Account of Purley on Thames

My Purley Grandparents by Tom Farmer

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My mother's parents, Charles and Mary Ann Heath, came to live in Purley towards the end of the last century. They live first in a thatched cottage opposite the present shops in Purley Rise but soon moved to a semi-detached cottage in the Street which at one time with its neighbour looked as though it was going to derelict but have both been well restored and turned into one cottage.

They came from the small village of Brightwalton on the Berkshire downs about half way between Newbury and Wantage, also a semi-detached cottage called the "pit" built into a disused chalk pit, a typical two up and two down, like their new home. Grandad was a farm labourer and Gran had been in service like so many couples in the country at that time.

In that cottage they had eight children - Florence (my mother), Thomas, Arthur, Charles, Alice, Andrew, Sarah and william, although my mother was out at work when the last was born. As far as I know they had all left home when they came to Purley, Grandad to work in the same job for Mr Saunders whose farm was at the bottom of New Hill.

My parents kept a small general shop in West Reading and, when as a small child my mother said my grandmother was coming to see us, I thought she meant my father's mother (who was widowed and lived with us for a part of the year). She laughed and said "No it's my mother".

I suppose she must have called befre but that was the first time I knew I had another grandmother. She was a small person not more than 5 feet tall, dressed in a long dark coloured dress and cape with a bonnet held under the chin with a satin ribbon in a bow, fitted over her hair with a bun at the back. What fascinated me was her shopping basket which was oblong and had a hinged lid with a handle on the top and held in place when closed with a skewer through two eyelets.

She must have walked from Purley as there was no public transport in those days. She also visited by Uncle William in Albany Road and had a meal at her other son's house (Andrew) in Beecham Road. County people were used to walking in those days and my mother had told me that when they lived at Brightwalton they would walk to Newbury and back, about twenty miles.

It was when I was still small that mother announced she and I were going to Purley to stay at Gran's for a few days which meant travelling down there in the carrier's cart. Mr Smith the carrier, lived nearly opposite the barracks in Oxford Road and it was a fine day when we waited at his house for him after he had collected the goods ordered by his customers. I was lifted up to sit between him and my mother on the blanket-covered seat right behind the horse and off we went.

Once past the Pulsometer Works, the road wound between fields which stretched up to Tilehurst on one side and to the railway on the other until we came to the houses just past Tilehurst Station where Mr Smith started making his calls. His last call was at the Roebuck which was a little longer and when he got up on to the seat he brought a new scent to the smell of horse.

When we got to New Hill he got down and fitted two skid to the back wheels, got back up and holding the reins taughtly we descended the hill, the horse carefully testing every step forward as it took the weight of the cart. I held on tightly to my mother as I had never seen such a long steep hill.

The surface was rough, pitted and scarred except over the railway bridge which was rolled flint. At the top of the hill in the right hand corner was a large sign which said "TO CYCLISTS THIS HILL IS DANGEROUS" and that sign was there for years

On the right going down the hill was a thorn hedge and behind it the beech wood which in the Spring, on the ground beneath spattered like snowflakes were wood anemones in profusion. Just before the railway was a wide gate and an estate drive through the wood. On the left was a field of rough tussocky grass with wild bushes in places and I don't think that field was used by any farm animals for grazing.

At the bottom of the hill were cross roads, straight ahead was the track to the river as it is now and on the right was the gravelled Park Drive leading to the Church with an iron gate, usually kept closed and a small gate for people on foot.

Turning into The Street was was Mr Saunder's farmyard with barn and milking sheds and next an open fronted barn housing carts and various farm machines with shafts ready to be taken on to the road and in corners, chains, plough shares and such like implements used on the farm. After the Old Rectory Drive we came to our destination, the first cottage on the right and Gran was waiting for us outside to greet us with a kiss which was always a real smacker.

We went down the cobbled path and through the covered porch, which had a bench seat, into the living room which also served as a a kitchen. The other room downstairs was a scullery entered under an archway in the corner of the first room down a step and up a step through the back door. Two bedrooms were reached through stairs in the living room with a door at the bottom of the stairs and next to that door was a pantry with a similar door. The uneven brick floor was covered with pieces of linoleum and in front of the fireplace was a rag rug.

