

Account of Purley on Thames

Jesse Lewendon

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Jesse Lewendon - Gardener and Superdad

Family reconstitution from the Purley parish registers show that the average number of children per family in the parish increased from 3 or 4 in the 1600s to some with 10 or more children in the mid-19th century. But the man who produced the most children in Purley was Jesse Lewendon, a gardener. He married twice and between 1842 and 1875 had 18 known children, of whom 16 were baptised in Purley.

Jesse Lewendon was a son of John Lewendon and Mary (nee Cooke) and baptised in Whitchurch, Oxfordshire, on 31st July 1814. His first marriage was in Purley on 14th November 1841 to Mary Adkins, a 22 year old spinster. He was described as a bachelor aged 25 and a gardener, and both were able to sign the register. Although Mary had been born in Dorchester, Oxon, both had been living in Purley for the three weeks prior to the marriage.

It is not clear where they lived for the first few years of their married life, but on 31st March 1851 Jesse and Mary were recorded in the Census Return as living with their 5 eldest children in "Purley Village". By a process of elimination it has been established that they occupied one half of School Cottage next to the Rectory, now known as "Hemington", the other half was occupied by Richard Herridge whose wife Mary was school mistress from circa 1854 to at least 1871. The Lewendon family continued to occupy this property until they left the parish.

Hemington was described as a "new built messuage or tenement" in 1733 and was occupied by one family; by 1773 it had been divided into two. The site on which it stands belonged originally to the manor of Purley Parva and is sometimes referred to as "Martin's Copyhold" after the family who held it in the late 1700s. The court rolls of 1813 and 1818 record Rev. Charles Manesty, Rector of Purley, his wife and niece, as taking over the property. It was probably about this time that another building, shown on the 1841 Tithe Map, was erected behind the house and used for a school.

Jesse and Mary had seven children; Emily was baptised in Purley in 1842, followed by Alfred (1844), Mary Anne (1846), Eliza (1847), Charles (1850), Frederic (1851) and William (1855). Tragedy struck in 1856 when baby William aged 18 months was buried in March and 12 year old Alfred in September, followed by their 40 year old mother, Mary, in January 1857. Jesse, now aged 42, was left with five children including Emily, now 15, who probably cared for the younger children aged 10, 9, 6 and 5.

It is not known where or when Jesse's second marriage to Sarah, a local girl some 20 years younger than himself, took place. A son, another William, was born in Tilehurst about 1858, followed by 10 more children, mostly baptised in Purley; Sarah (1859), Ellen (1860), Phoebe (1861), Louise (?1863), John (1864), Clara (1866), George (1868), Alice (1870), Albert Jesse (1872) and Edith (1875).

The Census Returns for April 1861 list Jesse and his wife Sarah living with 6 children (3 from each wife). By April 1871, the family had increased to 11 - the 2nd William had disappeared but 8 younger children aged between 13 years and 5 month old Alice were at home together with Jesse's eldest surviving daughter, Mary Anne. She was a 24 year old housemaid who had returned to live with her 56 year old father. All the children, ranging from 13 year old Sarah to Clara aged 4, were said to be "scholars".

The year 1875 was a time of change for the family. In February that year an Indenture was enrolled in the Court of Chancery granting the land and buildings in Purley, used for a school and teacher's residence, to the Rector for the use of the parish. On 12th July, Louisa Lewendon received a 6s (30p) prize for needlework at the school from Major and Mrs. Storer; this may have been given to mark her last day at school before she went into domestic service. By the time Jesse's and Sarah's youngest child, Edith, was baptised in Purley on 26th September that year, the family had moved to Christ Church, Reading.

There is no further reference to this family in Purley after 1875. Two of the children have been found so far in the 1881 Census Returns; Eliza, the 4th child born in 1847, was recorded as a lunatic patient aged 29 (probably her age when admitted) and former domestic servant in Moulsholme Asylum, now Fairmile Hospital. And Phoebe, 8th child born in 1861, was a general servant to Henry J. Hendy, a Professor of Music, his wife and 5 children aged 2 - 8 years at 58 Watlington Street, St. Giles, Reading.

Are there any descendants of this family? If so, it would be nice to hear from them and to discover the further history of this marathon family.

Jean Debney

