

Account of Purley on Thames

Allotments and Gardening

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Introduction

Until around the start of the 20th century gardening in Purley was a necessity rather than a pastime. People needed to grow vegetables and herbs in order to survive. Gradually however as transport improved agricultural produce could be purchased and gardening began to be seen more as a pastime than a necessity.

In the 1930s there was the Purley Produce Association which was in many ways the fore-runner of the Purley Horticultural Society which began life in 1969.

Allotments

In the 16th and 17th centuries gardens had been about an acre in extent but during the 19th century the land available to accompany a house was shrinking dramatically. At the turn of the century there was pressure to provide additional land and the allotment movement got underway. The first emergence of this in our area occurred in 1908 when the Rev HB Wilder rented land to Pangbourne Parish Council for use as allotments. This was between Sul Brook and Marsh Farm and was in fact in Purley parish. Rents were set at 4d a pole per annum. A pole is a plot measuring 30 by 90 feet and remains the standard unit for allotments. [1]

The initiative had been taken by the Pangbourne and District Gardeners Mutual Improvement Association which was obviously well supported as evidenced by the attendance of 80 at its annual dinner at the George Hotel in January 1908 under the presidency of Ambrose Petrocockino [1]

The inaugural meeting of the Purley Horticultural Society was at the Memorial Hall in June 1970. [2] As well as holding meetings with speakers it used to purchase supplies in bulk, to the benefit of its members. Gradually this evolved into a trading shed at the east end of the Memorial Hall car park and eventually to a permanent brick built structure with sales and storage facilities. Discounts were offered by Percy Stone's in Pangbourne but this facility lapsed when Stones got out of the gardening supplies business. Their place was taken by Englefield Nurseries through the good offices of Bob Hawkins of Westbury Lane who was employed there and also to the hardware store in Pangbourne when he later moved there.

A few years later Purley too had its allotments on land provided by the Bucknells just over the railway from Purvey's Lane. This was opened in January 1975 to be known as the Purley Parish Council Leisure Gardens. Water was laid on by a pipe crossing the railway, for which a lien had to be paid to British Rail, and stand pipes were set up at convenient points [3]. There are 38 plots but about half have been divided into half plots and in 2003 there were xx plot holders with yy plots vacant.

Rents were initially £2 but gradually they were raised to £7-50 with effect from 1/10/88 with half price for OAPs. [4] Administration has been provided by Doug Fossey who carried on after he left the Parish Council. He was replaced by John Chapman in 1992 and rents have gradually increased to £10 in 2003. While most of the plots are well cultivated a number have been left to be enveloped by weeds. Rabbits have become a serious problem and many plots nowadays are fenced with rabbit wire to keep them out.

A number of other problems have occurred over the years. One of the plots was held by a gentleman who temporarily did not have the time to tend it so he sublet it to a lady from Zimbabwe without the consent of the Parish Council. She used the plot to smoke fish which she sold in markets as far afield as Oxford. Unfortunately she was following a traditional Zimbabwean process whereby the fish was first dried in the sun, but the sun in England is not quite the same as in Zimbabwe. The matter eventually was reported to the West Berkshire food hygiene section who threatened to prosecute and the endeavour was curtailed by the Parish Council. There have also been a few cases of pilfering.

Gardening for Charity

For many years Chris Wilcox who lived on the Oxford Road used to grow bedding plants for charity. In 1985 he raised £200 of which £120 went to 'Save the Children' and £80 to St Mary's Church [5] He carried on the tradition after they moved to St James Close in Pangbourne in 1987 but the charity changed to St James Church roof.

In 2003 a number of Purley residents opened their gardens to support a local charity. Then the Berkshire Gardens Trust was formed with Ben Viljoen of Beech Road one of its leading lights and he has regularly opened his garden to the public to support the National Gardens Scheme.

A number of allotment holders take their produce to the Friday WI Market at Pangbourne Village Hall and one of the holders is in fact the secretary of the market.

