Account of Purley on Thames

Feudal and Mediaeval Farming

The Ancient Legacy

Man has inhabited the Purley area for many thousands of years. Of the ancient settlements almost nothing remains save what can be seen as crop marks at certain times of the year and implements which have been collected and which now mainly reside in Reading Museum.

There are traces of a mesolithic or neolithic settlement on the banks of the Sul Brook. One can just discern traces of hut circles and enclosures from aerial photographs of the crop marks.

That the Romans farmed the are there can be little doubt. There was a major Roman Villa in the Maidenhatch area which was discovered when the M4 motorway was built. Traces of Roman pottery have been found at many sites around and about, but so far no real evidence of Roman settlement although there is some conjecture that Purley Parva (Westbury Farm) may have been where the original Roman Farm was situated.

The area became settled in the way we know it today after the Saxon migrations of the fifth and sixth centuries. It would seem that such settlements spread out from a nucleus in Reading in the early 500s

and reached the Purley area about three generations later. Essentially the Saxons were farmers and they moved into Britain in search of land. Where they settled they maintained a central area of habitation and farmed the lands around this centre. When pressure of numbers forced some of the inhabitants to move on the tended to create a second centre to farm the next area of land. The sizes of villages were determined principally by how far a man could plough out and back in a day. For practical purposes this was about three quarters of a mile to a mile and a quarter depending upon the terrain.

Initially it was essentially a family settlement. Each family had a leader and the leadership tended to pass from father to son. Thus in time the principal line became dominant and social structures began to develop which had a marked influence upon the pattern of life. This pattern developed into what we now think of as the Feudal System as the mutual obligations which had been a feature of Saxon village life were replaced by 'fees' and extended the relationships from the village family to the king.

The intrinsic patterns were well developed long before the Normans invaded in 1066 and had a profound effect on the pattern of agriculture and employment for over a thousand years.

The Feudal Village

The feudal village had four distinct parts. There was the central area of settlement clustered around the church and the manor house. Cottages would tend to have around an acre of land which would be used to provide fruit and vegetables and a compound for the family animals and poultry. In essence each dwelling was a very small mixed farm. Secondly there was the meadowland which was jealously guarded and never allowed to be ploughed up. Third there were the surrounding areas of woodland and finally there were the great fields which produced the main crops for the village.

The essential pattern remained until well into the nineteenth century and is well shown in an estate map of 1786. So we may note the example of Purley Magna. The church was sited on a slight mound near the river with the manor house and its barns to the south. To the north of the church were a number of cottages roughly scattered on either side of the village street, each with their small parcel of land. Purley had two great fields, the West or Yonder field and the East or Common field, the meadows were adjacent to the Thames and instead of a third great field Purley was blessed with upland pasture on the slope of the hill to the south. It was also well endowed with woodland.

The economy of the village was relatively self contained. It had to produce all its own food, it had to

have its own sources of fuel, water and building materials and it had to have its own craftsmen. Itinerant merchants would bring trade goods from far afield and trade them for surplus goods from the village. Salt was a key commodity and the salt traders had had well established routes across the country. The final factor was the availability of a market and in this respect Purley was lucky being only four miles or so from Reading which was a relatively easy journey. This enhanced the opportunities for selling produce and also to acquire finished goods from the craftsmen of Reading.

When we look in more detail at the 1786 map we see the manor adjacent to the church with quite a complex of buildings as well as the main house. There were barns, pig styes, poultry sheds, cowhouses, stables and a dovecote. Most of the other dwellings in the village were much more modest although there were a few other larger houses like the the rectory which had an orchard as well as barns and stables.

Also in the village was a hop garden, used no doubt to produce the raw material for ale, there was a village green, a village pond, an area for coppicing on the side of the hill and a number of other buildings which did not form part of the central cluster.

On the slopes of the hill there were warrens where rabbits were encouraged to thrive and to produce a welcome addition to the food supply. The marshes alongside the river would be a source of reeds for thatching and mud for making bricks and for pasting over the wattles which formed the main part of most structures. The river also provided a rich source of food; fish and eels to be caught; ducks and geese who provided food and feathers as well as a good supply of eggs.

There seems to have been an ancient bridge across the river between Purley and Mapledurham and there was a road across the marsh which would have been used to carry corn to and flour from the mill at Mapledurham. It was undoubtedly also the route whereby chalk and flints from the pits on the hillside were taken down to the river to be carried on barges to other riverside towns and villages.

Of the other manors we know very little. Purley Parva also had a dovecote and Purley La Hyde had the only other mill, presumably on the present mill site on the Sul Brook by Home Farm Sulham. These other two manors seemed to have shared the same great fields and upland pastures and the great meadows in the west of the parsh were shared by all three manors as well as by Whitchurch across the river.

The Common Field System

The usual arrangement for a mediaeval village was the three field system. This involved three common fields, one would be used for crops which fixed nitrogen, one for growing grain and the other left fallow and used for grazing. The uses would be rotated from year to year. The grazing on the fallow field also allowed the animals to deposit manure an further replenish the soil.

Purley however seems only to have had two such fields. The largest was variously called the Hither, Yonder or West Field and the smaller was either called simply the Common Field or East Field. The boundary between the two was what is now Westbury Lane. It is possible however that the East field was an amalgam of the three great fields of Purley Magna and the West field an amalgam of the three ancient fields of Purley Parva. By 1786 when we have our earliest detailed map, Purley Parva had virtually disappeared as a settlement.

