



Account of Purley on Thames

Project Purley Meetings 2013

January 2013

no meeting due to weather

February 2013

Frost Fairs - Ian Currie

Whilst we all have our own experiences of harsh winters and memories of various snow depths it was left to our speaker Ian Currie, to enlighten us with his illustrated talk entitled “Frost Fairs and Freezes” on the Thames and the harsh winters since 1000 AD.

During the Little Ice Age which is normally dated around 1500 - 1850 AD, Northern Europe experienced much colder conditions and rivers froze more often but this was not the only factor that allowed the Thames to freeze.

The river was much broader and shallower and flowed more slowly. The medieval Old London Bridge which carried shops and houses was supported on closely spaced piers protected by timber casings causing a narrowing of the arches. In winter these would become blocked by large pieces of ice and act like a dam.

In 1434, 1506 and 1575 the ice was thick enough to allow people to drive their carts and carriages across but there was little in the way of organised entertainment. King Henry VIII was reported to have travelled from London to Greenwich by sledge in 1536.

The earliest recorded frost fair was 1564/5 when people congregated on the ice to take part in a football match, archery contests and feasting. Queen Elizabeth was known to have enjoyed target practice on the ice.

During the Great Winter of 1683/4, when the sea off the south coast was frozen up to two miles from the shore the most famous frost fair was held.

Coaches plied from Westminster to the Temple. There were stalls selling trinkets and children's toys. Hawkers sold spiced buns, gingerbread and mutton pies. There was bear or bull baiting, wrestling and horse racing to watch. Printing presses were popular selling poems and certificates recording people's names and time on the ice, and tavern booths selling mulled cider, ale and hot drinks.

London apprentices would be running and sliding, whilst others would be drawn on large sledges or boats adapted for the ice. The experts would strap animal bones to their shoes and use a staff to ski across the ice.

However the Frost Fairs weren't all fun, many people fell and broke limbs or fell through the ice and drowned and the Ice Men were there to deal with the consequences. It was a disaster for the port as ships couldn't enter the Upper Pool and there were many without work. Trade ground to a halt, coal and other goods became scarce.

In 1789 melting ice dragged a ship anchored to a riverside pub pulling the building down and five people died.

Following some unseasonable mild weather and a week long fog in 1814, the temperature dropped dramatically and by the end of January people were able to venture onto the ice. By the next day

London traders were setting out their wares, warming drinks, often alcoholic despite the lack of licence and providing a variety of amusements. They were quickly joined by nine printing presses creating Frost Fair memorabilia. A sheep was roasted and spectators were charged to look at it. People clamoured for souvenirs marked "Frost Fair 1814" and "Bought on the Thames". Even donkeys were tempted onto the ice to give rides. Spectacular at night, stars and fires sparkling under the backdrop of St Paul's Cathedral.

The thaw came quickly. A week after the river had frozen, crowds gathered to watch the passing of large ice flows and chunks of bridges. Sleet and rain ensued and within twenty four hours the ice had gone, although the cold weather lasted until the end of March

1814 proved to be the last Frost Fair. A new London Bridge was built in 1823 slightly upstream from the old bridge which was demolished eight years later. This, together with the creation of embankments, permanently changed the flow of the river. The Thames is now much deeper and flows too fast to freeze.

March 2013

15th March 2013

Annual General Meeting

The March meeting on the 15th, commenced with the Society's 31st Annual General Meeting

The Chairman reported that the past year had been dominated by the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations in Purley in which the Society had played an important part. The community came together in a wide range of activities and events and Project Purley had donated the £600 profit from the June 2011 Rain or Shine performance to the Village Jubilee Fund. £200 was also raised from the sale of bricks from the demolished railway bridges. The Society's major effort went into an exhibition which celebrated the reigns of three Queens, Elizabeth I, Victoria and Elizabeth II. It had been the first opportunity to use all our new display screens and, together with other stands which had been loaned and some which had been made for us, we were able to stage the largest exhibition in the Society's history which attracted a large number of visitors and positive comments.

Thanks went to all the members who had helped with preparing and staging the exhibits. The Society also took part in the Scarecrow competition and, later in the year, entered a decorated tree in the December Tree Festival at St.Mary's Church.