The fire was a range with an open top and an oven on one side and I should imagine the chimney went straight up. On that fire Gran had to do all the cooking, so that mostly the vegetables had to go in one pot. It is hard to think of a more inefficient method of heating and must have cost a lot for fuel. Against the wall opposite the fireplace was a chiffonier and above it a wall clock which I think Grandad thought was rather special. Over the years always when the hands were approaching eight in the morning, he would be watching it and on the hour he would rise and wind it up. Next to the chiffonier in the corner was a horse hair easy chair with a slippery covered surface, and under the diamond paned window was a gate-legged table flanked with two kitchen chairs. Next to the fireplace was Grandad's wooden armchair and at the well scrubbed table were two more chairs like those under the window.

In the scullery was a copper and a stone sink and water had to be brought in from a pump outside the back door, which had to be encouraged to work sometimes with a jug of water poured into the top.

At the back of the house was the fuel store shed and, of course, at the bottom of the garden was the brick built double lavatory which was shared with their neighbours the Clarkes. It was a disgusting place, as all earth closets were. The only sanitary arrangement was a covering of soil and ashes which Grandad had to dig out and bury. Inside was a string of cut-up newspaper hanging on nail and what with the flies and spider I would have hated to have gone down there late night.

The garden which was also shared between the two families went all around the house. Mostly vegetables were grown but under the window next to the porch was a flower bed and, in the summer, there were madonna lilies and the old fashioned purple double stocks from which Grandad saved his seeds and always got a good proportion of doubles.

Grandad came in for his midday dinner as it was so near to the farm. He was a tall heavily built man with a fringe of whiskers round his face and he still wore the smock-frock of the farm labourer,

as was usual in those days.

We sat down to the meal and I cant' say I enjoyed it as I was used to my mother's cooking, for she had been in service as a cook and finished up as cook at Basildon Park, so that although our meals were plain they were well cooked in our home. Here the crockery had been much used and the knives and forks had wooden handles, the prongs of the forks uneven and bent and the steel knives, which I was not allowed to use, had been sharpened and cleaned on a knife board many times over the years.

After tea in the evening Gran covered the table with a cloth and in the winter an oil lamp would be placed on it and lit. we went to bed early for Grandad had to be at the farm next morning before the other workers to feed and harness the horses ready for the day's work.

Mother helped me to undress. I said my prayers and was helped into a feather filled softness. Soon I heard Gran and Grandad come upstairs and was just droppong off to sleep when I heard them talking one against the other. "Mother" I whispered, "what are they doing?" "Hush" she replied, "go to sleep, they're saying their prayers"

It seemed only a moment had gone when I was awakened and it was morning and time for me to have my hands and face washed in rainwater poured into the basin on the wash stand. When we got downstairs for breakfast, Grandad had gone to work and later, after our meal, we began our walks.

First was down to the river and Mapledurham Lock, so along the road past the pond to the track which skirted Purley Park for a while and then a gate opened to a field by the river. Across the field we came to a long hollow, quite shallow, but evidently filled with water in the winter when the river was high, so planks resting on tree stumps made a dry crossing. Now of course, it was a perfectly dry field but I still had to run across the planks several times.

The sound of water rushing over the weir at the clappers could now be heard and what a sight it was to me to see that stretch of turbulent water pouring into the placid Thames! I was further to be amazed at the lock itself. Small boats right down in the depths and steam launches with their funnels level with the top of the walls of the lock and, as the lock keeper tirned the large wheels on the lock gates, the boats began to rise to the level of the river. Then the keeper and his mate put their strength to the great beams of wood connected to the gates and they slowly opened. Nowadays they are worked by electricity and one man can work both gates. In those days the lock keeper's house was on the other side of the lock and the river traffic was much greater.

What I especially liked was when there was a toot and round the bend came a paddle steamer filled with passengers, slowing for the lock, and how the keeper packed the smaller boats around the giant. All sorts of boats used the river - punts, rowing, sailing, launches - and the gentlemen wore theit straw hats and blazers and the ladies their pretty dresses and carried parasols - no bathing costumes in sight - that would be shocking!

