

## 5 The Settlement of Religion

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### **The Restoration**

Charles II came back to England in 1661 and a great sigh of relief was breathed throughout the country. The Civil War and the Commonwealth period had made the English nation tired of religious controversy and it readily accepted the new Prayer Book and the reinstatement of the Church of England as established by the Clarendon Code. Lord Clarendon was of course Edward Hyde whose first wife, Ann, is buried at Purley. The people settled down to catch up with 20 years of missed pleasures and it was not until the attempts by James II to restore Papal influence that the old passions exploded again. The seeds of suspicion which were sown by James were to remain and flower in England for another 200 years, directed mainly at Roman Catholics, although other non-conformists were not entirely free from suspicion.

Throughout the late 17th and 18th centuries the activities of dissenters and papists were a constant source of interest and anxiety. A careful record was kept and rectors had to respond to questionnaires on the subject on occasions. Many of these reports are preserved eg for 1706, 1767, 1780, 1783. By 1801 the questions had been dropped, although they did appear again in 1866 and 1869.

No other denominations established themselves in Purley, although Congregationalist, Methodist and Baptist churches were founded nearby. There was a Congregational presence in Pangbourne in 1797 when supplies were reported sent from Goring and a chapel was established there in 1815. The Congregationalists later took over the Friends Meeting House which became the United Reform Church, now demolished. There was a Methodist Church on the corner of



*The Congregational Church in Pangbourne c 1925 (P00001)*

Whitchurch Road and Thames Avenue in Pangbourne but this was sold and is now a private dwelling.

Eventually a Roman Catholic Church was also established in Pangbourne which together with Theale, Bradfield and Woolhampton was ministered to by Douai Abbey in Woolhampton in a manner very reminiscent of the Minster system of late Saxon times. Purley is included in the Parish of Tilehurst and now forms part of the Roman Catholic diocese of Portsmouth.

For Purley the years between the Restoration and the rebuilding of 1870 were unremarkable. The population of the village was very stable at around 150-200 persons and for most of the period attendances at church were good and the parish prospered. Many of the rectors were absent for much of the time and Purley was served by a succession of curates for the most part.

### **Work on the Tower**

During the period there was a fair amount of work done on the church. The roof thatch was replaced by brick tiles and the north door was blocked up. A gallery was constructed to increase the seating capacity by about 30. This work probably coincided with a rebuilding of the tower. The tower is built of chalk faced with red brick and is built in three stages. One can only speculate about what happened but it seems likely that when the tower was constructed in the early 17th century it consisted of two stages of chalk walls surmounted by an external belfry, probably similar to the one on Greyfriars Church in Reading today. Whether this accommodated three bells, as at Greyfriars, or five is problematical. Three of the bells date from around 1630 and two are slightly later.

Around 1739, a date inscribed on one of its quoins, it seems the tower had to be buttressed and faced with brick. Around 1788 a sixth bell was added and one of the earlier ones re-cast. The opportunity could have been taken to reconstruct the tower to provide an upper enclosed belfry



*The Tudor style window in the west face of the tower. It is presumed this was inserted during the 1626 rebuild. (M30622)*

*A smaller window in the second stage of the tower*



and add a final crenellated stage with five of the old gargoyles dating from the 14th century reset in non-functional positions.

### **Thomas Blagrave Senior 1662-1670**

Following the ejection of Daniel Raynor, Thomas Blagrave was inducted as rector of Purley on 16th December 1662. He was born around 1615 and educated at Merton College Oxford, taking his BA in 1634 and MA in 1636. He had been vicar of Uffington Berks since 1660. He came from the branch of the family in Chaddleworth and one of his forebears had been excommunicated in Marian times. He restarted entries in the parish registers, the earlier volumes having apparently been lost or destroyed. The registers record many collections for various charitable causes known as Briefs.

The church was visited by Elias Ashmole on 13th March 1664 and he recorded the epitaphs and inscriptions on the memorials which he published two years later. He described the east window as containing some well executed stained glass depicting Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist which had originally been given by Lord Grandison.

Thomas died in 1670 and was buried on September 14th. He was survived by three sons, Thomas, John and George and his estate was valued at £428 7s. His widow Mary lived on until 1688 in Tilehurst and was buried at Purley on 16th April.

