

Account of Purley on Thames

John Liebenrood and his Will

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FROM MY HISTORY NOTEBOOK

31 - A LATE 18th CENTURY FUNERAL

When John George LIEBENROOD a Dutch merchant, died at his house at Purley* on Monday, the 5th January 1795, the weather was extremely cold. Thick snow lay everywhere and there had been such a hard frost since November that the local papers were recommending that house-keepers spread ashes or sawdust outside their front doors to try and reduce the number of accidents. The old man was almost 83 and, probably feeling that life was getting short, he had written his will some months earlier and included with it a letter addressed to his great-nephew, John George ZIECNEBEIN. Fortunately for us, this letter was registered with his Will as a Codicil because it contained the instructions regarding his funeral arrangements: and we thus have a unique insight into some late 18th century burial customs.

The letter requests that his nephew is to 'get a careful woman to see my body washed in a decent manner, to put a clean ruffled shirt on and to attend my body night and day for 5 or 6 days or even to 8 days' if necessary. Edward Skeat WHITE, a mercer of Reading, was to be the Undertaker and was to be instructed to 'make a decent coffin ... after the same manner as for my late wife'. (Lucy, nee ALLEN, died in 1772). WARNER, the bricklayer, was to 'look for and open the vault ... which you and he know the situation of' - this was on the south side and towards the west end of the Chancel, but during the rebuilding of the Church in 1870, the marble monument placed there in 1795 was removed to its present position in the Tower.

Mr. LIEBENROOD then goes on to say that 5 days after his death he was to be placed in his coffin (if it was ready), 'using a clean shirt and clean best sheets', and that the coffin was to be left open for a further 2 days before being nailed up on the day of the funeral, which was to be at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. The clergyman who performed the service was to be provided with 'a silk scarf and proper hatband', and mourning rings for the seven chief mourners, including his great-nephew.

'Proper and suitable mourning' was to be given to his servants, John SMITH, William CARTER, Sarah HUMPHRIES and Hannah the Cook - in addition to a generous legacy each and their wages.

Eight of the 'labouring men' of Purley were to attend the coffin, and each was to have a 'grey frock' (smock), with hatband and gloves'. The eight men are named as PALMER, JEROM, JORDAN, GREEN, LUKEMAN**, HOUSE, HAMLIN, and Frank HAINES. They were all to assemble at Frank Haines' house in time for the funeral, and they were not to be served any liquor on this occasion.

Unfortunately for us, although John George LIEBENROOD'S death was announced in the local paper, there was no further obituary or report of the funeral; but since all the names given above can be recognised from the Purley Parish Records, the list is interesting because it tells us who were considered to be the active and strong men in the village at that time.

Notes: *From other evidence, it seems likely that John George LIEBENROOD lived, and died, in the house now called 'Purley Lodge'. He appears to have inherited the property through his wife, Lucy, only daughter and heiress of Mr. John ALLEN of Purley.

**William LUKEMAN - I wrote about him in Purley News, May 1981, article No. 11.

Jean Debney

FROM MY HISTORY NOTEBOOK

32 - JOHN GEORGE LIEBENROOD - WILL 1795

John George Liebenrood of Purley had been a widower for more than 20 years when he made his Will in February 1794. He and his wife Lucy had not been blessed with any children, and the old man distributed much of his fortune amongst his many nephews and nieces, etc. who were still living in Holland and Germany. In his generosity he did not forget some of the many business and social contacts he had made in England, and included £100 to the Treasurer of the Magdalen Hospital and £42 to the poor of Purley. Finally, after bequests totalling more than £16,000, the rest of the estate which included houses and land in Purley and Tilehurst was left to his great-nephew John Engleberts Ziegenbein on condition that, in addition to his two Christian names, he also took on the surname Liebenrood and the family arms "quartered as I bear them". None of the property was to be sold, except for two acres to be exchanged for the improvement of the estate that he lived in at Purley.

The old man left sufficient money for his great-nephew's immediate use in a little hair trunk, and told him to be careful of the papers that were in the black and small hair trunk as well as "in the writing desk and the drawers of both the bookcases". He would also find all the silver plate, besides that which was in use, in the blue hair trunk. The uncle then went on to advise his, as yet, unmarried nephew to be a "careful husband and steer clear of all bright and vain show".

During his lifetime, it is evident, Mr Liebenrood had already been somewhat of a benefactor to Purley: in July 1780, he took the parish to the Quarter Sessions to appeal for a rate for the "further relief of the poor of Purley". Eight years later he presented a new treble bell to St Mary's Church. It is inscribed: "The gift of John George Liebenrood, of the Parish of Purley, Esquire; John Sherwood, Churchwarden; Thomas Janaway fecit" (Janaway was a bellfounder of Chelsea).

During the 1790s it is possible that Mr Liebenrood was the only person of any consequence living in the parish. The manor of Purley Magna had been purchased about a year previously by Anthony Morris Storer, M.P., but in the absence of a suitable dwelling house (the old red brick "Great Farm", or manor house, was almost certainly in a poor state of repair by this time and the mansion in Purley Park had not yet been built) he continued to live in London and elsewhere. The Wilder family were already in possession of Purley Hall, but had not yet achieved their 19th century status in the area. And so Mr Liebenrood probably considered himself to be the local "squire" and benefactor of the poor. At any rate he left 40 guineas to be distributed among the poor of Purley and he made out a list of 24 names of those who were to receive one or two guineas each.

The Will was proved only 15 days after he died on 5th January 1795 and it is to be hoped that the bequests were handed out promptly to the inhabitants of Purley as times were very hard.