The Chairman thanked Val Jones who took over as Programme Secretary last March and had arranged a varied and stimulating programme of speakers and events. The visits to Dorchester on Thames and Stonor Park had been most enjoyable. The annual barbeque and Christmas party were great successes and thanks went to our hosts, Dorothy and Ben Viljoen and Val and Rick Jones.

Thanks went to Jean Debney. Angela Edwards and everyone who had organised and served refreshments at the meetings; David Downs who organised the two visits from the Rain or Shine Theatre Company, which together raised almost £1,000 (the amount raised for charity so far over the past few years amounts to close to £7,000); John Chapman and Ann Betts for producing the Journal and all the members of the Executive Committee for their hard work and support.

This coming year, at the request of the Rector, the Society will be carrying out a survey of St.Mary's Church Burial Ground including remapping the location of monuments, recording the monumental inscriptions and taking photographs. This is necessary as more unsafe gravestones are likely to be moved to the edge of the churchyard later this year.

In the Treasurer's absence, the Chairman reported the Society had ended 2012 in a strong financial position. The Society had received a grant of £200 from the Parish Council and "Purley in Old

Images” had brought in £701.82 against costs of £30 this year. However, we cannot expect sales of this book to continue at this level.

The Society had purchased a new projection screen, lap top speakers, new shelving for the cupboard and archive storage boxes and a gazebo for the summer barbeque. This year we have purchased a portable document and image scanner.

The cost of hiring the barn, producing the Journal and hiring speakers increased over the year and it was proposed that membership fees should be increased from £10 to £11 for single membership and from £16 to £17 for family membership with effect from January 2014. This was put to the meeting and agreed.

There being no other nominations, the Chairman, Catherine Sampson, the Treasurer, Lee Hall, and Secretary, Ann Betts were re-elected for the coming year. All the present members of the Executive Committee: John Chapman, Jean Debney, David Downs, Angela Edwards, Valerie Jones and Clive Killick were re-elected en bloc.

Ron Chudleigh was appointed Independent Examiner.

The Purley Effect - Rita Denman

After the AGM and a glass of wine we settled back in our chairs to the soothing sounds of Greensleeves being played and quintessential views of times gone by. Our speaker and member Rita Denman began to tell us how on a glorious October day in 1975, she and her husband first set eyes on Purley. It was love at first sight.

She recorded “Before the hurricanes of 1987 and 1990 there were more trees arched over the road from Ivy Cottage to Lister Close and everywhere sparrows were twittering. All was quiet in the lane; the old cottages stood basking in the sun and the shell of a new house before them.”

Some years later after research by Jean Debney it was revealed the plot showed records of connections to 1380 and history dating from the 1600s.

In the mid 1980s Rita and her husband were able to purchase half an acre of land behind The Mimosas. The grass was allowed to grow to hay and wild flowers encouraged. After nineteen years the hedge is still layered and more crab apple and fruit trees planted. The wild life is shared with the whole valley.

It wasn't only Rita who was seduced by the Purley Effect. In earlier years several artists have been drawn to live and work in this area of outstanding natural beauty. Humphrey Repton gave us a glimpse of Old Purley with his water colouring of plans for Purley Magna. Cecil Aldin was known as the sporting artist whilst Eliot Hodgkin who was born at Purley Lodge specialised in paintings from nature.

Maybe Rita's Purley Effect is still with us. The sense of continuity in the old cottages and farms, the ever changing powers of the river, the peace in the meadows are all still there.

May 2013

3rd May 2013

The Project Purley Archive

We had to cancel the January meeting of Project Purley because of the weather but, in response to many requests, we rescheduled it for May 3rd when Catherine Sampson and John Chapman told us about our growing archive. Catherine spoke on how the archive had come about and the sort of things in it. She put out onto tables a few examples of what the archive contains which was avidly

scanned by most of the members.

John spoke mainly about the way the archive is catalogued and indexed and showed some examples of the index that is posted on our website (www.project-purley.eu). He pointed out how little of what we have has been catalogued so far and appealed for some members to have a look at the boxes of donated material and do a bit of describing of items on a computer.

16th May 2013

Visit to Bletchley Park

Project Purley's summer season of outings and events kicked off on May 16th with a trip to Bletchley Park, home of the codebreakers during World War Two. After a welcoming tea and coffee in the Mansion house, our guide Dennis began our tour in hut 12 with an introduction to the park and its wartime work before taking us on a tour of the site. We learnt of the significance of the First World War in influencing the growth of more sophisticated signalling intelligence and of the development of the supposedly impenetrable Enigma deciphering and encoding machine by the Germans. Its complexity was such that the chances of someone being able to determine the critical three letters of the rota setting were 158 million, million, million to one. Settings were changed daily at midnight and as an additional precaution each part of the German military world had its own code book determining their settings.

