

Account of Purley on Thames

A Bit of a Tell

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This is one of a series of short articles written by Rita Denman for the Purley Parish News May 2017

Hello, it is good to be out and about in Purley and the local countryside to enjoy it in all its' spring glory. An English bluebell wood is a vision that will stay in the memory for ever.

We are very fortunate to live in such a green environment and our heritage of trees is a blessing. Many of the specimen trees in Purley remain from former large gardens and country estates. The oldest tree in Purley is probably the oak at the lower end of Long Lane. It is now just a shell but who knows how long ago it was a seedling. It is fondly remembered by children of the past who waited there for the van to transport them to school in Pangbourne. A cedar in the grounds of the old Rectory, now Lister Close, survived until 25th January 1990 when it was blown down by gale force winds. I recently read a list of 22 benefits of trees. Too long to repeat here but they are beautiful to look at, good for our well being and act as wind and noise breaks and help to clean polluted air. They are also home to many insects vital to the ecology and to birds that give us so much pleasure.

In recent years majestic chestnut and ash trees have been blighted by pests and diseases and Purley has not escaped this problem. It has been said that those who plant trees are unselfish gardeners because the results of their work is for future generations. Today we are enjoying the full beauty of landscapes designed by the celebrated gardeners of the past.

For our ancestors, wood was a vital material for building and for making tools and implements for work and in the home. Ash was preferred above all other native timbers for the handles of axes, hammers, shovels, chisels and all tools subject to sudden shocks and strains. It is also favoured for hockey sticks and oars and similar tough sports. Traditional uses included cart shafts and cart wheel rims. Hazel was used in the constructions of wattle and daub walls. The spindleberry tree draws its' name from the age old use of its' thin smooth stems for spinning. One end of the stick carried a thick hollow disc of stone or metal. These spindle whorls survive for centuries and provide evidence of human occupation. From the tree ring dating by Nottingham University we know that some of the timbers in our community barn were felled around 1540 and were recycled from a former house.

There has long been a group of willow trees at the corner of the field where the pond used to be. Phyl Rawlins was born in the village and in one of the many conversations I had with her she recalled that in her childhood a company from Oxford came regularly to take suitable wood from there to make cricket bats. We must return to the present and enjoy our beautiful countryside as it is today and make sure that we are good caretakers for future generations.

Mind how you go and I will see you again.