

# ***Account of Purley on Thames***

## **Project Purley**

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*Project Purley is a very active society with interests not just in Local History but all aspects of village life. We also take a keen interest in our neighbouring towns and villages. Many of our members have been active in local government at both a parish and district level both as members and participating in local plans and projects.*

### ***Local History before Project Purley***

First; a bit about Local History before Project Purley. The Victorian antiquarians began the serious work after pioneers such as Ashmole and Lyssons had travelled around the country recording what they could of local history. Much of the antiquarians work was published as articles in the Berkshire Archaeological Journal and occasionally in local newspapers. The Victoria County Histories brought much of this together but tended to focus on major estates and families. Interest waned in the early 20th century but then the Women's Institute got into the act in 1939 and published books of tales from Berkshire Villages. Seven editions were published, the latest being in 1996.

In Purley Joan Wilcox published a few items in the Parish Magazine which she edited and then the church youth group known as Pathfinders began to do more serious research but they didn't last long. When the Silver Jubilee occurred in 1977 the Parish Council organised an exhibition at the Memorial Hall and invited residents to loan photographs and other material. It was an impressive exhibition but no-one bothered to record what was on display or where it came from.

### ***Local History Classes and Articles***

Purley's first historian was Emily Thoyts, who was related to the Wilders of Purley Hall. She gathered together a good deal of information in the latter part of the 19th century. Much of this was drawn upon when the Victoria County History was written around the turn of the century.

The modern interest in Purley's history sprang from a series of local history lectures given by Mr Turner in the Memorial Hall in 1970. This resulted in a flurry of articles in Purley Parish News and an exhibition of old Purley which formed part of the Silver Jubilee celebrations of 1977. Also in the early 1970s, Mary Trembath of Pangbourne gave talks about local history, some of which touched on Purley; but she would stop talking if someone was spotted taking notes and so sadly there are no records of her talks.

There were also a number of articles published in local newspapers which included lots of information about Purley in the past. Starting in 1939 the Berkshire Federation of Women's Institutes published a series of books containing notes on local history submitted by members from the various parishes. The second edition published just after the war had but a 14 line entry for Purley. At least one of the entries in subsequent editions was by Sybil Pryor. Joan Wilcox made several contributions in the form of articles in Purley Parish News.

When the Queen's Silver Jubilee was celebrated in 1977 the Parish Council organised an exhibition and invited parishioners to loan their mementos of Purley. A remarkable collection of artefacts and photographs appeared but no record was kept and the objects were returned to their owners later. However it stimulated an interest in the history of our parish and a church youth group,

the Pathfinders, did some research.

## *Three Groups*

By the early 1980s three groups had been formed in Purley:-

To transcribe parish registers

To investigate the ground beneath the new church extension

To study and record the natural history of the area.

Jean and Cliff Debney had arrived in the parish in 1979. They were both family historians and one of Jean's first projects in 1980 was to gather together a small team to transcribe the parish registers before they were deposited at the Berkshire Record Office. This was before the popularity of home computers and the work had to be done manually and laboriously typed. Copies of the transcripts were deposited in Reading Reference Library.

John Chapman was interested in archaeology and when it was proposed to demolish the old north aisle of the church and build a new hall he tried to get Wessex Archaeology to do a proper dig; but there were no funds available to support such a project. However Sue came to talk to the people who were interested and suggested that the dig be done by locals with some help and guidance from Wessex Archaeology. The group that was formed did their excavations over the summers of 1981 and 1982 and made many interesting discoveries which threw a light on the early history of the church.

The natural history group was more informal and was led by Marvin Clarke. Participants kept diaries of what was happening in several habitats around ranging from Sulham Woods to bird life. A few articles were published in local magazines.

There was a fourth strand in that John Titterton was an expert in heraldry and had been recording heraldic displays in the area.

What we found however was that almost all the members of one group were members of another and had a considerable overlap of interest.

## *Project Purley Founded*

During late 1981 and early 1982 there were many conversations and a number of meetings of interested parties. Starting in October 1981 Jean Debney kept a diary relating to the parish registers group which recorded attendances and records at some of the meetings and on the 25th November she recorded a decision to found Project Purley and have quarterly meetings.

It was Jean Debney, leader of the family history group who pointed out that many people were members of two or three groups and wouldn't it be better if we all combined. Thus was born Project Purley – we held the inaugural meeting in the old pavilion on 4th May 1982 and 35 members signed up. The objective was agreed 'To study and document the history of Purley'

Project Purley was founded 'to research and document the history of Purley' but was deliberately not called a local history society as its scope was to cover both Purley's past and present and many topics other than 'history'. Over the next few months participants began looking into a variety of topics and had a visit to Reading University library on the 16th February looking at various documents and the court rolls. From her previous researches into family history Jean Debney was able to point people to sources of information and an amazing collection began to be assembled.

