

Account of Purley on Thames

Ghosts

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An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 63 published in PPN July 1986

63. Ghosts and Things

Since I first started writing these history stories six years ago, many people have passed on snippets of information about Purley's history. I have listened to tales of stage-coaches galloping along roads that did not exist in their heyday of the 18th century, of 17th century Civil War relics which turned out sadly to belong firmly to the 19th century and of numerous tunnels which if they all existed, would have caused parts of Purley to have sunk into the ground long ago. So, because all these tales were what is called "heresay" and could not be confirmed in any way, I have resisted including them in my History Notebook articles. However, there is one aspect of Purley's "history" that persistently refuses to lie down, and that is of the ghost, or possibly ghosts, of Purley Hall.

Although I have never seen a ghost, as a child I remember experiencing occasional unease when alone in certain very old buildings. It is possible that walls absorb sounds, so that an old building becomes "noisy", whilst a new house is silent and without any atmosphere.

It is thought that following an accidental or sudden death a spirit may occasionally remain restless and haunt a place. Since, over the centuries there must have been very many such deaths, it is perhaps

surprising that there are not more ghosts floating around. Ghosts apparently do not like bright lights and noise, so today's lifestyle would not suit them and very few are seen today.

In a book just published called "Haunted Berkshire", by Angus Macnaghten, there is a section about Purley Hall, which is said to have been haunted by the ghost of Warren HASTINGS and of a grey lady or nun. Bought by the Wilders in 1773, the house was let to a succession of tenants. Traditionally, Warren HASTINGS stayed there whilst he prepared the defence for his trial for impeachment by Parliament. The first, and perhaps the most famous of the governor generals of British India, Warren HASTINGS held the position from 1772. When he returned to England in 1785, he was accused of corruption and cruelty in his administration. The trial, which was held in Westminster Hall, commenced in Feb 1788 and continued for 7 years until April 1795 when he was acquitted. By this time he was financially crippled and in addition was forbidden to take any further public office.

On the 4th of May 1789 the Reading Mercury reported that Warren HASTINGS had taken Purley Hall as a temporary country residence until he could sort out his affairs and build himself a house, and one biography suggests that he spent a few months during the summer of 1790 at a house near Reading. Although his papers have been examined, no reference has been found so far to his stay in Purley. In the summer of 1788 he bought the ruins of his ancestral home at Daylesford, Oxford, moved in during 1791 and died there in 1818.

When Major and Mrs. BRADLEY purchased Purley Hall in 1961 they found the atmosphere oppressive and arranged for a service of exorcism to get rid of a very quarrelsome spirit, which they felt was of a recent origin. However, they apparently later saw "two charming ghosts" of a man, thought to be Warren HASTINGS and of an old lady dressed in "black panniered silk and wearing a white mob cap". There are also said to have been sittings of a "grey lady" earlier this century who is also friendly.

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