

Account of Purley on Thames

Farming and Life in Purley 1809

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An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 93 published in PPN August and September 1990

93: Farming and Life in Purley in 1809 (part 1)

August is the traditional month of harvest and school summer holidays were originally arranged to enable the children to help their parents in the fields. Nowadays with increased mechanisation less help is needed and we take our holidays elsewhere. Today Purley is primarily a dormitory town and people work elsewhere but until the early 20C agriculture was the only form of employment available.

Early in the 19th century, William Mavor was asked by the Board of Agriculture to survey Berkshire. The results were published in 1809 under the title of: "A General View of the Agriculture of Berkshire" and, like the other county reports published at the time, is an important source of English local history. It mentions farming history and practice, enclosures, drainage, machinery, crop husbandry and experimentation, treatment of the poor and wage rates. It also comments on the role played by canals, the improvement of the roads the factory system and the public's changing taste in food.

Although there is no specific section on Purley, references to the parish are scattered in the pages of the report and additional information has been collated from other sources.

Purley was listed with Tidmarsh and Pangbourne in the "chalk district" of Berkshire. The whole parish, which was nearly 1000 acres, was in one farm and worth £1 8s an acre. The farmer at that time was Edward Sherwood, the second of that name, who died in 1811. His father and grandfather had gradually increased their land holdings by purchase and lease since their arrival in Purley in the 1730s. Farmer Sherwood also held land in Sulham and Tilehurst.

In 1809 Purley was only partly enclosed. Much of the land was still in two large fields, Further and Hither Common Fields, lying between the meadows along the River Thames on the north and the Highway (now A329) on the south and on either side of Westbury Lane. The land, divided into strips held by different owners, was all leased by Farmer Sherwood; they were not finally inclosed until 1856. There had been a third common field called East Field which was last mentioned in 1714. Most of the land south of the A329 was enclosed by about 1600. There is no direct evidence of when such enclosures took place but field names in the Glebe Terriers of Purley (descriptions of land held by the church) suggest which parts of the parish were already enclosed and which was still held in common strips.

Mr Sherwood seems to have been mainly a livestock and sheep farmer. He bought cattle and fattened them for market on oil cake. He also bought Wiltshire and South Down crossbred sheep for fattening. They were fed on turnips, hay or "good natural pasture" and as well as "considerable quantities" of oil cake, especially during the last 6 to 8 weeks before going to market. Mavor commented that oil cake was already going out of favour in some places. The sheep were bought "store" at Michaelmas and in the spring. After six months they were ready for the butcher, but some were kept for 18 months, shorn once and then sold off.

Wages for a shepherd in Berkshire were from 8-10 guineas a year (£8.40 to £10.50) plus the run of a few

sheep; this works out to about 3s (15p) to 4s (20p) a week. The shepherd employed by several generations of the Sherwood family was almost certainly John Green, who came from Harpsden near Henley, married in Purley in 1779, produced a family of eight children and died here in 1820. He lived in a cottage with 1/4 acre garden near the church (the site was later incorporated into the walled garden and is now in the Riverside Drive area). Described as a lapsed copyhold tenant of Purley Magna in 1786, he probably continued to live there until his death, paying £2 10s rent a year. In 1790 he was tithing man for the manor and was named in John George Liebenrood's will dated 1794 as "Shepherd Green" and one of the poor of the parish.

(To be continued)

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93: Farming and Life in Purley in 1809 (part 2)

Other wages in Berkshire in 1809 were as follows:

Carter: 9-12 guineas a year (18p to 23p per week)

Under carter: 4-7 guineas (8p to 14p per week)

Boy: 2-3 guineas (4p to 6p per week)

Dairymaid: 5-10 guineas (10p to 20p per week)

Housemaid: 5-7 guineas (10p to 14p per week)

Town servants received higher wages and many young people left Purley in the hope of improving their prospects. Mavor commented that "gentlemen's domestics frequently have salaries far beyond the services they perform". It must be remembered that these wages reflect the general cost of living and prices of the time.

It is probable that most of the inhabitants of Purley in the early 19C were employed as unskilled labourers on the land and their wages are noted in the Guardians Minutes of Bradfield Union in late 1830s as from 8-10s (40-50p) a week "when in work" and less for women and children. Carter John Trueman of Purley earned 10s (50p) a week which is more than the wage mentioned in the paragraph above.

No mention is made of the crops grown in Purley but a four year rotation was practised in Pangbourne comprising barley, wheat, oats and then manured turnips "ploughed on the back for wheat". Tidmarsh and Sulham

had a five year crop rotation which included red clover before wheat, then oats, manured turnips and barley. Improvements in soil and crop management, especially in 18C, meant that land no longer had to be left fallow for a year to recover its fertility.

By the time of the report, hops, formerly produced in some quantity in Berkshire, were only cultivated in small patches or grew wild in the hedges. Most large households in the middle ages and later brewed their own small beer and many inventories of the period include beer brewing utensils. The evidence that hops had previously been grown in Purley is suggested by some field names.

HOPYARD, a $\frac{1}{2}$ acre strip in the Common Field, was part of the domestic land attached to Westbury Farm, Purley Parva, in the early 1600s and valued at 2d an acre in 1673. By 1840, the name HOP GARDEN PIECE was used for almost 11 acres of arable in the NE corner of Purley Further Common Field close to Westbury Farm which almost certainly included the above strip.

There were two HOP GARDENS marked on the map of Purley Magna in 1786 and the Storer rental of 1793 described them as arable land. The larger, just over 2 acres at £1 5s 6d annual rent, lay east of the present Mapledurham Drive and just behind St Marys Avenue; the smaller was about $\frac{1}{2}$ acre at £1 2s 6d rent and was part of the land now NE of Ivy Cottage in Purley Village. The boundaries of both of these fields had disappeared by 1840 when they were part of "Park and Churchams" and "Pond Meadow" respectively.

The poor of Purley used underwood, furze and stubble for fuel and there are several mentions in the school log book later in the 19th century of permission being granted to gather wood in Purley Park. Peat was also burnt & may have been dug at Tidmarsh and elsewhere; it cost 12s to 13s a load (60-65p) at the pits. However, each load produced about 12 bushels of ashes when burnt in the home and this could be sold at 7d or 8d (3p or

4p) a bushel. Mavor estimated that with good management a load or a load and a half should last a family for a year and firing might cost the poor about 10-12s (50-60p) a year.

Potatoes had been introduced from America in the late 16C and by the 1790s were still regarded as only suitable for animals. However a series of bad wheat harvests combined with Napoleon's blockade of English ports during the war with France, led the Board of Agriculture to encourage the production of potatoes to feed the poor. By 1813 potatoes were said to be grown in all the cottage gardens in Oxfordshire and were being eaten with bacon and cabbage.

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