The terrible frost and snow which had continued since November, suddenly came to an end with a thaw on Tuesday, 27th January. Such a rapid melting of large quantities of snow and ice caused the rivers to overflow making the ground floor of many houses uninhabitable and roads impassable. Within a fortnight, the fast current of the River Thames had "bulged" and swept away Hartslock near Basildon, together with the adjoining eel bucks, laid the whole of Pangbourne under water, and swept away the new ground at Whitchurch Bridge so that the bridge became impassable.

Most of the 24 beneficiaries in Purley can be identified - but more of them next month.

Jean Debney

FROM MY HISTORY NOTEBOOK

33 - The Twenty-Four Poor Inhabitants of Purley (part 1)

Seated at his desk in Purley Lodge in February 1794, John George Liebenrood wrote: "I request that £42 be distributed among the poor of Purley". It was just one of the legacies in his last Will and Testament. He then drew up a list of the 24 inhabitants, 9 men and 15 women, and stated the amount of money each was to receive: i.e. two guineas (£2.10p) to 5 of the men, and one guinea (£1.05p) to everyone else. The remaining 11 guineas he instructed were to be given to "such objects as present". This group of names is very interesting and most are well documented in the Parish Registers, etc.

Apart from one spinster, a bachelor and 7 unidentified women, the names represent 15 Purley couples. Altogether 95 children were baptised from these families (of whom 18 died young), and there were about 32 of them living in Purley in 1794, the rest having already left home or being as yet unborn. Four of the couples later left the parish, but the rest died in Purley when three were over 90, and one was said to be 100. Almost all of them were on Parish Relief for "infirmity and old age". Only three of the men and none of the women, for whom records are available, could sign their names. Three recipients were born in Purley, and 8 of the couples married here. Except for the shepherd, all the men were employed as agricultural labourers and would have earned between 9 and 12/- per week (in good weather).

Some years later, the first Census in 1801 recorded 27 families living in Purley. If one discounts 6 households who were "well-off", i.e. Purley Hall, the Rectory, etc., and the 15 families mentioned above, it will be seen that there were only 6 or 7 families not accounted for, and these may well be included in the unidentified names. This means that almost the entire working population of the village benefited from Mr Liebenrood's charity.

The 5 men to receive 2 guineas were Benjamin Humphries who witnessed the Will, and 4 of the labourers attending the coffin. Benjamin was Parish Clerk for many years, and his

daughter Sally was Mr Liebenrood's housekeeper. She remained in the service of the family when they moved to Prospect Hill, Tilehurst, in the 19th century. Frank Haynes (42*) at whose house the men were to assemble before the funeral, had 9 children. Shepherd John (*) Green came from Harpsden and Thomas Jordan (50) came from Sonning. Jordan and his wife, Mary, received 6/- a week plus firewood from the Parish before they died aged 86 and 83 respectively. William Lukeman at 53 was the oldest of the coffin bearers. He married in Whitchurch and moved to Purley soon afterwards. The oldest of his children was 24 years old and had herself been married for almost 2 years, when the 10th and youngest child was born. William, a widower for 30 years, was on Parish Relief and received frequent medical assistance before he died aged 89.

A fifth attendant, Benjamin Jerom (40+) was a married man but he only had a guinea. Three of the eight attendants, Richard House (30), James Hamblin and Richard Palmer (34) were all recently married; they received nothing, but their wives had a guinea each. In later life, Richard House suffered much ill-health, and 2 of his sons, Samuel and Robert, were ordered to pay 1/- (5p) and 1/6 (7¹p) per week respectively towards the support of their aged parents. James Hamblin was one of the few labouring men able to write their name at this time. In 1794 he married for the 2nd time, but died 2 years later leaving a 9 month old son. Richard Palmer and his wife were both over 70 when they died after much illness.

* Christian names and ages are calculated from the records

The youngest man to receive a guinea from Mr. Liebenrood's Will was 24 year old Thomas Allum. Orphaned at the age of 8, the last of his 3 brothers and a sister died a year later. He was married in 1802 and left the parish. "Old" William Sharman and his son-in-law Joseph Lambourn both died within 5 years of receiving their legacy. It was William's wife, Ann, who was said to be 100 when she died, but the records suggest that she was only 97!

The group of women is not so easy to identify and little is known for half of them. Almost all are called "Dame" a form of address indicating someone of a lower social order at that time; also few were given Christian names. So we may never know if Widow Hain was Frank Hayne's mother? If Fanny Smith the gardener's wife, was related to John Smith a servant of Mr. Liebenrood's, or if Sarah Carter was the young wife of another of the servants William Carter. Dames Martin and Grundy may have belonged to families known to have been in the parish some years previously, but the Dames Barnes, Bedwin and Dinah must remain quite anonymous at present. Among the remainder, the husbands of Dames Jane Palmer (37), Jane Hamblin (36) and Mary House (27) were all attendants at the funeral.

Dame Hannah Doe's husband, George, later begged for and received 10/6d (52½p) from the Churchwardens by claiming

that he had been at the Battle of Waterloo! Helen Newbury (23) was one of the few baptised at Purley and was orphaned whilst a teenager. She died, unmarried, at the early age of 32. Dame Elizabeth Buckland (spelt Bugland in the Will) was then a young married woman of almost 21 with a husband 15 years her senior, and her later story as a destitute widow makes sad reading in the Poor Law records.

The last of the women is Dame Jane Baker who was married in Chieveley in 1791. A year later she and her husband John were found to be destitute and "removed" by the Magistrates to Purley with their baby daughter. John Baker's position in life improved in later years and he was appointed Parish Constable for Purley in 1830-31.

In drawing up his list of names, Mr. Liebenrood appears to have differentiated between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor - phrases so beloved of the Victorians. He would have seen and observed all these families for some time and noticed their struggle to make ends meet. In this context, his bequest can be seen as a reward for virtuous poverty and was the reverse of the usual treatment handed out to "undesirables" in the 18th century.