Another favourite walk was up to the railway bridge in New Hill and on to the main road, then down Purley Hill over that bridge, which was not so interesting as the parapet was too high. On the first one I would be lifted up to watch for the express trains coming from the West You could see the signals by the other bridge and, when an arm dropped and the green light showed, you hoped it was not a slow or a goods train, of which there were plenty. There seemed a movement in the air before the express came into view under the distant bridge, it covered the track with a roar and, as it passed beneath us, we were enveloped in a fog of steam which cleared in seconds as we rushed to the other side of the bridge in time to see the last carriages and the guard's van, which was rather an anti-climax.

At Lower Basildon (where my other grandmother and uncle lived) between the railway tracks for several hundred yards were tanks of water and, as an express train tore along, it picked up the water for its boiler, sending waves each side. By the time it got to Purley, the fireman had got up a good

head of steam to take it on the final stages of its journey to Reading and London. It was especially spectacular at night with the fire doors of the engine open and in the red glow of the fire you could see the driver and the fireman who was shovelling on the coal, and the lighted carriages drawn along behind made an unforgettable sight.

Another day Gran said she must go to the post office. At the top of Purley Hill on the road to Pangbourne just past the Kennels of the Hunt were a few thatched cottages. One of these was the post office, nearly opposite the present one. If I thought that inside it was going to be like those in Reading where they sold sweets and papers and other interesting things, I was disappointed, for inside it was gloomy and what stock there was, as far as I can remember, odds and ends of stationery and such like.

One of these cottages was burnt down some years later, but which one I don't know. Back along the road to Long Lane and on the left hand corner was the smithy, always a magnet for the passer-by and up a few hundred yards the entrance to Mempsies nurseries, the employer of a good many men in the district. We walked along the lane which really was a lane winding and lined with hedges and elm trees, perhaps as far as where I live today, and then it was time to turn back to home.

Sunday came and it was time for Church. Before breakfast Grandad had to go along to the farm to see to the horses and later he, mother and I set off - Gran usually went to morning service but as we were there she stayed at home to cook a Sunday dinner. the weather was dry and warm, which was just as well for, after heavy rain, the road past the farmyard became thick with mud and muck where the cows made for the pond after milking and then hung about with tails swishing at the flies until it was time to go back to the meadows. People tried to find stepping places and there was much wiping of feet on the grass in the drive.

On the right was a field up to the railway in which at springtime cowslips flowered in abundance and they were much prized for making wine. As we approached the church I said to Grandad "Where are the bells?" He replied as far as he knew there had never been any bells, which surprised me as I thought all churches had them to call people in. As we entered the church and took our seat in the pew, how dim it was and cool after the bright warm day outside! Even the trains passing nearby could hardly be heard during the simple morning service.

The next time I went to Purley the Great War was waging and this time my father, mother, sister and I went by train to Tilehurst station. When we got out there I remember asking why we could not go on to Purley. I was told the next stop was Pangbourne and I realised to my dismay that we had quite a walk before us. It was when we got to the high flint wall just past the Roebuck and saw its length that I started grizzling, but there was no going back and I had to make the best of it. Just past the lodge which was on the opposite side of the road, I was shown the mouth of the tunnel under the road which led off one part of the Purley estate to the other. It was only when we reached the top of New Hill that I cheered up for now it was downhill and a short walk to Gran's house.

Staying at her parent's home with her little daughter, May, was my Aunt Clara (as we knew her, not Sarah). They lived at Shepherds Bush in London and she had lost her husband in France at the beginning of the war - killed in action.

Now the German Zeppelin raids were on and they had come to Purley to escape the bombs. May joined the school in Purley.

Whilst the grown-ups were talking indoors, we three children were in the garden making friends with the two Clarke children next door and soon playing games and racing around the narrow grass paths between the gardens.