### **Thomas Blagrave Jr 1670-1684**

On his father's death Thomas junior was instituted as rector. His wife Elizabeth gave birth to a baby son in 1681. The baby was baptised Thomas on 25th April. It died shortly afterwards and was buried on 5th May. Further children were born to Thomas and Elizabeth, John (b 21/5/82) and Thomas (b 19/9/83). When Elizabeth died she was buried in Purley April 10th 1689. The



*Three of the mediaeval gargoyles reset in the tower (M30451)*

only other incumbent's wife to have given birth is Benjamin Skinner's wife in 1773 as far as is recorded. Thomas died in 1684 and was buried on October 20th.

## **William Gostwyke 1684-1719**

William Gostwicke was appointed as Thomas's successor in 1684. He had been born around 1643, the son on the Reverend Gabriel Gostwicke MA and Mary (nee Bovey) of North Tawton in Devon. He was educated at Exeter College and Hart Hall, Oxford where he took his BA in 1664. His MA he obtained from Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge in 1669. On 22nd August 1672 he married Anne Johnson of Newbury at Winchester Cathedral. He was widowed shortly afterwards and remarried in 1678 to Jane Hawkins, a widow of Chippenham. She brought as part of the marriage settlement, a mansion house called Grant Lodge, seven cottages and numerous lands in Wiltshire.

He had been elected as Master of Reading School in 1673 on the recommendation of the Bishop of Bath and Wells and resigned the Mastership in 1687. He brought a steadying hand and strong leadership to the school which had suffered previously from power struggles and downright incompetence. It is likely that some of his old boys came to him to be married in Purley.

In 1696 William Gostwyke published a sermon that he had originally preached to a private audience of merchants in London. It was entitled 'The Christian Merchant' and showed a high level of learning and erudition. He took as his text Matthew 13 vv 45 and 46.

William's daughter Jane was married to John Stevens of Oxford on 31st August 1704. He was widowed in December when his wife, also named Jane died and was buried in the chancel. He christened his grandson Henry Stevens on 22nd October 1709. He had a second daughter Elizabeth, who had married Thomas Hatch in 1699.

In 1706 William made a return on dissenters to the bishop in which he gave a description of Purley Hall. It was owned by Francis Hyde, a reputed papist who was living at Burghfield.

An Act was passed in 1707 to discharge small livings from the obligations to pay First Fruits and Tithes. A list of livings that qualified was published by the Salisbury Diocese but as Purley was not listed, it was not exempted.

Also in 1707 there was a collection of 'Trophy Money' which yielded 13/9 from 18 contributors including Messrs St John, Lybbe and Hyde, the three lords of the manors of Purley (Purley Magna, Purley Parva and La Hyde)

In September 1707 William was sued for not keeping a bull for the use of the parish and wrote a memorandum of the affair in the parish register. It was George Blagrove of Tilehurst who launched the suit in Tidmarsh Court where he was Foreman of the Jury. He was a relative of the former rector Thomas Blagrove and was renting Mr St John's farm in Purley. The rector was ordered to be fined fifty shillings if he did not provide the bull by the 10th of May next. This had been a fairly common custom which had been related to the tithe rights of a rector, one of which entitled him to take the second best beast as his due after the death of a tenant farmer. William was however incensed and consulted Sir Constantine Phipps, an eminent counsel and Lord Chancellor of Ireland, who had been one of his pupils at Reading School. He gave as his opinion that there was no law on the subject and if it were indeed a local custom then it must be recorded in the Court Roll and had to be available to the jury every court day. This clearly had not been complied with and William called in Messrs Buckley, Attorneys of Reading who put an end to the problem by getting the conviction quashed.

There must have been something of a vendetta going on between him and the Blagrove family because in 1711, Mary Blagrove, the widow of George, tried to do him out of what he regarded as his just tithe on a second crop of clover. Clover was a relatively new crop at this time and it was not at all clear how the tithes applied as normally only one crop a year was taken from the land and hence the tithe was payable only once. When a second crop was taken was it titheable or exempt as Mary claimed. William negotiated with Mary's brother and agreement on payment was eventually reached.

The register for 1711 provided an account of the rails and walls of the churchyard. The boundary was divided up into sections, each of which was the responsibility of a particular person to maintain. The responsibility went with land tenure. The list gives a fascinating picture of land ownership and tenancy. William Humphry of Basildon did a survey of church lands in 1714 and a copy of his report was made in the parish register.

William died in 1719 and was buried in Purley on 24th October.