A logo was designed by Ray Herring depicting a snipe to reflect the meaning of Purley's name, ie a lea inhabited by a bittern or snipe and John Chapman produced a Chronicle of Purley noting what people had discovered in chronological order.

It was decided to launch the new society on the 4th May 1982 at a public meeting held in the pavilion at the Beech Road Recreation Ground. A leaflet and draft constitution was prepared and agreed at the meeting at which 42 people were present. Jean Debney was elected chairman. John Chapman suggested a list of 36 projects which we might like to tackle and it was agreed to meet monthly with a half yearly newsletter. We were mentioned in both the Evening Post and the Reading Chronicle of 30th April. Unfortunately we do not have a complete list of attendees but it is worth listing the names of those who had been mentioned in Jean's diary and whom we can count as founder members:-

Pam Beddoes, John Chapman, Marvin Clarke, Sylvia Conquest, Cliff Debney, Jean Debney, Alan Harmer, Pam Harmer, Marjorie Herring, Ray Herring, Margaret Hughes, Terry Hughes, Les Jamieson, Janice Jones, Rob Jones, Florrie Lector, Sandra Low, Sue Matthews, Marian McClure, Ken Mercer, Sybil Pryor, J M Rickwood, Pat Rickwood, Yvonne Rigg, Tom Robinson, Betty Shattock, Geoff Shattock, Jeannie Smart, B Solester, John Titterton, Rita Titterton,

Our members have campaigned for improved village amenities, were instrumental in getting the Barn provided as a community centre and meeting place. We have kept abreast of developments, photographing and recording changes and capturing the bits and pieces of fliers, programmes and the like which are all too easily lost but which add to the historical record. We have had a policy that if anything unique comes along we deposit it in the Berkshire Record Office and just keep a copy.

Jean Debney stimulated a great deal of interest in the village by a long series of articles in the Parish Magazine under the title 'From My History Notebook'. Other members have contributed articles to the Parish Magazine and the Berkshire Local History Association's Newsletters and Journals. We began including short articles in our Newsletter and over the years there have been many notable contributions.

### *Project Groups*

As the society got underway a number of other project groups were formed. *Maps* was organised by Cliff Debney and *Census returns* by Tom Robinson. Later *Oral History* was organised by James. Other individuals undertook their own research projects.

### *Meetings*

Before the founding meetings tended to provide an opportunity for individual researchers to tell what they had found and explorer potential new sources. After the founding meetings were held monthly from September to April with speakers. At first they were held in member's homes but soon as attendances increased

The pattern of meetings has continued since the inauguration. We have a talk on the third Friday between September and April with a Christmas social in December. We started off with meetings in member's houses and the switched to the Parish Office but as numbers swelled we had to move to the Barn. We now have over 100 members and meetings rarely have less than a 40 attendance, usually a lot more.

Our members are always helpful in serving the tea and coffee at meetings and all the little jobs which need to be done in order for things to run smoothly, like putting out and collecting chairs.

### *Visits*

The first organised group visit was to Reading University Library, closely followed by one to the Berkshire Record Office on the 8th July 1982.

The summer months are usually filled with outings which have become more and more adventur-

ous with trips to London, Salisbury and Portsmouth and walkabouts in local historic towns and villages.

## ***Social Events***

Each July we have a Barbecue which seems to have attracted the rain gods although we have had a few with glorious weather. Initially the barbecues were at Pat Deane's, then moved to Rita Denman's and latterly have been at Ben Viljoen's.

At Christmas we have a party which had been held at The Gatehouse for many years until the attendances got too large and we had to move to the Barn. There is usually a quiz and a plentiful supply of nibbles brought by the members. Initially we used to have mulled wine but that has now been largely replaced by ordinary wine.

## ***Exhibitions***

Our most notable achievements have been our exhibitions. Perhaps the highlights have been the one in October 1983 to launch the extension to the church, Then the Wilder 500 celebrations in Sulham and latterly the Diamond Jubilee celebrations at the Barn. The great thing about the exhibitions was the way lots of our members joined in to help and to make real contributions.