After tea Uncle Mark produced some baskets and said "Let's see if we can find some mushrooms." Although it was harvest time there was no work going on in the fields as Sunday was regarded as a

day of rest. We walked along a footpath until we came to a field of old pasture and I had never seen so many mushrooms. In no time we had filled the basket. I suppose in those days they were so common that people did not trouble to pick them. When we came back from our walk with the mushrooms a service in the chapel just up the road from the cottage had started. It was full to the doors and the lusty singing of the hymns could be heard plainly in the garden.

Then it was time to return to Purley and, after many kisses and handshakes, we got back into the car with some gifts from the garden and the mushrooms and a last look back as we drove down the road. Once more we passed 'The Pit' and Gran and Grandada, Mother and Uncle took one more look at their old home. I have been to Brightwalton many times since then but that one still stands out in my memory.

Years later 'The Pit' became empty and the farmer who owned it used it as a store for hay and fertilizer etc. By a strange coincidence at the time the cottage Gran and Grandad had shared at Purley was being converted into one house, their old home at Brightwalton was also being turned into a very modern house by a family from Pangbourne.

It must have been in the early 1920s when the Thames Valley Bus Company was formed and a service from Reading to Wallingford was started. They were solid tyred buses and, what with the poorly surfaced roads, it was an uncomfortable ride, but it was now possible to get to Purley without relying o the carrier, so that sons and daughters could visit their parents more often. Uncle Charlie and Tom came from London with their families and sometimes we would meet them there. They both worked for United Dairies and Alice, who was a cook in domestic service, was an asthmatic and later moved to Weston-Super-Mare for her health. Arthur I never knew - he drove horse buses in London and died quite young and was buried at Purley. Andrew worked at Simmonds the brewers, as it was then, later Courage, and William, the youngest, was at Baylis the grocer after serving in the Great War in Mesopotamia. The bus service started about the same time as I got my first bike, so I was often able to visit my two Gannies at Purley and Basildon.

After the visit to Brightwalton, I had got the liking for mushrooming and I asked "Gran are there any fields at Purley that have got mushrooms in them?" "There's one on the way to the lock but the village boys would be up early after them", she replied. Still I often went on the off-chance and, occasionally, was lucky and with not much hope of finding any took nothing to put them in, so off came my cap and then back to Gran's for a bag. Once I was out there searching the field when a black bird circled around and started dive-bombing me (as I thought) I flapped my cap at it and dodged about and was scared it was going for my eyes. At last it flew off and I went back to Gran's and told her what had happened. She laughed "That was a tame jackdaw and it belongs to one of the village boys - it was only trying to be friendly", and I felt a bit of a fool.

Sometimes I went into the Park but Gran seemed uneasy about that, saying the Keeper might turn me out, which I thought rather odd as it was quite open from the river. There was no hope of finding any mushrooms there, as the grass was thick and lush and splendid feed for the cattle. What was there, however, was a variety of trees, well spaced, fully grown and in their magnificent prime; Elm, Beech, Oak but especially two walnut trees with boughs extending towards the ground providing shelter for the cows. I could pick green walnuts for pickling and I was not the only one who searched the grass when they were ripe and fell.

It was seldom when I went to Purley that I was not offered a piece of Gran's dripping cake. Baking in that old oven was a chancy affair for sometimes it got burnt or was a bit heavy. Gran always used the old large raisins which had to be stoned and, when the cake turned out well, the crust had a marvellous flavour. She also made country-style wines such as parsnip, elderberry, rhubarb and cowslip. It would be difficult to make the latter today. Imagine picking baskets of the flowers and then taking just the petals only to make the wine.

In 1924 my father died and I left school to help my mother run the shop. Every month he used to cycle to Pangbourne on business, calling at Purley with an order for groceries for Gran and an ounce of tobacco for Grandad as an extra.

It was a little earlier than this that Grandad became too old to carry on at the farm. He suffered the usual painful complaint of the farm labourer in those days od rheumatism, and it got so bad that he moved about with great difficulty. The Parish Council gave him a job as a roadman, trimming the verges and filling pot-holes and suchlike, but it did not last long and now he sat most of the day in his armchair, even tending his garden was almost too much. His horse brasses, the insignia of his position in the farming world, hung on the cupboard door, his only memento of his working life. He could not read or write - Gran could do both enough to understand and make herself understood. Of course she was showing signs of age; she had always had slight tremors of the lips and shaking of the head, but this was becoming more marked and her hands were unsteady, so that placing anything down was apt to be with a bump.

