

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 2018

Hello again,

Spring has been on hold for so long but now it has arrived we really appreciate the sun and hope that it will last for a while. Despite the hail, rain and cold of recent weeks mother nature has been performing her annual transformation and the dawn chorus is gathering strength I hope that you will be able to enjoy it.

Last time we chatted about the excellent growing conditions that we have in our area. It brought to mind another Purley resident of the more recent past. Bernard Theobald was a larger than life character well known in Purley and far beyond as a modern pioneer of wine making in the UK. When Bernard and his wife Gwen took the lease on Westbury it was a mixed farm. It has a very long history dating back to the Domesday Book with a Tudor barn and house.

In 1961 Bernard embarked on the imaginative but risky business of turning it into a vineyard. He reasoned that if the Romans could grow wine here, it could still be done and was of the opinion that Reading had a climate similar to that of Bordeaux. He was the first to follow a new planting method using well spaced high supports which he described as high wide and handsome. For thirty years the vineyard grew in success and maturity and Westbury Wine earned a place in English viticulture winning many awards. The wine tasting evenings and vineyard tours were always a delight. Set in the beautiful Thames Valley, with sheep grazing among the vines, a setting sun and a glass of home grown wine in hand, what could have been more enjoyable. Bernard Theobald became a leading member of a wine growing association, being re- elected Chairman only hours before his death.

The lease on the farm was sold in October 1992 when the vines were hanging with luscious ripe fruit. Sadly there was no harvest that year. The vineyard was not continued but became part of the colourful history of Purley. The Bernard Theobald Trophy is awarded for 'Best Red' in the English and Welsh Wine of the Year Competition.

Mind how you go and I will look out for you again for another tell.