

Account of Purley on Thames

The Winter of 1794/95

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An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 58 published in PPN Feb 1986

58. The Winter of 1794/5

Local newspapers are an endless source of information on local as well as national affairs. Reading Reference Library has a collection including those of the Reading Mercury from 1723. While looking for information about John George Libenrood, who died on 13 January 1795 at Purley Lodge, many references to a severe winter were found.

By the late 18th century, the improved river system and newly created canals were in continuous use. In the severe frost and snow which continued from November to January 1795 everything froze and alternative transport had to be used. For several weeks Thomas Sherrat of Birmingham advertised in Reading that, until the canals were passable again, he would load wagons every day with goods at 2/8d and nails at 2/5d per cwt.

The slippery condition of Reading's pavements caused several accidents and the editor of the Newspaper took "the liberty of recommending to houskeepers to have saw-dust or ashes strewed before their doors during the continuance of the frost".

The sudden thaw at the end of January led to "considerable floods on the banks of different rivers", and "in many places the ground floor of the houses were rendered uninhabitable, and the roads impassable". This was

followed with heavy rain and by 14 February the floods were "greater than has been known for many years past ... On the Thames near Basildon, Harts Lock, by the rapidity of the current, was bulged and, with the bucks adjoining, entirely swept away". The whole of Pangbourne was under water, and "the new ground at Whitchurch Bridge washed away, so as to render the bridge impassable".

Such severe weather created a food shortage, increased prices and much hardship for the poor. Remedies were suggested by the more well-to-do to try and improve their lot. In April Mr Bushnell, a bacon and cheese warehouseman of Broad Street, Reading, advertised sweet bacon at 6d a pound "notwithstanding the high price this article bears", also cheese and lard "at the same proportionate reduced prices", for sale to "gentlemen and parishes for the purpose of retailing to their industrious neighbouring poor".

In the same newspaper a letter from "T Lamb of Reading" suggested some alternative vegetables such as peeled and boiled milk thistle (a common plant around Reading he added), marsh thistle; sow thistle instead of greens, raw or boiled burdock, dandelion or brooklime in salad, English mercury, Good King Henry and chickweed boiled like spinach, and nettles.

Alarmed at the continuing plight of the poor, a group of Berkshire magistrates met at the Pelican Inn, Speenhamland on 6 May 1795 and drew up a scale of wage supplements according to the price of bread. Their intention was to assist the poor but instead it led to agricultural wage restrictions. Evidence of this system can be found in payments made in Purley between 1826 and 1835 (the only period when such records exist); Richard New received between 1/3d and 2/6d (6p and 12¹/₂p) weekly depending upon the birth, or death, of one of his numerous progeny, and Thomas Lay received "bread money" in February 1827.

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