## ***Sub Groups***

As well as the three founding groups, others have been formed. We had the Maps Group, the Heraldry Group and the Oral History Group. We have many recordings of Purley people now long gone, but regrettably they are all on audio-tape and few have retained the equipment to play them. This is a common theme for Project Purley – technology moves on so fast these days that it is difficult to keep up. When we started we were offered the use of a computer on Richfield Avenue and were given a floppy disc to store our work. Now pretty well all our members have access to a computer, we use them to communicate, make presentations and produce publications.

## ***Newsletter and Journal***

The first Newsletter was published in July 1982 under the editorship of John Titterton and consisted of three cyclostyled A4 pages. These continued until September 1985 with just small news items and short reports of meetings. The January 1986 (issue 12) edition was word processed and adopted an A5 booklet format. We saw the start of short articles with one on Warren Hastings. In September 1987 it was announced that John had had to give up the editorship and Society Secretary Jan Jones took over temporarily to be replaced by Pat Deane. Millie Bordiss became editor in October 1993 to be replaced by Ann Betts, our current editor, in May 2002. The May 1998 edition saw a move from Word Processing to Desk Top Publishing with Ron Denman wielding the computer keys. He retired and was replaced by Ben Viljoen in January 2006. In May the title was changed to The Project Purley Journal reflecting the quality of articles now being published. John Chapman took over as designer in January 2011. Initially the Newsletter was printed by Pat Deane at home but this got to be very tedious as pages had to be pasted together in the correct sequence so that the final A5 booklet was all in the right order. One of our members Edna Bint, was part owner of the Print Room on Portman Road and offered to get it printed professionally and they have continued as our printers despite two changes of ownership and name.

## ***Publications***

As well as the newsletter we published a series of small A5 booklets to document the results of research but in 2009 we embarked on a much more adventurous project to produce a photographic record of the parish. Catherine Sampson was appointed Editor and she managed to assemble a remarkable collection of photographs into 'Purley in Old Images' This was launched by the Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire on September 17th 2010 and has been hugely successful, selling over 100 copies.

## ***The Committee***

The society has had a good series of committees over the years with all committee members making contributions. There have been three officers elected at the A.G.M. each year, ie Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer and the other responsibilities have been taken up on an ad hoc basis.

The Chairmen have been:-

1983 - 1987	Jean Debney
1987	John Titterton
1987 - 1995	Cliff Debney
1995 - 1996	Pat Deane
1996 - 2001	Ben Viljoen
2001 - 2006	Jean Debney
2006 - 2012	John Chapman
2012 - 2017	Catherine Sampson
2017 - 2018	John Chapman
2018 - date	Catherine Sampson

Other roles have been vice Chairman, Newsletter/Journal Editor, Web Master and Meetings Reporter

## ***Articles by members***

Jean Debney started her series of articles in Purley Parish News entitled '*From my History Notebook*' in June 1980. The 121st article was in December 1993.

Members have made many contributions to Purley Parish News and to our own Newsletters and Journals and e are actively trying to recover these to add to the archive

## ***Archive***

Over the years we have collected an enormous number of photographs and documents of all sorts ranging from copies of mediaeval charters to fliers for local events. We have been struggling to bring some order into our archive which is split between a physical archive of documents, display panels, magazines, tape recordings and books, with an electronic archive of photographs, images, press cuttings, articles and much more. As each former member hands over material that they have collected when they leave and present members donate material the archive has swollen so that the majority are awaiting cataloguing and overflowing the space in our cupboard at the Barn.

## ***Website***

The website was started many years ago as Project-Purley.eu and has been run mainly by John

Chapman who has attempted to set up an overall structure into which various articles can be slotted. In recent years we split it into a front end hosted by Wordpress and Gillian Wallace now looks after that with a back end run by John Chapman. We have had to change the domain name to Project-Purley.net with Britain leaving the EU. We have now come to an arrangement with the British Library who will now archive our website every six months.

## *Rain or Shine*

Another enterprise has been to sponsor visits by the Rain or Shine Theatre Company. David Downs has been the prime motivator. Initially we were entertained to 'modernised' versions of Shakespeare's plays in June but latterly they have put on a midwinter performance as well with some notable feats of acting and staging. The profits from these events have mainly gone to local charities totally well over £8000.

## *Other Societies*

As well as helping to organise and sustain Project Purley many of our members have played a significant role in other societies. John Chapman has been on the committee of both the Berkshire Local History Association and the Berkshire Archaeological Society for many years and Cliff Debney was vice president of the BLHA. Both he and Jean were active members of the Berkshire Family History Society and many of our members are passive members of several such societies. Catherine Sampson has been both Projects manager and chairman of the Family History Society.. Tom Hine was very active with the Mills Archive.

Because of these connections Project Purley has been host to workshops, AGMs and visits from several societies.