Bletchley Park and its 55 acres of land and lake were purchased by the British Government in 1938 for the princely sum of £6,000. It was in a quiet rural location with good trains links to London and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and importantly was close to an existing signal booster site. All of this allowed Bletchley's wartime activity to remain secret from the Germans throughout the war and it was only in 1974 when Frederick Winterbotham wrote a book about its wartime achievements that its secrets were first revealed.

As war loomed the first wooden huts were built at Bletchley and communication channels established. Later as demand rose further blocks of steel, brick and concrete construction were added, enabling Bletchley to employ over 4,500 workers at its height of operations, three-quarters of them female.

In July 1939, aware that their country would soon be invaded, Polish mathematicians handed over copies of all of their work on breaking Enigma to the British and French. It proved invaluable and led to the development of the Bombe machine which considerably reduced the time it took to break the daily codes from six weeks to days. A memorial to these mathematicians now stands next to the stable block. Further machines followed although all still relied heavily on human calculation until the development of Colossus, the first electronic digital machine with programmability. Block H, home of Colossus 9, now houses the rebuilt Mark II Colossus, the product of fifteen years of labour using scraps of diagrams, old pictures and half-forgotten memories.

After lunch there was time to explore independently. Colossus has its own museum alongside the National Museum of Computing in Block H, whilst Block B contains the Bletchley Park Museum which boasts the largest collection of Enigma machines on public display in the world. Several huts have been restored including hut 8 with its reconstruction of Alan Turing's office and displays on the use of homing pigeons during the war. It is the human story that shines through most though. Familiar names such as John Tiltman, Dilly Knox, Hugh Foss and Frank Birch are at the heart of many stories, whilst nineteen year old Mavis Lever is accredited with cracking the Italian Navy Code which led within a year to the crippling of the Italian navy at the Battle of Cape Matapan. Displays to Lieutenant Tony Fason and Able Seaman Colin Grazier G.C. tell how they lost their lives retrieving the Enigma codebook from the U-boat U-559 along with NAAFI assistant Tommy Brown. And even the six year old twin daughters of works manager Mr Budd, one of only two families to

live on site, are remembered. They had their own passes to enter and leave Bletchley and despite their tender age were still required to sign the Official Secrets Act.

It was good to visit Bletchley before its £20 million restoration programme really gets underway but returning in the future seems inevitable. Thanks to Val Jones for organising such an excellent trip.

June 2013

21st June 2013

The Summer BBQ

On the evening of Friday, 21st June the Society held its annual barbecue at the home of Dorothy and Ben Viljoen in Beech Road.

Prior to the start of proceedings, some of us took a quick look at the beautiful garden Ben has created and which opens each year under the yellow book scheme.

Although the weather had been unsettled of late, we were fortunate enough to enjoy the first dry barbecue for some years. The thirty-nine members and guests soon tucked into the melon starters, followed by sausages, burgers and chicken accompanied by a wonderful selection of salads which had been supplied by our members. Then came the mouth watering desserts to round off an excellent meal.

No one appeared to want to go home and the chatter and laughter continued until the light began to fade on this, the longest day and Ben put lighted candles on each table. Eventually, before everyone began to drift away, our Chairman, Catherine Sampson, thanked our hosts for once again welcoming us to their home, the chefs (John Chapman and Ben) for serving up a beautifully cooked meal and everyone who had helped on the day.

July 2013

Visit to East Hendred

On a glorious sunny July day a large group of Project Purley members visited the village of East Hendred. We were met by our enthusiastic guide Norman who directed us up the drive of Hendred House where we were welcomed into the Great Hall by Edward Eyston.

Whilst coffee was served by Alison Eyston, Edward started to tell us about the history of the family and house - that Hendred House is the Manor House of Arches, so named after the family who owned it in the 14th century. In the 12th century it was owned by the Turbervilles, a branch of the famous Dorset family from whom the Eystons are descended and have lived in the house since the mid 15th century.

