boys of the 19th Century, he would have left home at about the age of 12 to go and work on local farms. He would then have moved each year to a better job until his mid-twenties when he might marry and settle down.

Information about this large band of young single workers is hard to find. The survival of farm employment records is unlikely and often the only clue about an individual or family's residence is found in the decennial census returns or events such as baptism, marriage and burial in the parish registers. From the 1890s, Purley School register gives admission and leaving dates for each child which makes it possible to plot the length of stay for some families.

The subject of this story, Charles Prater, is not mentioned in any of the above records and it was only by chance, during a visit to the Berkshire Record Office, that his trial was noticed in the Quarter Sessions Order Book for January 1853. Since local newspapers reported court cases in some detail, it is often simpler to read them than the surviving legal documents and the following

story was located in the Berkshire Chronicle of 8th Jan 1853

On Sunday*7th November 1852 Charles Prater, a farm servant, got up early in order to walk home to fetch some clothes. He lodged with Charles Offer, a shepherd, and both worked for A. Storer, Esq. of Purley (later Major Storer of Purley Park). When he got downstairs Charles decided that he would borrow the shepherd's shoes and leave his own "very bad" pair in their place.

Half an hour later the shepherd found his shoes missing and set out in pursuit of his lodger. In the dusty surface of the unmettled roads he was able to track Prater's footprints to Hampstead Norris and then along Ilsley Road. While at the "New Inn", he saw the culprit go by still wearing the stolen shoes; he was taken into custody.

The next day Charles Prater was brought before a magistrate, F. Crowdy, Esq. JP, charged with larceny, i.e. for stealing the shoes, and sent to prison to await his trial at the Quarter Sessions the following January.

At his trial on 3rd January 1853, held in the Second Court before a petty jury, Prater said in his defence that he had intended returning the shoes and had even offered to pay for the use of them. But the verdict was "guilty" and he was sentenced to one month's hard labour in the House of Correction. This meant that he not only spent a total of 3 months in prison, but also lost his job and any chance of a good reference. One hopes he managed better next time.

*The report says Monday but 7th November 1852 was a Sunday which is more likely to have been his day off.

Jean Debney

81. Some Further News of Charles Prater

Since writing last month's story about Charles Prater, I have been able to visit Reading Library and do some research about his early life. The two sources that proved useful were the 1984 IGI and the 1851 Census. At present it is not possible to find out where Charles went after leaving Purley and Reading House of Correction in 1853.

The International Genealogical Index or IGI, contains many million baptisms and marriages, but no burials and is compiled from parish and non-conformist registers. It is basically a finding aid and the Berkshire section lists many Praters especially in the west of the county. Although original sources should always be checked for correctness and additional information, it has not been possible to do this at present for the Praters.

Charles Prater, said to be 17 at the time of his trial in January 1853, would have been born about 1836. A Charles Prater, baptised on 10th January 1836 at Great (or West) Shefford, son of William and Hannah, was the only Charles in the right period so, in the absence of other information, I have assumed that this is 'ours'. Great

Shefford is about 25 miles from Purley via Hampstead Norris and while it does seem an awful long way to walk

there and back in a day, my husband assures me that it should not have been too difficult for a fit young man.

From the IGI I was able to compile three generations of Praters in Great Shefford. Charles was the eldest of eight children, his father William married Hannah Chessels in 1834 but may have married first in Chieveley in 1812 to Ann Smith and had five other children. William, baptised in 1790, the third of eleven children of John Prater and Phoebe Looker who married in 1787, had two younger brothers, Joseph and John, who also lived in Great Shefford with their families. The 1851 Census Return of Great Shefford, taken on the 31st March, records Charles aged 15, working as a shepherd and born in the parish. He was living at home with his parents and four sisters, one brother and a sister were probably dead and the youngest brother had not yet been born. His father, an agricultural labourer, was 61 and his mother, born in Wiltshire was only 36 (this supports the theory that Hannah was William's second wife). Not far away lived at least two of Charles' uncles, their wives and several cousins; his grandparents John and Phoebe were probably dead by then.

The above suggests that although described as a "farm servant" in 1853, Charles was a shepherd, he lodged with a shepherd and was in that work two years before. There are no details concerning the type of farming undertaken by his employer, Anthony Morris Storer, but it is known that the Sherwoods, also of Purley, were sheep farmers in the district. In 1809 William Mavor wrote in "A General View of Agriculture in Berkshire" that every Michaelmas and Spring, Farmer Sherwood bought quantities of Wiltshire and South Down mixed sheep to be fattened with oil cake (according to the report, too much was used) and sold six months later "fit for the butcher". A few were kept for 18 months, shorn once and then given oil cake for the last 6 or 8 weeks.

Although we only know that Charles wanted to go home to collect some clothes, he may have had other reasons for undertaking the long trudge.