

# ***Account of Purley on Thames***

## ***The Elizabethan Embroidery***

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*An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 69 published in PPN February 1987*

### 69. The Elizabethan Embroidery From the Church

As mentioned in last month's story, Billing's Directory of Berks and Oxon of 1854 stated that "the communion table" at the church of St. Mary the Virgin at Purley was "covered with a very old and curious piece of tapestry".

A few years later local historian Emily Elizabeth Thoyts asked about this tapestry in the "Notes and Queries" section of the recently started Berks, Bucks & Oxon Archaeological Journal. In his reply the Rector of Purley, Matthew Powley said:

"The old altar covering, which now hangs in the vestry here, is a very curious and well-preserved piece of tapestry, evidently I should say, hand stitched. It is in two lengths, which have been joined in the middle lengthwise, and that one half is upside down."

He then went on to describe the subject matter as best he could. Although he does not say so, it is possible that it had been moved to the vestry during the rebuilding of the church in 1870. His successor, Rev. J.H. Dudley Matthews, considered it to be an unsuitable subject to be found in a Christian church and arranged, in 1904, for its sale to the Victoria and Albert Museum for £60.

At the Museum the two panels were separated and identified as late 16th century English embroidery. Each measured about seven feet wide by about two feet deep. They were found to be of linen canvas, embroidered in that stitch

with coloured wools and silks, with some parts raised by padding (petit point).

The subject matter of the panels is classical mythology. The first panel tells the story of Adonis and Venus represented in Elizabethan costume. There are two scenes set in a wooded landscape; on the left Adonis is beneath an apple tree attacking a wild boar with a spear and on the right he lies dead on the grass, mourned by Venus and three nymphs; in the clouds above Venus is seen again in a chariot drawn by birds. There is a winding stream, a fountain and hounds chasing the boar in the middle distance and a temple and other buildings in the background.

The second panel depicts the story of Myrrha and Cinyras from Ovid in four scenes: of Myrrha trying to hang herself in an arcade surrounded by vines, of a garden where she is led by the nurse to Cinyras bed and lastly where she is pursued by Cinyras and changed into a myrtle tree.

The Museum suggests they may have been designed for use as valances. Window curtains were rare until the 18th century so four-poster beds were often fitted with hangings to keep out draughts and daylight. My dictionary shows valances fitted on the inside of the hangings at the top, where the pictures and patterns could be seen as one lay in bed. Although no early reference has been found, it is interesting to speculate that these valances may have graced the bed of an Elizabethan parishioner of Purley and that he, or a descendant, willed them to the church, perhaps in lieu of unpaid church rates which everyone then had to pay.

When I saw these panels on display in the Museum in 1980 I was very impressed with the subtle colours of blue and beige used in the design.

They are now stored in the reserve collection and no longer on public view. The only reminder that Purley now has of this interesting antique are three black and white photographs showing small sections only. Until the extension was built these hung in the vestry at the church.

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