

Account of Purley on Thames

Changes in 20th Century Purley

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An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 103 published in PPN November and December 1991

Some Changes in 20th Century Purley (Part 1)

From the Domesday Survey of 1086 to the beginning of the 20th century, Purley changed very little. The population increased very slowly to a maximum of 200+ in 1851 and then fell again until the 1930s when it began to rise until now it is well in excess of 4,000. The villagers' small cottages were replaced as they fell down and the gentry houses were rebuilt in the 17th and 18th centuries either on or close to the site of the old one. The survival of the community depended almost entirely on agriculture and the lives of many must have been comparable to that seen in the Third World today.

In its 900 year history, the main changes that have taken place in Purley, prior to this century, occurred in the 1800s. About 1800, Purley Park was enclosed, with the loss of some cottages near the Church, and Purley Park mansion house was built on high ground. This meant diverting the Reading Road to the South and opening New Hill to allow access to the village. In 1840 Brunel's broad gauge Great Western Railway split the parish in half from East to West.

The import of cheap foreign foodstuffs towards the end of the 19th century was one of the reasons for the agricultural depression and the consequent low wages of farm labourers. The population of

Purley and other rural parishes in Berkshire fell as many people moved into the rows of new houses in Tilehurst and Reading and got better pay in the burgeoning new industries: beer, bulbs and biscuits (i.e. Simonds Brewery, Suttons Seeds and Huntley and Palmers). By about 1900 much of Purley's population consisted of families who came and went after a few weeks or months at most. After World War I the disappearance of the community was probably saved by the release of land for housing so that Purley now has a larger population than Pangbourne.

The catalyst for most of the changes in 20th century Purley was the death of Major Storer of Purley Park in 1902. Together with the Powys Lybbes of Hardwick (now Lady Rose) and the Wilders of Purley Hall and Sulham, he was a major landowner. The sale, and subsequent break-up of the Purley Park Estate in 1920 by his granddaughter, marked the real beginning of the changes.

Most new houses in Purley in the 1920s and 1930s were individually designed. Because of the depression, only one or two were built in the 20s, with increased development in the 30s. This included the plots along the South side of the Reading Road opposite Purley Park and in Long Lane, as well as the "Purley Rise Estate" which drew up a plan for housing sites along the Reading Road, with Glebe Road and Beech Road on its North and South. The Purley Park River Estate also began in the 1930s when, because the land was unsuitable for housing due to flooding, small camping sites were sold. From the early 1940s, some of the temporary huts and caravans were occupied all year round by escapees from the London Blitz. The area continued to develop but it was not until the 1970s that most of the roads were made up and the 1980s when the last of the main services arrived.

Many small businesses have come and gone in 20th century Purley and the land they once occupied is now mostly covered with houses. The largest in terms of land use were market gardens or nurseries. The first was Mortimer Menpes Fruit Farm in Long Lane from 1910

to WWII, when it became the O.A.K. Nurseries, and then Oakdale Nursery until the late 1950s; Orchard Close and Highfield Road now occupy this site. Melville Brothers grew trees in the Carlton Nurseries from the 1930s to 1960 and Horace Pocock had a small market garden from WWI to the 1930s in the grounds of Stonecroft, which is now the East end of Beech Road. Harold Gutch's nurseries from the 50s to the 70s is now the western portion of Nursery Gardens, and the balance was the garden of Westfield, a house built for Sir Fredk Sykes in the 1890s which became flats in the 1950s and was demolished by 1970. For a period about 1949 there was also a mushroom grower in premises on the Oxford Road.

Some Changes in 20th Century Purley (Part 2)

Capt. Beale bred pigs in the 1920s on a small holding where Hillcote was built about 1930, and then Horace Grimstone's poultry farm was there until the 60s. From late 1940s to the 60s, Thomas Keen ran Purley Park Poultry Farm south of the Oxford Road. A small poultry farm run by Dudley Unwin in the 1950s and 60s in the old kitchen gardens of Purley Park became Church Mews and Waterside Drive in the 1970s. Members of the Venner family had a poultry farm at Purley Rise on the corner of Westbury Lane from the late 1920s until the 1960s. In the 1950s Kenneth Venner started trading on this site as "Cara-Venners", hiring caravans, a business which is still very much in evidence today.

Dogs were one of the most popular forms of business in Purley in the first half of this century. The most well-known was the South Berkshire Hunt which kept its hounds in the kennels behind Belleisle Farm from the early 1900s to the 1940s. In the 50s Belleisle became the HQ of G. Percy Trentham Ltd., building contractors, and both these concerns provided local employment. Although there have been some problems, this site is now the latest housing development. From the 1930s to the 70s, the Stadium Greyhound Kennels were on what is now the Westwood Fields estate and finally there was a dog breeder and some boarding kennels for brief periods in the 30s.

The change from horse to motor transport put the blacksmith out of business and the forge at the corner of Long Lane was demolished in 1936. At about the same time, a small garage appeared on the

North side of the Reading Road which is still there today.

In the decades following the Second World War, further land became available and housing estates developed. Home Farm became Farm Close (with the new farm built closer to the river) and the Old Rectory became Lister Close. The remaining portion of the River Estate between St. Mary's Avenue and the railway were built and Cecil Aldin Drive was developed on land behind the blacksmith's site. The Purley Park mansion and land between the Reading road and the railway continued to be occupied as a private house until sold in 1948 to become a home for handicapped men. In the 1970s, most of this land was sold and became the Purley Beeches estate. Finally, in the 1980s, land on the South of the Oxford Road, which had been used as greyhound kennels and then a poultry farm, was covered with the houses of the Westwood Fields development.

The only real farm, in the old-fashioned sense, in Purley today is Home Farm which rears cattle. Bernard Theobald changed Westbury Farm in the 1960s from dairying and it is now a tourist attraction with a vineyard and trout fishery.

There have been a varying number of shops to serve the growing community. During the 19th century there was only one shop plus the post office. Between 1900 and the 30s most goods were delivered from the Pangbourne shops. In the 20s, Miss Pocock had a shop in the post office but this only appears to have sold sweets. A grocers shop appeared in 1931 and by 1939 there were 6 food shops in the Oxford Road and the River Estate. During WWII there were 3 shops including a drapers. A newsagents opened in the 1950s and, until the 1960s, there were 5 or 6 shops. By the early 1970s this had decreased to 3, the same as today; a general store with post office and a newsagents in Purley Rise, and a general store in Colyton Way on the River Estate. Increased car ownership means that most bulk shopping is now done outside the parish, either in Pangbourne or increasingly at the Savacentre supermarket at Theale.

Although there are still many small businesses in Purley today, with some advertised in the Purley Parish News, few provide much local employment. For the majority of the population, Purley is now a dormitory town.

During this century the main development has been in the eastern half of Purley, which is now covered with houses, while the open land in the western half is designated an area of outstanding natural beauty and hopefully will remain that way.

It is highly likely that in this summary of 20th century changes in Purley, YOUR particular bit has been omitted - if so, then I should be very pleased to hear from anyone (preferably in writing) who wishes to add to the above.

Jean Debney