

# Account of Purley on Thames

## Trenthams

R200547 25/2/2018

*This article was written by a former employee of Trenthams, Rita Denman, and published in two parts in the Project Purley Journals of January and May 2006*

In 1951 the company of G Percy Trentham Ltd set up an office in Purley, in what was the old farmhouse of Belle Isle Farm on the Oxford Road. The previous owner was The South Berkshire Hunt who kept their hounds there and called the premises The Kennels. Cecil Aldin the well-known sporting artist had also been an earlier owner. The first move by Trentham's was to acquire the farmhouse with adjacent cottages and land. All of the surrounding land was purchased as it became available until by 1958 the Company owned 15 acres. *(The picture on the front cover shows the company site in 1978 - Ed)*

### G Percy Trentham Ltd

Building and Civil Engineering Contractors

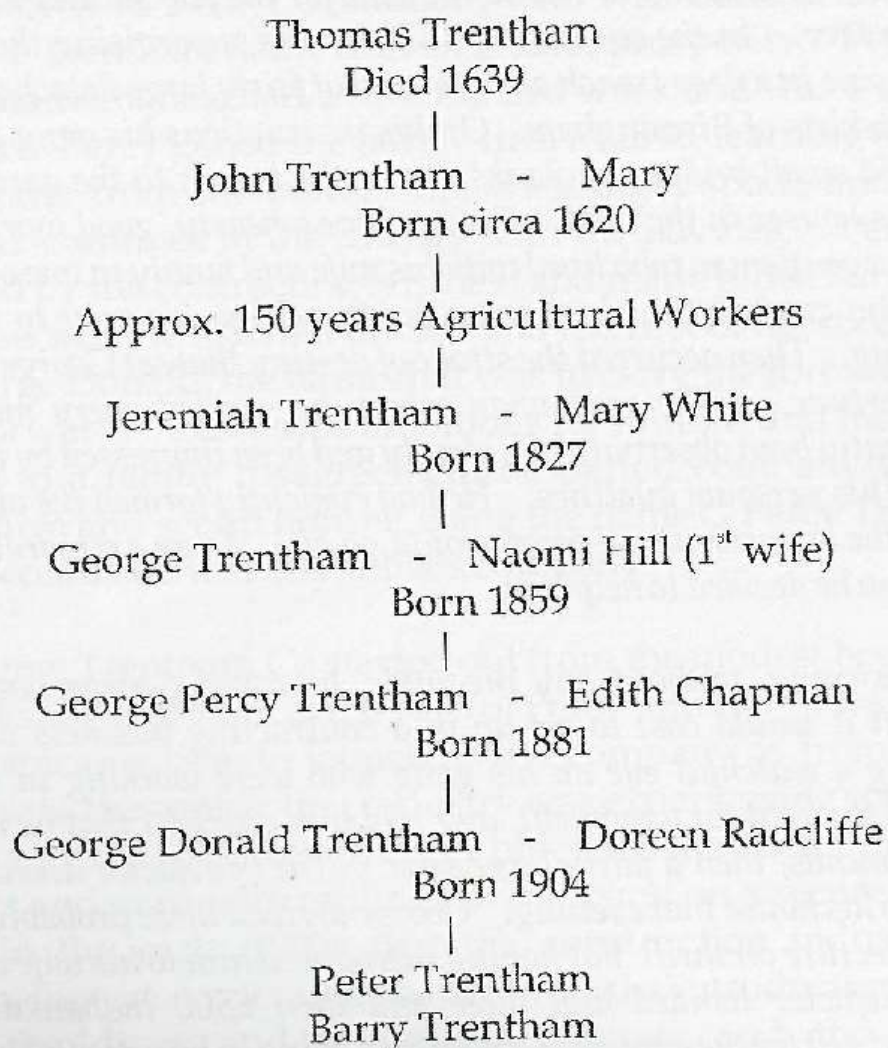
Head Office: Pangbourne Reading RG8 8AN  
Telephone: Pangbourne (073 57) 3333 Telex: 847326

Company letter-head

This was a family owned private company, which had come into being and reached great success through the diligence and determination of Trentham family members.

