



THE PURLEY BARN



The story of our barn starts with a marriage. In 1514 the daughter of the lord of the manor of Mapledurham became engaged to the son of the lord of the manor of Purley. Elizabeth Blount was the bride to be and Nicholas St John the groom to be. Both were part of the energetic and fun loving court of the young Henry VIII. When they married they came to live in Purley at the ancient manor house which stood somewhere to the south of the church almost opposite the ancient Mapledurham House. During the coming century both these houses would be rebuilt. The details of Mapledurham House are well documented and the new design, built in 1588 is essentially what is there today. Nicholas died in 1589, still living in Purley as far as we can ascertain. Of the 'new' 16th century Purley Manor House we know next to nothing.

It was only when our ancient barn was being demolished that some clues began to emerge and even then it is much more speculation than well documented fact. What do we know of the barn? – well, we know that in 1793 it was standing just beyond the south wall of the churchyard and roughly parallel to it. A similar building also appears on an earlier map dated 1746. In 1741 we hear of a new brick house built by Edward Sherwood in Purley and there is a reasonable assumption that this house replaced the 16th century manor house. When Nottingham University came to do ring dating on the timbers of our barn they found two distinct groups. The main beams were all from timber felled around 1730/1 and most of the secondary beams were from timber felled around 1540. These latter beams all bear the signs that they were originally part of an older building and what more natural than when a timber framed house is demolished, the timbers should be put to good use. There is also little doubt that the timbers came from a high class building as witnessed by the quality of the finishing and jointing. So we make the reasonable assumption that the ancient manor house was replaced by a Tudor style timber framed house around 1540, that this in its turn was replaced by a brick house in 1741 and the timbers reused in our barn.

Now we move to well documented history. The brick house was replaced in its turn by the present Purley Park and the barn was moved to its second site at Belleisle Farm around 1800. Here it remained; first in use as a farm building until around 1904, then as stabling for the South Berkshire Hunt until 1950 when Trenthams bought the site and used it for a workshop and store.

Between 1985 and 1994 there were great debates as to the future of the Barn. Various plans were submitted for its conversion into three or four dwellings, total demolition and conversion to community facilities in situ. However, all these came to naught as the developer went broke and the site was bought by Bryant Homes.

The final move to the Recreation Ground was due the generosity of Bryant Homes who had it restored and made available for community use. The restoration was done by Ovary Construction who are specialists in this field. The barn was stripped to a skeleton so it could be examined in great detail, including a tree ring dating exercise by Nottingham University on the 31st January 1995. This confirmed the dating of one group of timbers to the 1540s and another group to the 1730s. The former group can be readily identified as the joints used for the manor house can be clearly seen.

The tiles were first removed and stored in a portable steel shed but even so many were broken and a large quantity of second hand tiles had to be obtained from other sources. As the barn was dismantled frame by frame, the timbers were cleaned and treated and then it was re-erected on its new site.

There was a sod cutting ceremony on Jan. 9th 1995 attended by members of the Parish Council and the Scouts and work began immediately to prepare the new site. Foundations had to be dug and a new trench cut so that power cables could go underground instead of overhead and via a pole right where the barn is to go

As far as possible all the old timbers were resited in their original positions but a number of new baulks of Suffolk oak had to be obtained to replace sills which had rotted away and softwood timbers which Trenthams had used in their repairs. Also the Building Control people insisted that the joints were all reinforced with iron bars. New cladding and windows were provided along with some new fire-exits and there was a dividing partition built to split the 8-bay structure into 5-bay and 3-bay sections. In the aisle part some small offices were built and gents, ladies and disabled toilets plus a small kitchen provided.

The new Barn was officially opened on the 24th June 1995 with a major exhibition put on by Project Purley. For the next few years the 3 bay section was used intensively by the scouts and youth club with the 5 bay section almost unused. However gradually over the years usage of the barn has increased and for the first time last year showed a small profit. The maintenance and insurance costs are very high but we are now hopeful that it will pay its way in the future.

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(This article was originally published in the Project Purley Newsletter of September 2005)