

Account of Purley on Thames Hyde Hall

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Today when many people own their own houses, it is hard to imagine a society where almost everyone, rich and poor, lived in rented accommodation - but that is how it was until the first part of this century when cheaper mortgages became available. Owning a large property did not necessarily mean that one could afford to live in it - it was usually leased to the highest bidder and its owner took a smaller and cheaper property elsewhere.

Hyde Hall was leased to Francis Hawes in 1718 and, when he purchased it two years later, was renamed "Purley Hall"; it was resold in 1722 to Francis' brother Thomas. By the latter half of the century they were short of money and the Hall was let to several tenants. It was sold again in 1773 to Rev Henry Wilder who continued to let it. It was during this latter period that Purley Hall had its most well-known tenant: Warren Hastings, who was awaiting his trial for impeachment with the East India Company, rented it in May 1789 as "a temporary country residence" until he could "build himself a house"; it is not clear how long he stayed there.

During the time of the Hawes' ownership, Purley Hall was let in 1767 to Harcourt Powell, Esq. an attorney. Three pieces of paper in a miscellaneous collection in the Berkshire Record Office refer to this.

The first is an Authority, dated 30 July 1767, appointing him as attorney to Robert Dalzell, Lord of the Manor of Tidmarsh, who was then living in Gisons, Normandy in France. In this capacity, Mr Powell was to prosecute Mr Roe the miller, or William Keen the blacksmith, both of Tidmarsh, or indeed any other resident of that parish, if they attempted, "without proper authority" to "steal, take, kill or destroy any fish bred, kept or preserved in any river or stream, pond, moat, stew or other waterhole" or to "hunt, shoot or fowl" on any land belonging to the Lord of the Manor ie. if anyone was caught poaching on the lord's property while he was away!

The second piece of paper is an Indictment about Charles Cannon, Harcourt Powell's "servant" probably his coachman. In it Charles was accused of speeding, eighteenth century-style, on 3 Sept 1767 when he had "negligently and carelessly" driven a post chaise drawn by two geldings from Reading to his master's house at Purley Hall. It was said that he drove with such "swiftness, fury and impetuosity" and so "whipped, lashed and spurred the said geldings" that they became "lame, sick and disordered and were greatly swilled in their bodies". One of the horses was "broken winded"* and several days later, both were still "sick and spoiled". They were valued at £40.

The third document is a Writ dated 1768 and addressed to Mr William Wilder at his house in Reading called The Black Bear. It referred to an inquiry regarding the damages in the case between Harcourt Powell Esq. and Charles Cannon, the defendant. Unfortunately no further information has yet been located as to the outcome of this case.

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*Broken-winded = A horse who is unfit for hard work because of ruptured air cells in its lungs.