Thomas Trentham of Deddington Oxfordshire was a prosperous shoemaker and landowner in the 1600s. Thomas died in 1639 leaving a widow and three sons from his first marriage. His will indicates that he lived a very comfortable life and that he was probably of royalist rather than parliamentary sympathy. Every family member benefited from the will but John, who was probably the youngest of the three sons and was earning a living as an agricultural labourer, received only a few items of furniture - a cupboard a table and some benches. The children of John and Mary his wife were baptised at Middleton Cheyney in Oxfordshire. For 150 years this line of the Trentham family remained agricultural workers and throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century the name of Trentham

occurs without a break in the Parish Register. In 1827 a later John and Mary Trentham bore a son who they named Jeremiah. This John had served a few years in Wellington's army. Also at about this time the industrial revolution was in full swing and Stephenson's Rocket engine heralded a revolution in transport. Jeremiah broke the tradition of working on the land and became an employee of the contractors who were plate laying for one of the new railway companies, making the first move into contracting, the business which his descendants were to make their own.



Jeremiah became a Methodist attending the Wesleyan Chapel at Banbury where he met his future bride, Mary White. Jeremiah prospered and became a manager in the field of railway contracting. He fathered a son George Trentham who was born on 18<sup>th</sup> December

1859. George grew to be a well built, stocky young man who had watched his father at work, laying or supervising laying railway lines for his employers. He too obtained work with a contractor at the age of 14 for five shillings a week. His abilities won him quick promotion and by the time he was 20 he had been appointed assistant manager with Currall and Lewis a firm of contractors in Birmingham. It was a major step forward.

*George\* dreamed of establishing his own firm but to do this as a contractor he needed capital and he had none, save for the few shillings he had been able to save. In the summer of 1879 he was supervising the laying of a water pipe in a deep trench along a road of fairly large detached houses on the outskirts of Birmingham. On his instructions his gang of labourers had laid small bridges of planks across the trench to the garden gates of various houses in the road. George gave a hearty 'good morning' every day to a gentleman who lived with his wife and family in one of the houses and who crossed the plank over the trench on his way to work every morning. Then occurred the stroke of destiny that set George on the road to a fortune. The gentleman whom he greeted every morning had apparently been observing him closely and been impressed by what he had seen of his personal qualities. He had evidently formed the opinion that, given the opportunity, George would go far. In an extraordinary act of altruism he decided to help him.*

*One morning, without any preamble, he asked George how much he thought it would cost to set up in a contracting business on his own. Keeping a watchful eye on his gang who were working in the trench, George thought for a moment, and told him outright that he would need £500 pounds, then a fairly large sum. The benefactor asked George to come to his house that evening. George arrived there probably expecting a brief lecture on thrift, but having introduced him to his wife and family, his benefactor handed him there and then £500 in banknotes as an outright gift for the express purpose of starting in business on his own.*

The young energetic George, lost no time in giving notice to his employers and advertising himself as 'Contractor for Buildings,

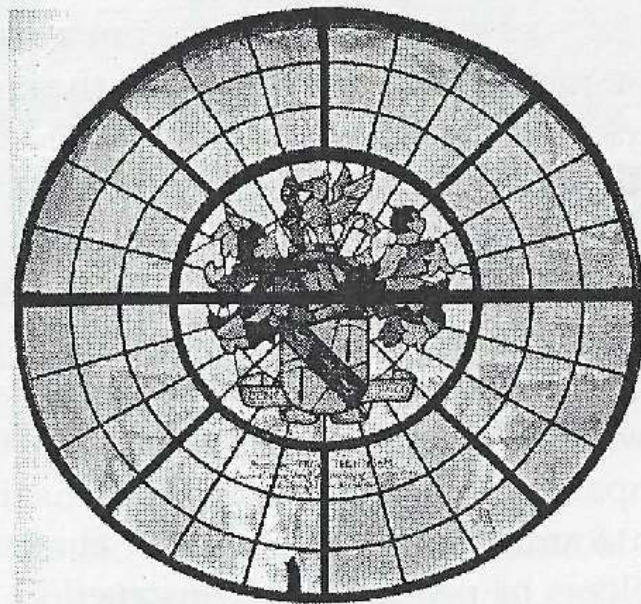
*\* This paragraph and the next are from The Trentham Story by George Bruce*

Parks, Roads and Tramways, Bridges, Light Railways, Paving, Drainage, Gas, Water, Canal and General Engineering Works.' He prospered in the days when the horse and cart and spade wielding navvies supplied the motive power for the vast amount of above and underground construction. Within a few years he had become the main Birmingham Contractor for the laying of tramways and other public works. He then repaid the gift that enabled him to start, but he never disclosed his benefactor's name. The Trentham family prospered and it was the descendent, George Percy (known as Percy) Trentham, who was born in 1881 who carried the Trentham name to even greater prosperity. Percy was good at mathematics, had a love of hard work and was a talented footballer. Percy joined the family firm in 1896, learning the hard way literally from the bottom up, wielding a spade and laying pipes and tramlines in the ditches with the navvies. Percy was fascinated by the contracting business and made himself master of all its aspects. He married in 1903 and the first of his six children was George Donald, the name that was to carry the fortunes of the family forward. Percy was ambitious for himself and his family, and due to a family disagreement he parted company with his father's firm and set up himself using the name G Percy Trentham to avoid confusion with his father's company.