Within each field the land was divided up into strips. Normally these strips would go from one side of the field to another so that each strip had a fair share of good and poor land. A strip would usually

be a rod wide (5ft 3in) and a furlong in length. This area would be known as a rood. and could be ploughed with one trip out and one trip back. Usually one man's strips would be well scattered again to ensure a fair distribution of the good and the poor land.

At the time of ploughing the strips would be marked out afresh with a committee to decide upon any boundary dispute. These were frequent and often very bitter. The 1786 map however shows that

many of the strips went in different directions and did not extend the full width or length of the field, lending weight to the idea that by 1786 the existing fields were an amalgamation of earlier fields

Whether a two or three field system were in use the pattern was roughly the same. The land would be considerd as three portions which could be three full fields or one full field (fallow) and two half fields. Of the three portions of field, one was ploughed in the autumn and sown with wheat or rye, the second was ploughed in the spring and sown partly with spring wheat, barley or rye, part with vetches, peas or beans and part with rootcrops such as mangolds or turnips. The third portion would be left fallow.

The areas and the crops to be sown were determined by the village moot. The seed would be spread by broadcasting across several strips at a time and it tended to spread well beyond the intended area and harvesting could be very difficult at times. The average yields were very low, grain crops might yield perhaps ten bushels per acre from a sowing of two to two and a half bushels, thus at least a quarter of the crop had to be retained for next year's seed.

After harvesting the grain would be stored away in barns and root crops in clamps. Straw would be used for several purposes including bedding, fuel and insulation. Once the crops had been removed the animals would be turned out to graze and fertilize the ground.

Animal Husbandry

Animals formed an important part of the village economy, but very much secondary to the arable crops. In the Spring the animals would be taken up to the higher ground as soon as the weather allowed. It seems that the plateau between Purley and Theale was used for this purpose as is evidenced by a number of ancient field names. The mediaeval term 'cattle' included all cloven hoofed animals such as cows, goats and sheep so it is not always easy to distinguish one from the other in mediaeval records.

Once the females had dropped their young they would begin lactating but the milk was used mainly for the young animals at first. After the young had been weaned the best milkers would be brought back to the lower pastures where their milk could more easily be handled for drinking and for making butter and cheese.

Some of the cattle would be slaughtered for meat, the hides were either used for making leather in the case of the cows or for parchment in the case of the sheep. The horns had plenty of uses from drinking cups to decorations. The sinews provided thread and the bones could be made into needles.

After the harvest the great fields would become available for grazing and it was essential to have the animals there so that they could fertilise the ground with their dung.

Pigs were also a very important domestic animal. They could be grazed in orchards or in the beechwoods on the slopes of the hill, or they could be kept in pens adjacent to dwelling houses. Almost every part of the pig could be used. Its meat provided pork and ham, its skin was a tough material for shoes and protective clothing, its bristles made brushes and its bones and glue. the fat made lard and cooking oil and all the remaining portions from trotters to liver were considered great delicacies.

Dogs were used for hunting and scavenging and rabbits and hares were encouraged to breed as a source of fur and food.

When winter set in the animals would be brought back to the owner's house where they furnished both food and warmth. They were slaughtered for food when feeding them became a burden, or at the appropriate time, were mated ready for the spring lambing and calving.

Most of the villagers could afford to keep only one or two animals, usually females and so there was a need to provide stud animals. It was often the parson who was charged with keeping either a bull

or a boar for the use of the parish.

Meadows and Grazing Rights

The meadows were treated very much as the great fields except that they were never ploughed and grew only the one crop - hay. This was a matter of life or death for the animals for unless there was sufficient hay to enable them to be fed all through the winter some of them would have to be slaughtered unnecessarily and this could cause a severe drop in the prosperity of the village.

Each villager would have his own strips of meadow which he would mow at an appropriate time and cart away to make a haystack, which would be thatched with straw.

The right to graze either on the common grazing lands, the meadows or the great fields was a very precious right. The number of beasts you were allowed was strictly limited and depended on the size of your land holding. There were numerous disputes over grazing rights, one of which in Purley was serious enough to be considered at the Court of the Berkshire Eyre in 1248 when Roger of Hyde was given back the grazing rights on an acre of pasture alleged to have been taken away from him by the vicar named John.

As well as the great common fields and common meadows there was other land which had been enclosed at some time in the past either by an absentee landlord, as part of the desmesne land of the manor or part of the glebe lands which essentially formed the farm which sustained the parson. It was essential for the well being of these fields that animals were grazed there and it was often the case that these fields had a priority over the common fields as part of the 'customs and practices of the village. Thus as soon as the field had been harvested the owner would claim his right and villagers would have to keep their cattle on the land even though they needed the dung on their own lands.

In a late sixteenth century glebe terrier the parson's right to graze six beasts on the meadow of the common marsh was recorded in the same way as the actual land holdings. In the terrier for 1634 this was spelled out in more detail as the right to graze six kine on the marsh at commonable times and also to graze the same six cattle at and after the feast of St John the Baptist on a meadow called Loarscroft which belonged to the Lord of the Manor. It is not entirely clear whether this should be regarded as an obligation rather than a right.

Bibliography

Oxford History of England (Domesday to Magna Carta)
Glebe Terriers (transcribed by Jean Debney)

S2009 20/12/2016