Now what they feared when Grandad lost his job on the farm happened - the farmer gave them notice to quit. Of course, it was a tied cottage and Mr Saunders wanted it for another worker, and Gran was worried to death. "Us'll finish up at Bradfield" she cried (she meant the workhouse there) and Grandad looked grim. I don't think it would have come to that for Uncle Andrew would have found room for them, but it would have meant selling up their home. In the end a compromise was found; they agreed to take in a lodger - a tractor driver at the farm. Mr Brown was a young man whose home was at Thatcham and every Saturday afternoon he cycled there and came back Sunday evening.

Calling there every month I began to realise what an uncomfortable house it was, especially in winter. If the wind was coming the 'wrong way', smoke billowed out into the room making your eyes smart. I don't know how Grandad stuck it sitting in his chair near the fire. Also some years the Thames would flood and the water would come up to the gardens and, one year, it actually came into the scullery. Another hazard was rats - I was told they got into the Clarke's next door and stole food, although it did not happen to the grandparents.

One day on my way back from Pangbourne, I got to the cottage and Gran was coming along the road with the old pram, which must have been used for many children, loaded up with wood she had collected in the park. In the winter the fire must have devoured coal and any free fuel helped keep the bill down. How often she collected wood I don't know, but it must have been very heavy work.

The field next door to the cottage was the village sports ground, if you could call it that. there was only one goal made of two upright branches of trees, forked at the top and another branch lodged across them, so it was just a kick-about (when the lads got a ball) As there were two horses in the field and plenty of nettles along the sides, conditions could have been better.

It must have been a great pleasure to Grandad to see the horses in the field, for he had worked with them for years. The few steps to the fence were all he could manage now and they would come up to him to be petted and given some tidbits and Gran would say "There's your Grandad out there giving those horses some of my carrots" One day Uncle Bill was visiting his parents and he, Grandad and I were at the fence and Uncle was giving one of the horses pieces of apple. He said to me, "Here, give him a piece", so rather timidly I offered the great shire horse, between my fingers, the apple. "Not like that", Uncle said "He'll have your thumb off - in the palm of your hand", and I was surprised how delicately the great beast took the morsel.

One thing I could not get used to was Grandad's broad dialect. He spoke in a deep mumble and I could not understand half of what he said. If Gran was there she would interpret but he must have thought me a bit dim. Once I forgot his ounce of tobacco and I saw the look of disappointment on his face. I never forgot again.

Sometimes when I was going home from Purley the cows were coming out of the farm gate from the milking shed (milking parlours had not yet been thought of) and I had to wait until the herdsman came out to drive them back to their meadow. The herd was very different to the black and white friesians which are so common today. They were a mixture of all sorts and sizes with fearsome horns and I did not fancy picking my way through them. Some were drinking at the pond and others, steaming and tails swinging pushing one another around until the cowman came out and gave the peculiar cry which the cows all seem to understand. The boss cow gave an answering bellow, as much to say "Back to works girls" and they all moved steadily and slowly down the track to the field.

Another time I had nearly reached the farm when out came six geese making for the pond. They spotted me and up came their necks and they started honking then making for me and looking as though they were going to attack. I retreated back to the cottage where Gran was watching with some amusement. "You take a stick with you" she said. "They will soon get out of the way". But I preferred to go the longer way up Purley Hill - I was no country lad!

The next year I became the proud owner of a motor cycle and sidecar and I was able to take mother to see her parents more often, also my other Gran at Lower Basildon.

My sister, Elsie, became engaged and she and her new fiancé went on their bikes to Purley to introduce Arthur to the Grandparents. Out came the wine bottle to drink a toast to the young couple but it wasn't a wine glass Gran handed Arthur but a tumbler. When Elsie saw the expression on his face she said "Steady on Gran, I'll share that with him or else he won't be able to get on his bike." I knew how powerful that wine was and I would sooner pour it into my petrol tank than down my throat.