The G Percy Trentham Co started out from the modest beginnings of a workshop and store in the yard of Percy's home. It was not the most auspicious time to launch a new company as from 1905 or thereabouts, the contracting industry was experiencing something nearing a slump. However, Percy bided his time accepting small contracts and gradually putting his company on a secure footing. It was in the early 1900s that the construction industry was experiencing great scientific change with the introduction of steel framed buildings and reinforced concrete and the internal combustion engine, which was to replace horse power for load carrying vehicles. In time, prestigious contracts came Percy's way including the Dolwyddelan Reservoir in the Snowdonia region which involved building a dam half way up a mountain named Moel Siabod.

In 1913 the company was incorporated as a private limited company named G Percy Trentham Co Ltd. Two early 1914-18 wartime contracts for the motor industry were significant milestones that were to lead some 15 years later to a major turning point, the big contract for the Ford Motor Company's factory at Dagenham. At the end of the war, Donald, Percy's eldest son, then aged 15, began to be drawn into the Company. 'Father used to put me on a job driving a skip while all my friends were out enjoying themselves' he later recalled. Under Percy's guidance full advantage was taken of the enormous building programme that took place following the war and the quality and excellence of work was acknowledged by government departments, consulting engineers and architects alike. By the judicious buying of shares and ploughing back profits G Percy Trentham Co Ltd grew. Donald began his apprenticeship with the firm in 1921. He was kept hard at work and had no special privileges and the site agents made weekly reports on his progress. Percy was known as a hard but fair taskmaster who expected excellence of work but who at the same time commanded the loyalty of his employees. The welfare of his workforce was at his heart and care of the older employees who were finding the heavy work too much for them had always been a priority. He repaid the loyalty of his permanent staff and weekly paid men by instituting a scheme for a week's holiday with full pay. He also began the tradition of the firm's annual dinner and regarded Christmas as a sensible time to give pay increases and compliments to deserving employees. In 1926, Percy was struggling against economic and political odds and in 1928 he began looking for a major undertaking that could, when completed, put his firm into the first grade in all respects. This chance came when through dogged determination Percy succeeded in getting the name of G Percy Trentham Ltd on the list of those to be invited to tender for the huge contract for the Ford Motor Company, who were planning to build on a 330 acre site at Dagenham in Essex. It was with great jubilation that the Company learned that contract No 1 had been awarded to them. In November 1932 when the factory was completed the firm had undertaken 72 different contracts for Fords worth well over 1 million pounds.

Despite the economic depression of the thirties Trentham's were being awarded a variety of contracts. In 1932 Donald was married to Miss Doreen Radcliffe and the marriage was blessed with two sons, Peter and Barry, both of whom followed in their father footsteps and, after undergoing a period of strenuous training with the company, eventually took their places as directors. In 1937, contracts for housing estates, bridges, swimming baths, factories, reservoirs and the inevitable sewerage undertakings and road works were in progress. The success of his firm widened Percy's horizons and brought him into contact with men of influence in the City of London. He had joined various City Guilds including the Paviours and the Cordwainers and was to involve himself still more in the City, his objective being to seek election to the Court of Commons Council. On 9<sup>th</sup> May 1939 he was unanimously elected a member for the Bread Street Ward of the City as a Liveryman of The Company of Paviours with the full intention of playing a big part in the City administration. In early 1939 at the persuasion of friends he sought election to the office of Sheriff. On this occasion he was unsuccessful but at a second attempt was elected Sheriff in June 1940. A brilliant career was brought to end when Percy Trentham was killed in a German air raid on London on December 8<sup>th</sup> 1940. On 26<sup>th</sup> October 1972 a stained glass window was unveiled in memory of George Percy Trentham at St. Lawrence Jewry, the Guildhall Church in the City of London.



