

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 March 2018

Hello again it's good to see you. The biting wind of the last few days reminded me of the old nursery rhyme. 'The north wind doth blow and we shall have snow And what will the robin do then, poor thing? He'll sit in the barn to keep himself warm And hide his head under his wing, poor thing.' The origins of this rhyme date from 16th century England. Modern standards of hygiene on farms mean that there are fewer barns where robins and owls can sit.

On a bitterly cold morning I watched the sun rising across Home Farm fields the tongues of sunlight turning the frost pink, slowly lengthening until they reached the trees setting them all aglow. It was a beautiful but fleeting moment. The sun disappeared behind the clouds and was hidden for the rest of the day.

As our modern windows are double glazed we no longer see the frost patterns on the inside of the windows and the pleasures and perils of an open fire are a distant memory. There was so much tradition and folklore connected with the fireside. I can just remember the kitchen range, the steel parts bright, the black parts shining with a good polish of Zebo and the hearth whitened with hearthstone.

I remember the noise of riddling the fire through the front bars with a poker and the continual battle with the damper and the wind in the chimney. If the wind was in the 'wrong' direction the room filled with smoke. Sometimes the wood or coal sent sparks flying out into the room and we had to be quick to stamp them out but toast never tasted as good as that toasted by an open fire and family gatherings never as cosy as those around the fireside, reading or knitting or just imagining pictures in the glowing coals.

In the past the cottages in Purley Village were thatched and with the use of candles and oil lamps fire was a constant risk. Early chimneys were built of wood which made matters worse. There are many records in Parish Churches of alms given to the victims of fire disasters. Laws were eventually passed banning wooden chimneys. There are some very handsome brick chimneys in Purley.

Daffodils are in bud and signs of new growth already showing in our gardens. The next time we meet Spring will be here.