

Account of Purley on Thames

Memories of Old Purley Park Estate

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By Richard Walmesley.

I visited your history site some time ago and did say I would list all the things I remembered about living there from the late 1950's onwards. I left Purley in 1978 and only ever returned once for a brief visit in 1997. It has taken me a while to put these memories down on paper due to other commitments and the lack of free time, but I hope this will be of use to you.

The best thing I think is to start at the top of New Hill. On the left and right were wooded areas down to near the railway bridge. On the right just before the bridge was a driveway up to the large mansion house, which at that time was as a home for men with mental health problems. Almost opposite that driveway was a bungalow.

Crossing over the railway bridge there was a gravel driveway on the left to Mr Bucknell's house (the local dairy farmer). On the right was a steep bank into more woods. I do remember this was a favourite spot for people to dump old cars, and if I remember right the wrecks were never removed before they filled the area with rocks and earth prior to building on that land (this would now be Primrose Close).

At the bottom of New Hill to the left were the four thatched farm cottages with small gardens at the front which usually had vegetables and some flowers in them.

Looking straight ahead from the bottom of New Hill was Mapledurham Drive, and slightly to the left on the corner was a large stone and concrete plinth which Bucknells farm used to leave their milk churns on ready for collection. This was a favourite hangout for us kids and when the lorry turned up to collect the churns we were always shouted at by the drivers mate to shift our backsides as they needed to pull the lorry up close to load the churns.

Turning right into St Marys Avenue there were several wooden bungalows here, then turning left into Colyton Way you had Mr Annetts shop on your left. Next door to that was Mrs Clarke's kiosk. A little further down on the same side was another store run by Mr and Mrs Weller. A bit further on, also on the left-hand side was the garage. Yes, Purley Park Estate did once have its own garage with fuel pumps. This was run by Mr Ritchie and his elderly mother. They also had a small timber yard at the back, very handy as the properties on the estate were mostly timber. I think it was around the late 1960's that old Mrs Ritchie died, and shortly after that the garage side of the business closed. The one thing that does stick out in my mind is that my Grandad who lived next door kept the large enamel sign which he retrieved when the garage was being demolished....."Regent Petrol – 1/6 a gallon".

Moving along now and turning right into Wintringham Way. There was a collection of timber bungalows on both sides, but down on the left was the '44 Club', so named for being at number 44 Wintringham. Further along was Harry White the television engineer who always had a stock of valves to repair our old black and white televisions.

Near the end of Wintringham Way was the social club. Just before that was Mr Potters house that had an interesting large front garden. It was almost a model village with a railway and harbour. Mr Potter also built old sailing ships which he sailed when the river flooded the field behind his house.

Another thing Mr Potter did was to build a catamaran pleasure boat which was moored down the road in Riverside Gardens, but this unfortunately sank during a flood.

On the corner of Riverside Gardens and Wintringham were Mr & Mrs Duadorf (or could be Dewadorf – not sure of correct spelling). They used to hire their small boat out for sixpence an hour. We kids would then become pirates of the Thames planning to hold up and board one of the Salters pleasure boats and loot their gold. Never actually did it, but it was fun pretending....

One point of interest here; near the end of River Gardens there used to be remnants of an old wooden landing stage, and on the opposite bank were some wooden posts sticking out of the mud which were visible when the river was low.



This was reputed to be the old ferry crossing, and in this print you might recognise the large house in the background.

I think this print is still held in the archives of Reading library, although I found it some time ago while searching on the net for old prints of Purley.

Something else worth noting; if you draw a line from the old Gatehouse at the bottom of Purley Lane down along St. Mary's Ave, and curve slightly past the church it will almost line up with where the old ferry crossing would have been. Maybe something worth a bit more research?

From Riverside gardens we cut through the path that was known as "Cally's Ally" because of the old chap who lived on the corner in Chestnut Grove. Old Cally was a right character and used to organise the over 60's bingo evening at the social club once a week. He also played Father Christmas each year to the children and to some of the old folks as well!

In Brading Way there was Mrs Barnes, a remarkable lady. She devoted most of her time to the local community and the church. She was also 'Brown Owl' of the local girl guides.

I remember she had a green Ford Thames minibus which she used for taking the old folks and children out on trips. She also was a friend of Mrs Prior who lived in the large four story country house where Lister Close now is. When Mrs Prior sold the house and moved Mrs Barnes did several trips with her old Thames minibus taking people from the village for a visit to Mrs Prior's new home.

Back on the estate now: On the corner of Brading Way and Park Walk were Mr & Mrs Bartholemew. Quite a few of the properties in Park Walk were weekend or summer holiday homes for people from London. Opposite Park Walk was Mr Unwin's land. Most of this was grassy field, but there were some derelict greenhouses inside a walled area which was also an overgrown orchard, so no prizes for guessing where us local kids used to go scrumping – and were often chased off by Mr Unwin.

Mr Unwin's drive led from his house next to Park Walk all the way round to a gate in the carpark of St Mary's church. About halfway round the track from Mr Unwin's house and the church was a bungalow. This was occupied by a very well dressed gentleman who drove a large black car. A good source of extra pocket money for us kids was to hang around in the church carpark and open and shut the gates for him. Sixpence every time, and sometimes a shilling!

As for The Short & Oak Tree, a lot of plots with as little as twenty feet width which were some of the smallest plots on the estate. If I remember right there were just a couple of larger plots, one being halfway up Oak Tree that also has a front on St.Marys Ave, and the other was at the bottom of Oak Tree into Park Walk. This one was owned by the Woodman family who were happy to let people from the estate cut through their garden as a shortcut to the church on a Sunday. Anyone trying to sneak through during the week would encounter the wrath of Mrs Woodman who would open her kitchen window and tell them in no uncertain terms that it was not a public right of way!

The exception to this was the weekend of the Purley fete which was held in the field next to St.Marys Avenue. There was a large barn for cattle about where the turning for Chiltern View now is. The barn was used as the refreshment tent for tea and biscuits, and of course a bar selling ale and cider from the barrel. Around the barn were the stalls. I don't remember much about them except for the one that sold homemade biscuits and cakes. This particular stall did very well at encouraging me to part with most of my pocket money!

One other thing that you might want to research – the bridge over the river at Purley.

There was a reference to it in a book "The History of Reading". Apparently there were three channels for the Thames at Purley, two of which are still there with the island.

But in the field there is a dip which fills with water during a flood, could this be the third channel that has silted up over the years?

It was said to have been destroyed during the English civil war by troops under the command of the Earl of Essex to stop the Royalist army from crossing into Berkshire. If I remember the story correctly, the Earl of Essex only had enough men to guard a few strategic bridge crossings, so any small bridges, especially those of timber construction, were destroyed.

We often wondered about the bridge across the river at Purley, and we assumed its purpose was to enable the crop farmers around the Purley village area to take their grain over to Mapledurham mill.

It would be nice if any real evidence of the bridge was found, but for now it will just have to be a small mention in a book.

That's about it for now, but if there are any particular points in my memory ramble that you would like me to try and elaborate on then let me know.

Please excuse the disjointed content; I have just been writing things down as they resurfaced in my memory.