Edward explained the original fireplace in the Hall would have been in the centre of the floor, the smoke leaving by a hole in the roof and blackening the timbers. The present fine fireplace with a moulded four centre arch and panelled frieze was put in in the 15th century. The 13th century walls were wattle and daub with timber frames and two of the original windows could still be seen. He drew our attention to the high pitched Hammer-beam roof believed to be a 15th century modification.

He told us the Chapel at the South East corner of the house was authorised by Pope Alexander IV in 1256 when the manor house was built. The family members were recusants. During the Reformation when the Catholic mass was deemed a capital offence the chapel balcony was walled off and for at least a hundred and fifty years it was used as a secret chapel where mass would have been said. The

main part was disguised as a wood shed.

The family have other relics of those sad times - the drinking cup of their kinsman Sir Thomas More and the staff of Bishop John Fisher on which he leant on his way to the scaffold.

On a lighter note Edward mentioned former local residents, Roy Jenkins the politician, Charles Eyston a 17th century antiquarian and Captain George Eyston who held the world land speed record during the 1930s.

After a brief look at the garden, Norman took us to the parish church of St. Augustine dating from the 12th century. Externally the most striking feature is the perpendicular Gothic West Tower displaying the "put-log" holes where the builders had put their log scaffolding.

Inside the tower is a rare working example of a 16th century faceless clock which as well as chiming and striking, plays the Angel's Hymn every three hours. It was made in 1525 and is wound daily. The tower has a ring of six bells, the fourth peel is pre Reformation and the third is inscribed "Fear God" and was cast in 1647.

Inside, the church is home to a medieval lectern depicting a Crusader's foot standing on a dragon head. The Jacobean pulpit features carved heads of Charles 1st and Oliver Cromwell.

Much of the charm of East Hendred derives from the old and varied dwellings. There are believed to be at least ten cruck cottages - a development of the earliest and primitive method of domestic building whereby curved timbers in the roof framework extend to the ground of a medieval house, others with their thatched roofs and timbers date from the 16th and 17th centuries. The 18th century is represented by St. Amands House whose façade was added in 1716 but the interior indicates a far older origin.

As we neared the full circle of our walk we stopped outside Mr Wicken's shop and admired the splendid example of Tudor Herringbone brickwork, A property which may once have belonged to a cloth merchant.

After lunch some of us bought ice creams and relaxed on the grass, others grabbed the last bit of history and made their way to Champs Chapel Museum, originally built by the Carthusian Monks in 1453 and now houses a collection of village artefacts, pictures, documents and books.

A very big thank you to Val Jones who organised such a splendid day.

7th June 2013

The Comedy of Errors

The Rain or Shine Theatre Company made their summer visit to The Barn on Friday, June 7th to present what is probably William Shakespeare's fastest moving play, The Comedy of Errors.

Activity in The Barn began as early as 8 am when Ben Viljoen, Clive Killick and I put out the seats for the matinee performance to be watched by the girls from Kendrick School. Then Cliff and Jean Debney arrived to organise the snacks for the actors. Angela Edwards, Catherine Sampson and Lee Hall set up the drinks and refreshments tables, then the nine strong cast touched down to build their stage, scenery, sound and lighting before arranging their costumes and props.

With everything in place, the actors went through their vocal warm-up, changed into costume and awaited the arrival of the hundred strong audience from Kendrick for the 12.30 pm performance. The girls absolutely loved it, as did the dozen adults from Purley who find it more convenient to watch the afternoon rather than the evening show. The matinee finished just before 3 pm, so the girls were able to return to school by coach in good time.

Most of the actors took advantage of the time between shows to shop or just look around Pangbourne for an hour or so, before returning to The Barn for tea and to get ready for the 7.30 pm performance.

The evening audience numbered just over the hundred and, like the afternoon contingent, everyone was hugely entertained by the hectic, knockabout style of the play's interpretation.

The purists may not appreciate the appearance of characters such as Long John Silver and Tommy Cooper in a Shakespearean production, but *Rain or Shine*'s reputation is well established locally. Their performances include classical acting techniques as well as pantomime. This summer's cast included five young newcomers as well as the four regulars so their movement on and off the stage meant that, while the story of mistaken identities was difficult to follow at times, there was more than enough physicality to keep everyone's attention. The unrelenting pace of the play plus the warmth of The Barn saw the actors drinking vast quantities of water between their times on stage.

