

Account of Purley on Thames

Watercourses

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Introduction

This section will ignore the biggest and most important water course ie the River Thames as this is dealt with in another section. It will be concerned to identify and define the many small water courses which drain Purley and which provide a damp habitat for many plants and small creatures

The Sul Brook

The Sul brook from which Sulham gets its name originates in Park Wood in Tidmarsh, quite close to the River Pang. It flows down to the Thames forming the eastern drain for the marshes at Tidmarsh and the boundary between the parishes of Sulham and Tidmarsh.

Its course was diverted in the 18th century where it enters the parish of Purley to flow alongside Sulham Lane. Its original course will be dealt with below as the Canal. In fact it is the new part of the brook which is more canalised than its old course.



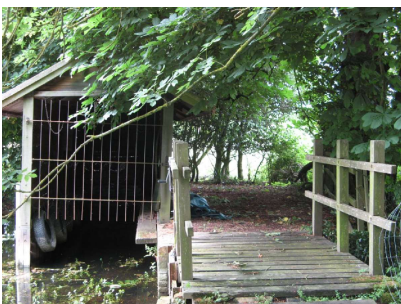
The Sul Brook passing Home Farm Cottages in the 1930s

It flows under chain arches bridge and then behind the council houses on Bourne Road to the railway bridge near the sewage farm. Beyond the bridge it separates into two parts flowing either side of Saltney Mead before joining back together again almost at the Thames. Technically however the western branch is described as a drain.

It is a reasonably fast flowing stream which is about six feet wide at the chain arches bridge and 18 inches deep. By the time it reaches the Thames it has a combined width of around twelve feet and has reached a depth of three to four feet. It would seem to gather water from the sewage station as the volume is perceptibly higher after it passes this point.

The Canal

When the grounds of Purley Hall were being remodelled in the 18th century both Sulham Lane and the Sul Brook were moved bodily westwards. Two weirs were built at the points where the stream was diverted so that the water level within Purley Hall could be kept at a constant level. The water course was widened into a series of ornamental ponds and overflow allowed to spill over the northern weir along a drain to the south of the Pangbourne to Purley Road to enter the Sul brook at the chain arches bridge.



Footbridge over the Canal

The canal is much deeper than the brook reaching four feet or more in parts and has reeded margins with plenty of water lilies in the ornamental ponds.

Westbury Stream (West Brooke)

This stream flows from a pond just to the west of Springs Farm and thence eastwards passing north of Westbury Farm and reaching the Thames just below Mapledurham Lock. It is fed by a large number of small field drains and ditches and effectively provides the surface water drain for the area north of the railway and west of the lock.

It is steep sided and runs about two feet deep and two wide for most of its length. It widens out to about five feet before it reaches the Thames.

At Westbury Farm it has connections to the two trout lakes built by Bernard Theobald in the mid 1970s but has protective screens to prevent pike entering the lakes from the river and of course to prevent the trout escaping.



Footbridge over the West Brook by Westbury Farm

Village Stream

This stream is now virtually obliterated by development. It used to originate at the village pond which was situated on the north east corner of the Mapledurham Drive and Purley Village intersection. It then flowed due east diagonally across the parcel of land which forms Primrose Close and the Council estate. Approximately in the middle was a second small pond.

It then flowed alongside the railway lines to join the Thames near where the Marina entrance now is.

Cows grazing next to the Village Pond



The Huscarle cut

Another water course which has now all but disappeared is the remains of the canal cut by Sir Thomas Huscarle in the fourteenth century. This leaves the Thames at the point where the Westbury Stream joins it. It then strikes first towards Mapledurham Drive following the hedgerow and then swings east to parallel the Thames for a short distance, finally turning southwards again towards the middle of Wintringham Way. Its course beyond there cannot be determined because of development.

For most of the time this cannot be distinguished but every year or so there is just sufficient

flooding for the stream to stand out distinctly. In later years this stream formed the centre of Purley Marsh and there was a small foot-bridge which carried the chalk road known as Marsh Lane over it. The remains of one of the supports for this bridge could still be seen as late as 1989 when vandals tore out the remaining stump.



The Huscarle Cut flowing across the River Meadaow

The Thames Gravel

One of the issues omitted by most of those concerned with flooding is that approximately two thirds of the water of the Thames Valley flows beneath the surface through the gravel. Thus our flooding problems have much more to do with rising groundwater than to the river overflowing its bank.

This subsurface waterway is fed by water flowing down from the Tilehurst plateau. It is of sufficient flow volume that when the GWR was constructed in a cutting, Brunel had to place drainage channels beneath the railway track and use a special steel for the rails as the humidity created rusting.

For many years when the River Estate was being developed this source of water was tapped by simple pumps in gardens and residents used to keep a milk bottle to hand, filled with water to prime their pump.