

Account of Purley on Thames

Farming in 17th Century Purley

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An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 94 published in PPN October and November 1990

94: Farming in Seventeenth Century Purley (part 1)

Farming in 17C Berkshire was on a much smaller scale and less specialised than in the 19th. Most families in Purley had both animals and crops and sometimes took on other part-time work in the home, such as outwork for the wool trade of Reading. This information comes from probate inventories which list a person's possessions at death. From these one can also see that many families made their own bread, beer and cheese and produced bacon and honey. They would have then sold the surplus in the weekly Reading market and used the cash to purchase items they could not produce at home.

The recent discovery in the Public Record Office in London of a probate inventory for Thomas Childs, yeoman farmer of Purley who died in August 1690, led me to re-examine the information collected about his family and to compare his listed possessions with those of his father and of his widow Joan, who died in December 1692.

Thomas was a son of Richard Childs, yeoman of Purley who died in 1647, and possibly a grandson of William Childs, notary of London in 1619. He lived in Purley during the time of the Civil War and Commonwealth. As a yeoman farmer of Purley in the latter half of the 17C, Thomas Childs was one of the village elite, ie somewhere between gentry and labourers. In July 1641 in

Whitchurch, Oxon. he married Joan Justice, a member of a large and influential local family.

Of their five known children, both sons predeceased their father and the Childs family name died out. But their three daughters all married well: Mary to George Blaggrave son of Rev Thomas Blaggrave, Rector of Purley, Sarah to Richard Holmes and Joan to Robert Robinson.

Thomas Childs also appears to have increased the amount of land held by his family in Purley. Whether this was by his own efforts or by inheritance is not clear. In 1634, his father occupied land in Purley Parva, to the west of the parsonage on the Street with a further piece nearby in Nutnam field. At a Court of Examination of Purley Parva on 26 September 1664, Thomas was recorded as holding a copyhold tenement in Purley with 6 acres of land for the lives of himself, his wife Joan and Thomas their son at an annual rent of 6s (30p). This may have been his father's holding referred to above.

In 1650 he took a lease on land belonging to Westbury Farm: 15 acres arable in Brown Yard, 15 acres in Kirnham, land in the Further, Middle and Nuthams common fields, 9 acres of pasture in Wheathams and 4 acres in the Moore plus the new and old orchards adjoining the Moore. For this lease he paid £130 and an annual rent of £26. He was still leasing this land in 1672.

Thomas also held land in Purley Magna in 1671. In January 1682 he obtained a lease for 2 acres in Knapps Close in Purley Parva for a peppercorn rent on the lives of his three daughters.

When Thomas' father, Richard, died in 1647, his probate inventory totalled £97 of which 2/3rds was animals and crops and the rest household goods. The following rooms were listed: on the ground floor was the hall (ie living room with a fire for cooking), a room "within the hall" and a "bolting house" for making bread. Upstairs were a low chamber, an upper chamber and a middle chamber and outside was a yard with a barn.

(To be continued)

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94: Farming in Seventeenth Century Purley (part 2)

Richard Childs' house in Purley in 1647 was sparsely furnished downstairs with just a frame table and a form, some "wooden ware", brass, tubs and kivers (shallow wooden troughs). Upstairs were 4 beds, one with a feather mattress and one with flock, a cupboard, a shelf, a chest and the household linen, a warming pan and a Bible. Although the Bible is not mentioned again the warming pan was listed in his son's kitchen in 1690. Also upstairs was the pewter, some wool and old iron, a winnowing sheet and 8 sacks. The food in the house consisted of two pots of butter and one of honey, with some cheese in the middle chamber.

His animals were 3 bullocks, 2 cows, 6 swine, some sheep and of course the bees. In the barn was corn worth £30 and some hay. Richard also had "carts, ploughs, tumber & wood".

When he died in August 1690, the value of Thomas Childs' estate was £291, almost three times that of his father. About 90% of his wealth was tied up in the farm with a mere 10% for domestic items. Because of the faded and peculiar handwriting on the original document, a crumpled strip of parchment about 5" wide and about 2 feet long, it is possible that some values I transcribed are not correct.

The rooms named in the 1690 inventory suggest little change since 1647 with slightly more furniture than in his father's day. In the parlour were five chairs, andirons for the fire and a clock worth £2. The kitchen had a "fire bowl", spits and tongs etc, brass kettles, pots and skillets for cooking, pewter, tubs, buckets and some chairs, a spice mortar and the warming pan. In the "sellars", meal house and milk house were barrells and bowls for brewing beer and making bread and cheese.

Upstairs there were still 4 beds in the 3 rooms: the chamber over the parlour, his lodging chamber and the best chamber. The linen, stored in coffers and boxes over the parlour, consisted of 13 pairs of sheets, 18 napkins and 2 tableclothes. In the best chamber was a little table, 3 chairs, 3 stools and a chest plus £3 of cheese on shelves and, in the kitchen, £3 of bacon.

Thomas had 6 horses & a colt with some harness, 16 cows, a bull and 2 calves, 196 sheep, 8 store hogs and 10 pigs. The "fruit" in the orchard was valued with some sacks, "sives", measures, rakes, forks, prongs and "other old things". In the yard were 2 hay ricks, 2 long carts, 2 dung carts, 2 ploughs and a pair of harrows. A quantity of wheat, "pease", vetches and oats were in the barn together with some "old corne in the house". He also held 3 leases: "Simmonds", "Eldridges" and a small copyhold together worth £2 15s (£2.50)

In his will, which has not yet been read, Thomas would have left his wife Joan at least 1/3 of his estate to provide for her widowhood. At her death just over two years later in December 1692 her probate inventory totalled £123: 2/3rds farm goods and 1/3 household. She had £14 18s 6d (£14.92) in silver and £3 10s (£3.50) in old gold, neither mentioned in her husband's inventory, which she distributed in her will among her married daughters and grandchildren.

Joan appears to have occupied only two rooms in the

house: the best chamber with a joined bedstead and a feather mattress, a small chest and a side table, and the "other chamber" now with 5 flockbeds and blankets. She also had linen "about the house", brass and pewter, wooden vessells, chairs and stools etc, the "iregeere and utensills belonging to the fire", £4 of provisions and a clock - this one worth only 15s.

Her share of the animals was 6 hogs and 8 store hogs in "the haise", plus £38 of wheat, £30 of barley and some "pease" all stored in the barn. She also had 2 "small copyhold leases" valued at £2 10s (£2 50).

It had been thought that this family occupied Westbury Farm House, but closer examination of the evidence suggests that they lived on the "Street". It is hoped to write more of this in the future.

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