The applause at the end of the performance, plus a generous leaving collection of just over £200 showed that the audience had enjoyed what they had seen. The total profit on the day amounted to £550, and this will be shared between the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and a donation towards improving the sound system in The Barn - not that it is needed by *Rain or Shine*!

The company are on tour visiting over 70 venues, travelling this time as far north as Carlisle, until September 1st. They then have a well deserved break before rehearsing for their Christmas production, which is still to be decided. The date for their visit to The Barn is set, however, for Friday, December 6th.

I record my thanks to members of Project Purley who helped with the organisation of the performances, and also everyone who came to watch and support us. Our donations to local and national charities have now passed the £7,000 mark.

September 2013

Fairmile Revealed: the Victorian Asylum

At the September meeting Mark Stevens, the senior archivist at the Berkshire Records Office opened the doors of the old Fair Mile Hospital to reveal life in the Victorian times.

Until the late 18th century, mentally ill people in Britain were either cared for by the community, or treated in harsh conditions in prisons, workhouses, or private "madhouses". Attitudes began to change during the reign of King George III. Not only did the King suffer from periods of mental illness, but he was also the victim of physical attacks from subjects who were obviously ill. All these events were eagerly reported by the developing press. Around the same time William Tuke, a Quaker, revolutionised care for the mentally ill founding The Retreat in York. This institution was run under a programme of humane care.

In 1845 all counties were compelled to make residential provision for the treatment of the mentally ill and the Berkshire justices together with Abingdon and Reading made agreement with Oxfordshire in 1847 to use the latter's asylum at Littlemore. The agreement lasted until 1867 when Berkshire, Reading and Newbury Boroughs made a new agreement to build and share an asylum. Land was purchased in Cholsey, and Fair Mile opened in 1870. At the time, it was called the Moulsoford Asylum due to its proximity to what was then known as Moulsoford Railway Station.

The first phase was designed to accommodate 285 patients but numbers soon multiplied and the hospital was further extended. The patients were mostly "paupers", that is, their care was provided at the expense of local ratepayers. Fee-paying private patients were also admitted.

Fair Mile was almost a self-sufficient community with its own bakery, laundry, farm and gardens. The Medical Superintendent was expected to act as Senior Physician with the support of an assistant doctor and nursing staff and a wide range of auxiliary workers. The asylum also employed a chaplain and held regular services in its chapel. It had a library and offered entertainment such as

sports, music, dances and theatrical performances.

Victorian asylums were not vast prisons where people were kept locked up for their entire lives. Many patients were discharged “cured” to their friends or families and the Victorians themselves were determined to make admissions difficult. Asylum care was relatively expensive and as a result, mentally ill people, particularly the elderly, might be just as likely to endure the Spartan regime of the workhouse than be admitted to an asylum. Nevertheless, Victorian asylums tended to expand because there was a lack of effective medical treatment for mental illness and a substantial number of patients with severe learning difficulties, including children were admitted.

The Asylum’s treatment regime consisted of rest and routine. Patients were fed a nourishing diet, fresh air and exercise and kept occupied with work and entertainments. If their condition improved, they were given greater freedoms, supervised walks and outings. In keeping with the concept of the Asylum as a refuge, the Victorians also believed that admission in itself was treatment, as it would remove a patient from the causes of insanity in their day to day lives.

In 1948 Fair Mile became part of the NHS and ceased to be known as an asylum or mental hospital. This period coincided with dramatic improvements in pharmaceutical and psychological treatments for mental illness and with the modern welfare state, together with the post-war economic boom, standards of living and general health began to rise.

During the 1980s, social policy moved away from large scale residential care towards “care in the community” and Fair Mile closed in 2003.

October 2013

An Embarrassment of Riches - Berkshire Archdeaconry Depositions 1558-1620

Our speaker at the October meeting was the delightful and enthusiastic Joan Dils, a well-known local historian with many publications to her name. Joan had come to give us an insight into life of ordinary folk during the Tudor and Stuart times.

An Archdeacon is the Bishop's right hand man looking after part of his diocese. They often had legal qualifications since much of their work involved matters of church law, so helping the Bishop to administer and control his flock. Courts would be held in different towns around the archdeaconry every few weeks, often a simple table set up in front of a church altar. The Archdeacon dealt with matters such as the probate of wills, granting of licences for schoolmasters and midwives. He also judged those accused of offences against church law - non attendance at church, not owning a bible or deviations from the prescribed order of service.

