

Account of Purley on Thames From Elyham to Belleisle to Trenthams

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An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 74 published in PPN July to September 1987

74. From Elyham to Belleisle to Trenthams (Part 1)

The origins of the buildings now forming the offices of G.P. Trentham Ltd. on the South side of Purley Rise have, until recently, been something of an enigma. The only firm evidence found to date had been the Tithe Map of Purley in 1841 showing "Elyham House" with its surrounding buildings. The main house is a Grade II listed building described as late 18th century, but there has been a persistent story among the older residents of Purley that the barn and so on had been "moved from somewhere".

The history of the site itself can be traced back to 1593 when Ralph Walker, yeoman of Purley had 2 acres of rye planted in a field called "Hale Ham". Scattered references and various spellings of the name "Elyham" in the intervening years show it to have been about 16 acres of arable and woodland belonging to the manor of Purley Magna. The evidence now being discovered in the Storer papers is thus proving very interesting.

Anthony Morris STORER 1 purchased the manor in 1793 and invited Humphrey REPTON the landscape gardener to plan his new estate. REPTON visited Purley on 2nd November that year and by 22nd November had produced a red-leather bound volume of notes with beautiful watercolour sketches and plans of the area as it then was, and how he suggested it might look in the future. The result was eventually to change the face of the parish.

REPTON found that the original manor house to the south east of the church was by then only a farm surrounded

in a random manner with various outbuildings, and not suitable for a gentleman's residence.

The farmhouse itself measured 60 x 57 feet and the sketches show a square Queen Anne style building of three storeys with a symmetrical red brick facade, casement leaded windows and a tiled roof with a chimney at each end. It probably dated from the 1740's and was built sideways to the river Thames. The central front door on the south aspect was flanked by two windows and had a triangular pediment probably supported with half pillars. On the first floor were five windows with two dormers in the roof. The full aspect of the north or rear of the house is not shown. The back door with a simple projecting canopy appears to be set off centre. There were also small gable windows on this side of the house.

No information exists about the appearance of the interior which had a "new kitchen, best parlour and rooms over the same ... one cellar and a pantry" stated to be set aside for the use of the landlord as required. This probably represented about half the house, which in 1793 was leased by Widow Sarah SHERWOOD and her unmarried son, Edward.

The largest farm building was a tiled barn measuring 117 x 31 feet, with a threshing floor lying parallel to the south wall of the churchyard with a "linnen yard" for drying washing between the barn and the wall. To the west and at right angles was a "green" barn of 83 x 31 ft also with a threshing floor. Next to this was a cowhouse for 9 cows and stables for 19 horses, measuring 84 x 20 ft.

On the opposite side of the yard and at right angles close to the tiled barn was a cart shed 55 x 20 ft, with a pig sty at the rear. Between this and the house was a granary, size unknown, and two fowl (i.e. chicken) houses. On the site were also several large elm and walnut trees.

(to be continued)

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74. From Elyham to Belleisle to Trenthams (Part 2)

In REPTON's opinion the farm site near Purley church was the "most desirable" spot for STORER to build his new house or "Casino"; but he also suggested 2 alternative sites, (A) on high ground by the turnpike road and (B) near the Tilehurst boundary.

But first the farmyard with its "filth and nuisances" was to be moved. Repton suggested that "the barns, stables and outhouses being chiefly wood, may be taken down, removed and rebuilt without great expense". The existing farmhouse was to remain in use while the new one was built and the old materials then used for "new offices and stables". The farm was to be resited about half way along the Street on the N side between the Church and the pond; roughly where Oak Tree Walk and Park Walk now are in the River Estate. No mention was made about rehousing the 3 cottagers, GREEN, BALLARD AND GUTTERIDGE who lived there.

After the severe floods in the winter of 1795, STORER wisely chose higher sites: Purley Park was built in its present position, site A, and the farm in Elyham. This field was poor land then worth only 17s. (85p) an acre, on the south side of the Turnpike Road,

Plans for a "new model farm" drawn up by Repton's friend Mr. WILKINS of Norfolk used the measurements of the old buildings by the church (see Part 1). The surviving buildings at Trenthams Ltd today (1987) show that Wilkins' original plan was generally adhered to although turned 180°. The Tithe Map and Ordnance Survey maps show some of the intervening changes on the Elyham

The old buildings were to be re-erected in a square with the tiled barn on the N to shelter the yard and keep it warm for cattle but because of the change of site, it was placed on the S where it can still be seen. The granary and cart shed planned to go at either end of it have not yet been identified. On the left (E) side of the yard the thatched barn existed until 1961 when it was replaced with a period-style office block. The stables and cowhouse on the right (W) are now a brick-built canteen which has been enlarged.

