

Account of Purley on Thames

The changing population of Purley

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75. The Changing Population of Purley

Few of the families who lived in Purley in the 18th century were still here in the 19th. Many families stayed for only one generation and there were several reasons for this. The change made to a major portion of the parish by the STORERS in creating Purley Park in the 1790s was one but there was also a change in land holding in the rest of the parish. Unable to pay the increased price for a new lease, the small copyhold properties were gradually combined into a larger, more economic unit and leased to a single farmer. By 1809 the SHERWOODS farmed the entire parish, with the exception of land and gardens round the houses, combining arable crops with fattening sheep for market. In other words the 18th century population of smallholders with rights was replaced by tenants in tied cottages without rights.

The population explosion which began in the mid-18th C continued into the 19th; with larger families and an increased survival rate the population in England and Wales doubled to 18 million between 1801 and 1851. Improved diet, housing and medical care may have led to this increase, but since few of these improvements reached the poor or those living outside towns, they had little effect on the rural parish of Purley. Nevertheless a comparison of baptisms with burials shows a potential increase in the parish which was counteracted by migration. With no increase in available jobs or housing, many families found themselves in a catch-22 situation.

lived in accommodation tied to their work and raised families of 6, 8 or 10 children. Their tiny cottages could not house the growing brood and most 12 year old boys and 14 year old girls were sent out to "service". Some went to Tilehurst or Reading which expanded rapidly after the opening of Huntley & Palmer's biscuit factory, others to villages 10 to 20 miles away - far enough to walk to Purley and back in a day to visit their parents. The coming of the railway in 1840 increased mobility and enabled others to move to London and elsewhere. Few of these children returned to their native parish except in the case of illness - there was simply nowhere for them to live and no work for them to do.

Until 1856 the major employer in the village was Farmer SHERWOOD. Agricultural work was poorly paid and many labourers were laid off in bad weather - saving for a "rainy day" was a reality! The big houses employed some village women and girls on a daily basis but the census returns show that most living-in servants came from outside the parish. After Edward Sherwood died in 1856, the employment pattern changed and the STORERS of Purley Park became the main employer.

Sometimes the ageing parents remained in Purley for the rest of their lives and were buried there. But in several instances, unable to continue the arduous field work which was all they knew, they had to move out of their homes to make way for new and younger farm workers with their families. It is not certain where they went. Some may have moved to Reading or Tilehurst where rooms were reasonably easy to rent and some probably went to live with their married children.

Using parish registers, census returns, etc. all the known families who lived in Purley in the past have been reconstituted and it is possible to relate at least part of their histories. Over the next few months it is intended to write the stories of some of the 19th century families, some of whom stayed so briefly. Perhaps someone will recognise their ancestors and the next chapter of the story might then be discovered.