Many of the offenders were reported to the court by churchwardens, sometimes as a result of questions sent to them in advance of a visit from the Archdeacon. They would include the state of the church, service books and sacred vessels and also the spiritual and moral behaviour of the incumbent and parishioners. Other cases were brought by individuals complaining of libel or unfair treatment in a will and a range of sexual misdemeanours, the latter earning the courts the name ‘bawdy courts’. The Archdeacon could order convicted offenders to do penance or as an ultimate penalty, excommunicate them. Brief summaries of the cases were recorded in abbreviated Latin. In some instances the evidence of witnesses for both parties was recorded in the form of written answers (depositions’) to written questions. The evidence is recorded in documents called ‘Deposition Books’ of which six survive for the Archdeaconry of Berkshire.

Before giving their version of events in dispute, witnesses had to provide, as proof of their fitness to appear, a brief autobiography. A typical example is Thomas Macall, aged thirty, born in Cholsey, who then worked in Dorchester and Wallingford and in 1598 was living in Sutton Courtenay, about nine miles from his birth place; or Thomas Fry of Abingdon born twenty years before but who spent three years in London. What is striking about many of these very incomplete life histories is that

many people had left their birth places, either temporarily or permanently, most moving only a short distance to take up an apprenticeship, to find work or marry. Women were just as mobile often leaving home as teenagers. The evidence the witnesses gave can be interesting but more so are the details of daily life which were the context in which they described events relevant to the case.

The rooms of Tudor and Stuart houses are familiar from wills and probate inventories. There was little privacy for anyone, few had a bed of their own, frequently referring to each other as 'bed fellows'. Formal betrothals might take place in a kitchen or garden with the poultry or pigs. Houses of craftsmen and yeomen were work places and lodgings for employees as well as homes for the master and his family. Leisure activities were simple - bowls or football on the common or a visit to an ale house, maybe just eating with friends. The everyday speech of ordinary folk; Time was not always reckoned by the clock but by activities, 'a little before milking tyme at nyght'; 'at candle tendinge time'. Distances were expressed by using familiar objects, he was just a bow shot away. A word that frequently occurs is 'cuckoo' used when a man was being cuckolded by an unfaithful wife. Instead of words some neighbours used actions such as putting up a pair of horns on a house where they suspected someone of adultery.

Much of the landscape and way of life which gave rise to these expressions and actions has long since disappeared but records such as Deposition Books allow us to recapture a small fraction of this lost world.

November 2013

The Great Train Robbery by Hugh Granger

It is fifty years since the Great Train robbery and at our November meeting, Hugh Granger came to lead us through the plans and execution of the robbery and the mistakes made.

The raid was devised over a period of months by a core team of criminal gang members. At 6.50 pm on the 7th August 1963 the travelling Post Office train set off from Glasgow to Euston Station. It was scheduled to arrive at 3.59 the following morning. There were twelve carriages with 72 Post Office staff who sorted the mail. The second carriage behind the engine carried the high value packages including used unrecorded bank notes which were due to be burned the next day.

Just after 3.00 am the driver Jack Mills stopped the train at a red signal light at 'Sears Crossing', the signal had been tampered with, covering the green light with a glove and connecting a six volt battery to power the red light. The train's second crew member tried to call the signalman from the trackside telephone only to find the cable had been cut. Returning to his cab he was overpowered and the driver struck from behind with a cosh rendering him semi-conscious. At this stage the front two carriages had been uncoupled in order to move the train to Bridego Bridge half a mile away to load their waiting ex-army truck with the stolen money.

A retired train driver had been hired but he proved unable to operate the newer type of locomotive and it was decided the wounded Mr Mills would have to move the train to the stopping point near the bridge. There they tried to move 120 sacks of money to the waiting truck by human chain. These were very much heavier than envisaged - some bursting open as they rolled down the bank. They then departed in two Landrover vehicles both with registration plate BMG757A and headed along minor roads to their hideout at Leatherslade Farm where they counted and divided the proceeds and played Monopoly using real money. Not all wore gloves.

They had been unaware that when the telephone lines had been cut, one of the rail staff had caught a goods train to Cheddington and raised the alarm. It was broadcast on the police radio within minutes 'There's been a robbery and you'll never believe it, they've stolen the train'.

Another witness had overheard instructions to the postal workers not to move for thirty minutes, this being interpreted as a thirty mile radius and half an hour away in a fast car.