*The Stained Glass Window*

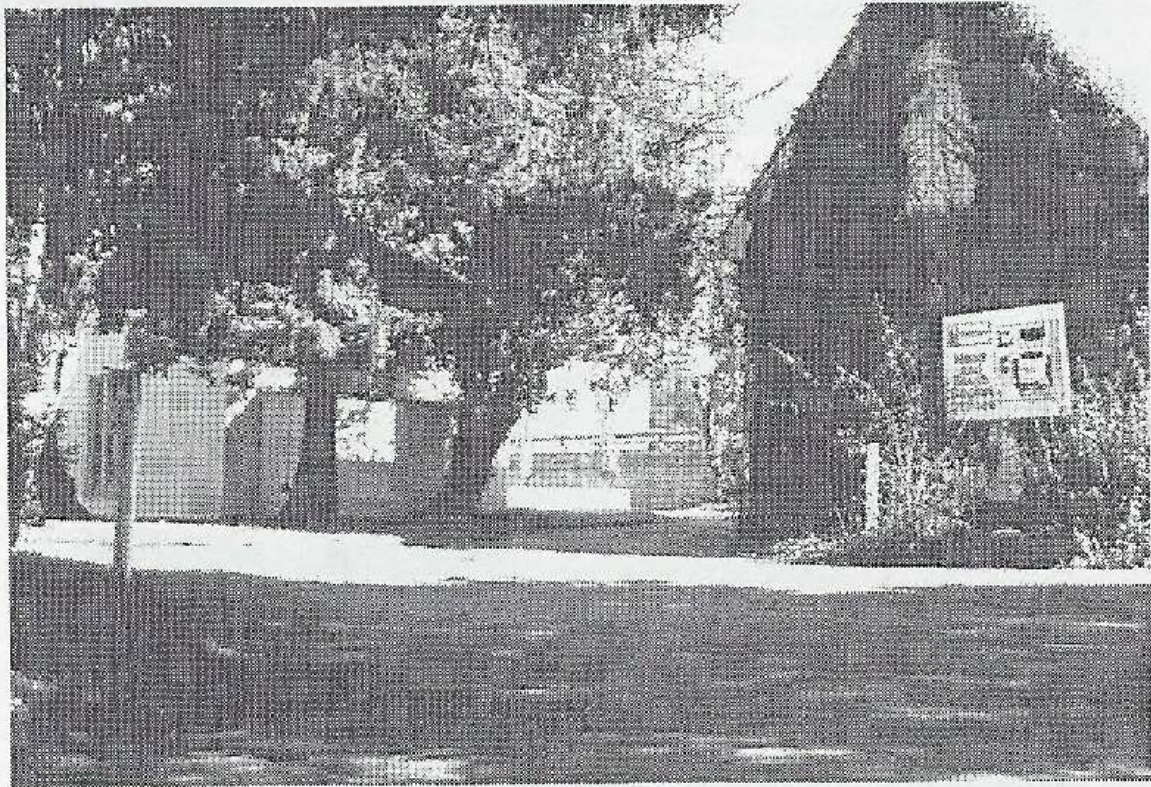
Following his father's death, Donald became the recognised head of the Company. Donald had by this time achieved a reputation for professional ability and intuitive business acumen combined with toughness, and unaffected charm and unusual generosity. Donald Trentham assumed his new responsibilities determined to carry on his father's tradition of benevolent paternalism and to continue to make the Company grow. He inspired loyalty, and respect for his considerable experience. He was also known to sack a man on the spot for idleness or slipshod work. It was said that signs of an impending outburst was the sudden bristling of the eyebrows. In 1941 the company was engaged on 50 different contracts, mainly for the war effort. These included a large new RAF airfield at Ramsbury, war factories for Armstrong Whitworth Ltd, Rotol Airscrews Ltd, Baulton and Paul Ltd, the Blythe Bridge Shadow factory and RAF work at Hullavington and Quedgeley. Two other very important contracts in 1941-2 were for a new airfield at Chalgrove and the Royal Aeronautical Establishment, transferred from its vulnerable base at Christchurch, Hants. The purpose of this new building was the very secret experimental submarine radar location station. When the work was completed, in September 1943 Donald and his staff were honoured with a visit to open the station by King George VI, Queen Elizabeth and Sir Stafford Cripps.

The war effort in terms of construction of military installations began to decline in mid-1944 with the prospect of victory in sight. As early as 1943 Winston Churchill urged his colleagues to make plans for the post-war transition of industry from war to peace, the resumption of the export trade and the provision of employment and housing for all who sought it. This would keep G Percy Trentham Ltd occupied for some time to come. In the meantime the contract was secured to build the first penicillin factory in England. Although the war had claimed the founder of the Company, in all respects the Company had faced the challenges that the war had brought and not been found wanting. The new challenge would be to face the problems of peace and reconstruction. The Company was one of several major contractors engaged in putting up what were known as aluminium houses. This was a pre-fabricated factory-made house,

a product of the Aircraft Research Industries Organisation. Between five or six completed houses a day was the average rate of erection and the record was 54 minutes for one house. The Company put up a total of nearly 5,000 houses. From houses to the complete redesigning and rebuilding of the entire complex of docks in Cardiff South Wales, the Company was kept busy for several years.