A freak of nature which we no longer see was the swarms of mayflies along the valley in May. In a much smaller area it was like, in comparison, a plague of locusts in Africa. As cars travelled along Oxford Road, the windscreens would be covered with the dead insects and I would arrive at Purley with my motoring coat smothered with them, having stopped several times to clean my goggles. I don't know why this phenomenon is no longer seen, unless it is due to pollution, spraying or improvements to the Thames.

As time went on Grandad became weaker and he could not even walk to the fence to pet the shire horses. He sat in his armchair by the fire and smoked when he had enough tobacco and I am afriad Gran got irritated at times when he got in her way. At last he became too ill to get up and soon Gran was getting worn out going up and down stairs and having little rest at night seeing to his needs. Finally he needed night nursing so Mr Brown moved out and Gran had his room to sleep in while members of the family and neighbours kept watch at night. People were very good and brought little delicacies for him. I had to smile one day when we called. Gran said with a sniff "Rector's daughter brought a bowl of soup over, said it was clear soup - more like hot water with a few tatties in it" It was not Gran's idea of soup.

I do not know the exact date when Grandad died. On the gravestone in Purley churchyard the moss has eaten away most of the date and only 1928 can be seen. At the family gathering after the funeral, Uncle Andrew offered Gran a home and as she knew she could not go on living at the cottage, she accepted.

The clearance of the furniture, etc. came soon after. Their children were given the choice of anything they fancied except Grandad's most cherished possession, the horse brasses, which Gran gave to Mr Hodgkin of Purley Lodge, the head of the Pulsometer Works in Reading. He had been very good to them and used to sit and chat with Grandad and no doubt there was more than tobacco handed over when he called.

It was when Gran was moving to Uncle Andrew's that the "invasion" of Purley Park began and the first casualties were the felling of of the great trees. Anything that people could live in and make a

home moved on to the sites in the Park for there were very few planning restrictions in those days. Sectional wooden buildings, old buses, and I seem to remember railway carriages, all with a length of garden, became the new Purley and it took many years for the modern houses to replace some of the less weather-proof structures. One thing is sure, there would have been no more collecting wood from the Park for Gran's fire.

She lived for another five years at Beecham Road, Reading, but with her departure from Purley I lost touch with the village and its surroundings but I still remember it as it was and can only marvel at the changes that have taken place over the years.

New houses have been built, the old cottages modernised, new estates cover the fields and what were once woods. A procession of cars travel to and from the main road via the two hills and there is a bus service. The church has been enlarged and, with the Memorial Hall, provides meeting places for the residents. Two new schools nearby cater for the children and a sports ground for the athletic is another amenity for the district.

I for one would not like to go back to the times of my Grandparents, the cold and damp, the poor food and clothing, low wages and little prospect of a rise in the standard of living. Also, always the threat of flooding from the Thames.

Yet we are realising some things have been lost. We town children had little restriction on playtime. Street games which we so much enjoyed would be impossible today owing to the traffic and parked cars. Every year had its seasons - it would be time for "primrosing" and "bluebelling" and "blackberrying" and off we would go, sometimes with a packet of jam sandwiches and a bottle of drink and when we came home with our booty, tired but happy, the welcome back was only spoilt if we had dirtied or torn our clothes. When I was older I would go for miles on my bike by myself or with a pal out into the country exploring the roads and our parents never seemed to be worried where we went.

Compared to my boyhood, what I miss most besides the different wild flowers, are the butterflies both in numbers and variety, especially the small blue. We are lucky to live on this side of Reading, for we have some lovely countryside next to us still fairly unspoilt - long may it remain so.

Postscript - A note from Phil Rawlins (nee Leath)

> Tom Farmer, I also lived in Purley village all my life until three years ago. Yes I remember your grandmother well. She walked from Purley to Pangbourne every Monday to pay the women's of Purley club money into the Pangbourne branch. Also Mr Hodgkin, owner of the Pulsometer, called in to see both your grandparents on his way home from church each Sunday.