

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 July 2017

Hello again,

I thought that as it is such a beautiful summer day I would find you here by the river. It is very pleasant sitting in the sun and watching the boats coming through the lock. The Thames has been a transport highway since time immemorial, a source of power for the watermills and employment for fishermen and boatmen. A watermill was recorded at Mapledurham in the Domesday book and the present mill dates from the 1600s.

From early days there were disputes between millers and other river users. The boatmen wanted a clear run up and down the river and the millers wanted to dam parts to get a good head of water to drive the water wheels. These differences were eventually solved first with flash locks and then pound locks until eventually we arrive at modern technology.

The continuing tradition of Swan Upping in July brings historic pageantry into the present day and our stretch of the river has been the inspiration for writers and painters and a backdrop for films.

On a lovely evening in July 1992 Purley Parish Church held a 'songs of praise' at the river meadows and Pangbourne Silver Band accompanied the hymn singing. It was an event enjoyed by visitors to the river and residents alike.

The river is loved and feared in equal measure and as memorials in the churchyard show it has claimed the lives of young and old. In December 1914, The Rector of St. Mary's Purley Rev John Matthews had been taking evensong at Mapledurham Church. Returning across the river his boat was swept away and his body was recovered from the Thames five weeks later at Henley. The river towpath for the barge horse changed from the south side of the river to the north side at Purley and a chain ferry operated near to Tilehurst Station to take the horses across the river

In the 1920s the ferryman was working alone on the craft when he slipped into the water and drowned, his heavy boots holding him down in the river mud. He was buried in St Mary's churchyard near the eastern boundary wall although any marker has been lost.

Whatever happens, as the old song goes, "Old Father Thames keeps rolling along down to the mighty sea". I'll look out for you for another tell.