

Account of Purley on Thames

John Wilder

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55 John Wilder and his house in Purley.

John Wilder was a yeoman farmer in Purley during the years following the Restoration of Charles II. He and his wife Elizabeth lived in a two-roomed cottage, with a lean-to at the back, owned by Sir Walter St John, lord of Purley Magna. They appear to have had one son, also named John, who died six months before his father in 1673.

Their cottage was the western one of three which faced south on to the "Streete" near the church. Richard Osborne lived in the middle cottage, which he rented annually from the Rector of Purley and Thomas Bushnell lived in the other, also owned by Sir Walter. Behind their gardens was a field called Little Wheatham. An old sketch map of 1786 shows three cottages which are thought to be these dwellings. They lay somewhere in the area of The Short in Purley River Estate and almost certainly disappeared with the creation of Purley Park circa 1800. Probably of fairly flimsy construction with a single fireplace and very small rooms, they would compare well with a modern caravan.

John, senior, was buried in Purley on 4 September 1673. His death appears to have been unexpected as he did not make out a will and his widow had to obtain letters of administration from the Archdeacon of Berkshire in order to deal with his estate. She also had to obtain a bond

for £60, double the value of her husband's goods; Ambrose Staveley and the Rector of Purley, the Rev Thomas Blagrave were her sureties.

An inventory of John's possessions was appraised by three Purley men on 16 September: Thomas Child of Westbury Farm, a yeoman and overseer of the poor, was the most important of the three, the second was John Gutteridge and the third was Wilder's neighbour Thomas Bushnell. These latter two were also farmers, but less wealthy, and both served for many years as churchwardens.

As they passed through the house the three men noted the contents of each room and then did the same for the yard and barn. The furnishings seemed to be sparse in this household, but some items may have been omitted from the inventory, either through carelessness or because they were of too little value. For example, there was a table and cupboard valued at 10s (50p) in the hall, together with £2 worth of "brass, pewter and other lumber", but no mention of fire irons or chairs to sit on.

Bedding worth £3 was in the upstairs chamber, together with 4 pairs of sheets and other linen at £1.10s (£1.50) but no bed! His clothes, valued at £2.10s (£2.50) were probably kept with other items in the two chests and a trunk found in this room worth £1. Stores in the "Milkhouse" were some "cheese and barrell tubbs" (£1) with "an old cheese press, and other lumber" at 2.6d (12½p).

Like his neighbours John practised mixed farming. He had two cows and a bullock, together worth £6, with two hogs and a pig at 5s each (25). The harvest had been completed when the inventory was made and £7 worth of wheat and other grain was stored in the barn, together with hay worth £2.2s.6d (£2.12½) to feed the animals in the winter.

From this inventory with other records we are able to obtain a brief glimpse of how one family lived three hundred years ago.

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