

Account of Purley on Thames

Behind the scenes at Purley Park

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An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 48 published in PPN March 1985

48 - Behind the Scenes at Purley Park

The domestic offices on the ground floor, in the basement and out in the courtyard of Purley Park, recall not only some of their 19th century uses, but also their modern 20th century ones.

In charge of the household was the Housekeeper who was important enough to be waited on by her own servant. After presiding over the dinner table in the Servants' Hall she and the other senior servants, the Butler, Valet and Lady's Maid, retired to her room for after-dinner cheese etc. These same servants also took their breakfast and tea in the Housekeeper's room.

In the lofty kitchen with its cooking range, dresser and cupboards the Cook was assisted by a Kitchen Maid. Vegetable preparation and washing-up was done in the deep sink, with a teak draining board, in the Scullery. Only very hot water with soda was available to remove the grease from the cooking pots and dishes, and damp silver sand for scouring purposes (the forerunner of today's Vim?). Everything had to be carefully dried and polished with clean cloths before being put away by the Kitchen and Scullery Maids.

Food was stored in the cool larder which had slate shelves and was partly tiled. There was also a game larder and of course a dairy for the milk, butter and cream.

Down in the basement the family silver and cutlery was stored in the Butler's pantry under the close surveillance of the Butler whose bedroom was next door. Nearby were the wine and beer cellars which were also his responsibility.

The difficulty of keeping clothes clean in an era when few items could be washed and the fact that the house was then surrounded by good country mud - no made-up roads in those days - meant that separate areas had to be set aside for their attention. At Purley Park there were brushing and cleaning rooms together with laundry and drying rooms. Some houses might also have had a boot room.

Some of the things were stored in the wood room and the

coal cellar, which was filled from a chute in the back yard. From 1912 there were central heating boilers in the furnace room. In Victorian times lighting was by oil lamps and candles which were attended to in the special lamp room. Also in 1912, an oil-powered 7hp Hornsby Engine and a Newton's Dynamo were installed in a brack and slate building at the rear of the house. These supplied the power for electric lighting.

By the 1920s when the motor car was well established as the mode of transport for the gentry, Purley Park had garages for four cars. One garage had a repair pit and there was also a mechanic's workshop. Side by side with these modern facilities remained loose boxes and stalls for at least six horses, with the men's rooms above; and of course the harness and cleaning rooms. The cart sheds and poultry houses had been joined by 1923 with a detached carpenter's workshop and a gardener's store in one of the disused stables. Today there are no horses to be seen at Purley Park and these buildings are used for various other purposes.

I hope you have enjoyed this series of articles about Purley Park as it used to be. If anyone has further information or wishes to correct anything I have written, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me. Next month's story will be about the estate cottages and their facilities, if any.

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