After hearing a telephone call from Biggs's wife to say his brother had died and remembering the vehicles they had driven to the farm had been seen by train staff the gang realised they must leave sooner than anticipated.

Following a tip from a herdsman who used the adjacent field, police called there five days after the robbery. The farm was deserted but for the truck now painted yellow and the Landrovers. Inside were Post Office sacks, packages and bank note wrappers. There were finger prints on a ketchup bottle and of course, the Monopoly board.

Bruce Reynolds, the gang leader died this year. Charles Wilson, treasurer and organiser a possible suicide in 1994 and Brian Field, key informant who held a post robbery party at his home at local Whitchurch Hill - was killed in a car crash 1979.

December 2013

6th December 2013

Rain or Shine - The Snow Queen

Preparations for the visit of the Rain or Shine Theatre Company to the Barn on Friday December 6th began as early as 09:00 when Ben, Charles, David and I met to set out tables and chairs. Soon afterwards Angela, Catherine and Lee arrived to organise the day's refreshments before Jean and Marjorie also turned up to provide tea, coffee and biscuits for the helpers and actors.

The five strong group of actors, all of them well known to Purley audiences, pitched up at 10:30 in their battered old transit van which, as always, contained all their props, scenery, lighting, staging and costumes. They joined us to chat informally and exchange news before building the set for the afternoon and doing their vocal warm-up whilst changing into costume.

The audience for the 13:00 matinee consisted of year 3 (aged 7-8) children from Westwood Farm Junior School with their helpers, as well as a few villagers who find it more convenient to attend the afternoon performance. This winter's production did not, as in previous years have a specifically Christmas theme, but actor/director James Reynard's adaptation of the traditional fairy tale had more than enough action, movement and comedy to keep the young audience enthralled throughout.

So slick were the changes of costume, scenery and character, that, when I asked some of the children at the end of their performance how many actors there had been onstage, answers ranged from 'five' to 'eleven' - quite a compliment for a team of four plus a narrator.

The audience for the evening performance was slightly smaller than that of other occasions, perhaps a sign of the multiplicity of events that now take place at Christmastime. But those who attended were nothing other than enthusiastic. The cast delighted us all with a play that contained not as much slapstick as usual, despite passing references in James' script to Victor Meldrew, Lady Gaga and Rod Hull and his infamous Emu, as well as some lively, chatty ornithological puppets.

The attraction is in watching, in close-up, the skill of the actors. All of them are good, though James, as narrator, does not have the opportunity to display the range we have seen from him in previous roles. But that was more than compensated for by being able to observe Pippa Meekings, the youngest of the cast. She moved seamlessly between the characters of the Snow Queen, Sorceress, Princess and Robber Girl, changing not only costume but voice, posture, facial expression and emotion, almost at the flick of a switch. Even when other characters are talking, it is difficult not to watch her as she can convey such meaning with the flick of a finger or the raise of an eyebrow.

The play and its adaptation contain fun and silliness and, as in all good fairy stories, the innocent

charm of Gerda, the heroine, eventually triumphs over the elements of darkness and death. This conclusion makes for an even more enjoyable experience for the audience, who applauded the cast loudly at the curtain and who gave generously to the retiring collection.

Each visit by Rain or Shine is a win-win, grin-grin situation for all concerned. The actors are well received and feel the location is a comfortable one for them; the audience, ranging from six to eighty-six is kept entertained and amused and, perhaps most important of all, Project Purley is able once again to support a local charity. On this occasion we shall be donating £500 to Crossroads, a voluntary organisation which offers respite time and support for carers.

I record my sincere thanks to all those who made the event such a success. Rain or Shine will return to The Barn on Friday June 6th 2014 to perform Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice'.

13th December 2013

Christmas Party

On the 13th December Rick and Val Jones opened the doors of The Gatehouse to enable Project Purley members to enjoy their Christmas party.

On arrival we soon tucked into an excellent supper and, with a glass of mulled wine in our hands, we embarked on the 2013 Christmas Quiz. David Downs had set us ten cleverly arranged anagrams with a Purley connection and five Christmas carols, one of which was not quite a carol. Most of us struggled along enjoying the challenge but Nicki Woodward sailed through and was the star of the evening.

There was an unusual version of Cinderella by six of our members to which the audience generously applauded and we all wished each other a Happy Christmas.

Thank you Rick and Val for sharing your home with us.