The new farmhouse on the south of the yard was to have a "smart" side facing the road and a front door "which like the parlour tho seldom used is always expected by the farmer". It was to be "set a little distance from the road" leaving room for a small garden, hidden by two walls from the yard, where fruit and so on could be cultivated.

At the centre rear of the house was to be a bow window giving a good view of the farm yard from the farmer's "keeping room" or "small snug den". Two curtained inside windows would allow him to see the hall and front door and into the wash-house. This meant that no one could enter the house and go upstairs or into the pantry, dairy or cellar without being seen.

The plans show a kitchen on the left of the front door with a wash-house behind it having a door to a small yard which was the servant's entry to the house. This yard had wood and coal sheds, "dirt" bins and a door to the "linnen" or drying yard with, at the far end, a piggery having access only from the farmyard. The yards are now built over. On the right of the front door was a parlour with pantry and dairy behind and a passage to a small court beside the house forming the "mistress's" way to the farm and poultry yard". This court has also been built over. On the first floor there were to be 5 bed chambers with attics on the top floor.

Although the original farmhouse has been extended on both sides and has had extra windows put in the roof, it is still possible to detect the old building by changes in the brickwork and the colour of the roof tiles. The extensions blend in well with the old. (To be continued)

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74. From Elyham to Belleisle to Trenthams (Part 3)

Although there is no firm evidence, it would seem that the farmhouse known as Elyham House was completed sometime between 1795 and 1799, the year in which Anthony Morris STORER I died. The first occupants were probably the widow Sarah SHERWOOD with her farmer son Edward, his wife and eldest daughter, also called Sarah, born in 1798. SHERWOODS were still there in 1841, the now grown-up baby Sarah with her younger brother Edward, with two male and two female servants.

In 1851, the premises were leased to Anthony Morris STORER II's sister Ann Katherine and her husband Capt Charles WHITELOCK who kept three servants. Two years later Anthony STORER himself appears to have lived there for a couple of years. It was in a directory of 1854 that the new name BELLEISLE is first recorded although it is possible that it had been used locally for some time. The STORER family made their fortune in the 18C from their sugar plantation in Jamaica called BELLEISLE and it seems natural that this name should be used for one of their English properties.

When STORER married in 1860 he moved into Purley Park with his young wife and leased Belleisle to a timber merchant called James WALLINGTON. The house was now filled to capacity with a wife, seven children and five servants, (governess, nurse, cook and two housemaids). Two more children were born in Purley, the youngest of whom was buried only 3 days after his baptism in 1862. This family, who had lived in Cheltenham, Gloucs and then Broxbourne Herts, only remained in Purley for about

three years.

Between 1864 and 1867 a Rev. Cornelius Henry HART was at Belleisle and then the house seems to have been empty for some years. About 1874 a farmer, William Nicholas POWELL leased the house with 310 acres land and employed 7 men, a woman and some lads. He was evidently a farmer of some skill and won second prize of a guinea for his corn at the annual Pangbourne Ploughing Association meeting in October 1876. He had two sons born and baptised in Purley, Claude in 1878 and Walter in 1879. Belleisle remained a farm until about 1903, Charles WEST was there for around 10 years from 1882, then Philip SYMONDS in 1894 and William Baker BOULTON from 1899 to 1903.

From 1904 to about 1960 the South Berks Hunt were associated with Belleisle and it was during this period that its most well-known resident, Cecil ALDIN the sporting artist lived there for more than twenty years. During the First World War he was in charge of a Remount Depot obtaining horses for the army. Some of these horses were stabled in the Great Barn at Purley and because of a shortage of able-bodied men to look after them he became the first to recruit women for the task. One of his paintings in the Imperial War Museum shows the interior of the Great Barn with several horses and women stable hands. Crippled with arthritis, Cecil ALDIN left Purley for Majorca in 1930 later returning to England where he died in the London Clinic in 1935. He is commemorated by the road called Cecil Aldin Drive.

When TRENTHAMS Ltd. bought Belleisle in 1951 they described it as an "old country house". In a programme of reconstruction and building, the small barn on the east of the farmyard was replaced with a period-style office block and the old farmhouse was extended, its original size still visible by a change of colour in the roof tiles and the brick patterns of the walls. In addition many trees were planted to landscape the site to produce the present property which still shows traces of the old farm yard plan.

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