

Account of Purley on Thames

Accidents and Emergencies

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Introduction

There have been many accidents over the years which have been serious enough to have been recorded. The causes and circumstances have been many and varied but for convenience they have been divided into three groups:-

Road accidents

Drownings and accidents on the river

Other accidents

Within these groups the arrangement is strictly chronological but in some cases the incident fits better into another section of this account. These will be only briefly mentioned here but are included for completeness.

Road Accidents

Elizabeth Coles - 1814

From an article in Purley Parish News, June 1983 by Jean Debney

It was on 2nd October 1814, that Elizabeth Coles with two companions was driving along the road leading to Purley. Suddenly the black mare that was drawing their gig took fright and ran away. Elizabeth leapt out of the carriage and hit the ground with such force that from 'One mortal blow and contusion on the head ' she " then and there died "

The jury at the inquest two days later brought in a verdict of accidental death, caused, they said by the black mare which was said to be owned by John Simeon Esq JP of Whitchurch and worth 30s.

The following day Elizabeth was buried and despite some weathering on her monument it is just possible to make out the inscription "Sacred to the memory of Elizabeth Coles who was accidentally killed on the 2nd of October 1814 aged 24 years. 'Watch therefore Reader'" There is also a footstone inscribed "EC 1814"

Jonathan Freeman - 1982

Douglas Shaw - 1982

Douglas Shaw aged 22 of Wintringham Way was in an accident in Overdown Road, Tilehurst at 10.30 on Sunday November.14th 1982. He collided with a Ford Escort car driven by Colin Edwards of Cholsey who was unhurt. He suffered head injuries and died shortly afterwards. (ref 7 - 15/11/82)

Accidents on the River

John Morley 1776

John Morley, a youth aged 15 and servant to Michael Blount of Mapledurham House, was drowned in the Thames near the house in August 1776. The Coroner's inquest brought in a verdict of accidental death.

George Viner 1854

From an article in Purley Parish News - May 1982 by Jean Debney

On the right hand side of the path leading to the south porch of Purley Church are the gravestones of two young people who drowned in the River Thames. It was the inscriptions on the two stones which led us to look elsewhere for more information, which was found in the back copies of the Berkshire Chronicle and Reading Mercury. "Sacred to the memory of George Viner who was accidentally drowned while bathing August 31st 1854 aged 20 years. This stone is erected by his afflicted parents as a lasting tribute of their affection to their son" George Viner was a footman with Alexander Popham Esq. a tenant at Purley Park from about 1847 to 1858. It had been a week of beautiful weather and early in the morning of 31 August, George and another servant went to bathe in the river near the church. He could swim and had almost reached the Oxford side when he appeared to be sinking and called for assistance. As his companion was a poor swimmer, he went for help, but by the time he returned from the house with the coachman George was lying in seven feet of water. At the Inquest held later that day a verdict of accidental death was recorded.

James Affleck - 1856

From an article in Purley Parish News, May 1982 by Jean Debney.

It was almost two years later that the same coroner, Rupert Clarke Esq. was called to investigate another sad case of drowning at Purley. "In memory of Francis Affleck who was accidentally drowned while bathing in the River Thames on 24th July 1856 aged 9 years."

Returning from school with a friend one Friday afternoon, Francis Affleck decided to bathe in the river near the Pound House, Mapledurham. Being only 9 years old he was probably not a very strong swimmer and almost immediately got out of his depth. Before assistance could be procured he was unfortunately drowned; as before the verdict was accidental drowning.

John Henry Dudley Matthews 1914

Kevin Tickner 1983

From The Evening Post of July 18th 1983

Kevin Tickner aged 17 of Apple Close drowned while swimming with friends near King's Meadow, Reading. Kevin was among hundreds of swimmers who flocked to the river on Saturday - one of the hottest days of the year. Police say he got into difficulties and disappeared from view. His body was found at 4.23 pm by the Caversham lock Keeper after a 30 min search. (NB the keeper, Len Overy used to be keeper at Mapledurham Lock) Regional navigation inspector (for Thames Water) Darrell Cruickshank (of Long Lane, Purley) urged swimmers to keep to swimming pools.

Terence Sawyer 1987

Terence Sawyer aged 48 of the Street, Purley and his friend Valerie Pilling of Newbury, were seriously burned when his cabin cruiser 'OK ya' exploded as the vessel floated in the middle of the stream between Scours Lane and Caversham Lock on May 25th 1987. They were taken to the Royal Berks Hospital. A police spokesman said that the couple seemed to have been looking at the engine and that explosion was caused by a leak of petrol and fumes. (ref 7 - 26/5/87)

Other Accidents

Francis Humpries - 1794

From an article in Purley Parish News July 1983 by Jean Debney.

On a Spring day in March, Ploughing was in progress and Francis Humpries was driving a team of horses. The sudden noise from a falling tree startled the horses and, in an effort to control them, Francis was thrown to the ground and the plough went over his head. Despite a fractured skull and injury to his brain he lived for five days and died on the 15th March 1794. The Coroner's Court was convened the following day. Their verdict was that Francis had died 'accidentally, casually and by

misfortune' as soon as the enquiry was completed Francis was buried in the churchyard at Purley and no stone marks his grave.

Cedar Tree - 1970

A cedar tree which formerly stood before the Old Rectory was badly burned in a demolition man's Bonfire. It was ring dated as being roughly 160 years old which could indicate it had been planted to commemorate the victory at Trafalgar. (ref 1 - Jan 1978)

The Coussens Family 1986

Valerie Coussens and her sons Nigel aged 16 and Stephen aged 13 were killed when their helicopter plunged into a field near Swalcliffe Lea near Banbury. They were on their way for a birthday treat from their home at Purley Hall to Alton Towers in Staffordshire. (ref 7 8/4/88)

Bibliography

- 1 Purley Parish News
- 8 Reading Mercury
- 7 Evening Post
- Quarter Session Records