1952 was another landmark when Donald Trentham's eldest son Peter aged 18 joined the Company, followed by his younger son Barry aged 20 in 1958. These latest two family members were expected to learn the rough and tumble of the business just as their father had, by starting at the bottom of a trench.

So in 1951 this nationally known prestigious company brought its offices to Purley although its address was known as Pangbourne.



*The Entrance Head Office Pangbourne*

Behind the quiet façade of the old farmhouse the business of civil engineering and contracting continued. The commercial buildings

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that Trentham's put up to carry on their business were integrated into the old farm complex.



*Rear of the Old Farmhouse and the Lime Walk*

The ancient barn, which has a history of its own, found a new use as a carpenter's shop. Kennel Cottages were used for employees and various other barn style buildings were used as laboratories, as storage and a canteen.



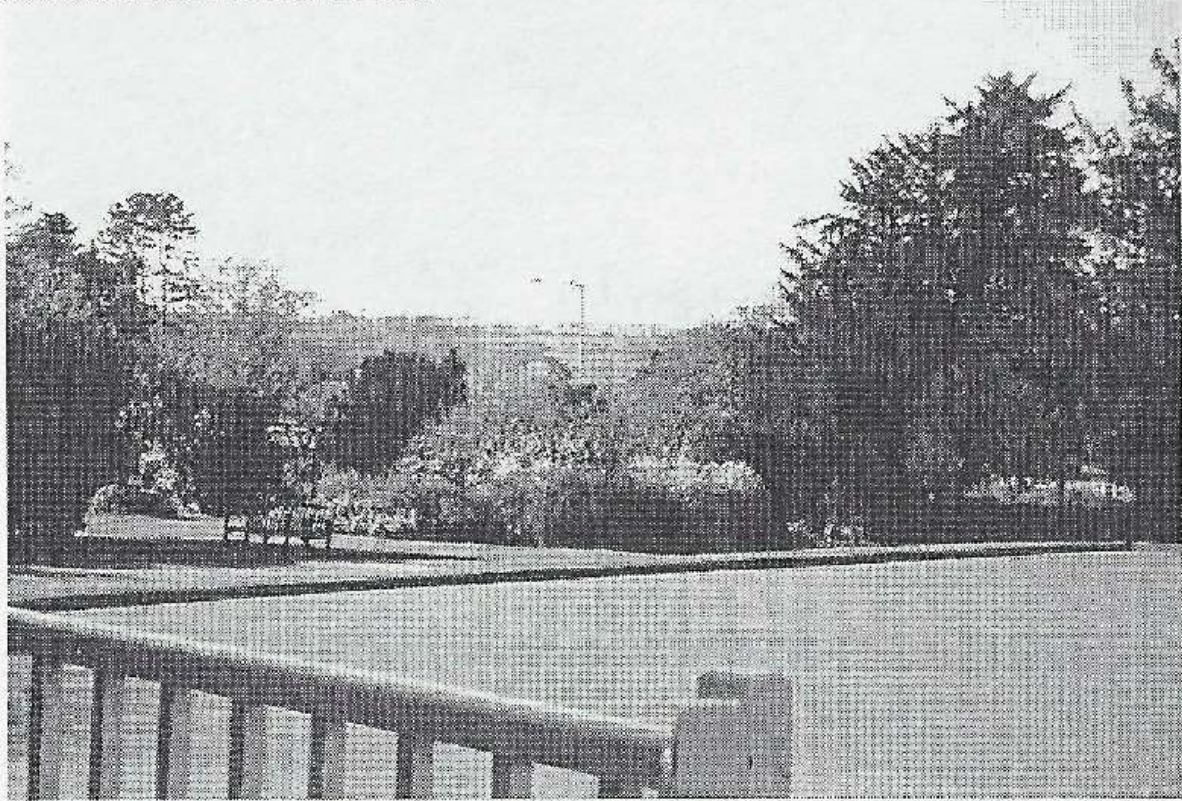
*Kennel Cottages*



*Beyond the Canteen Area looking North*

Because of his love of nature and gardening Mr Donald, as he was affectionately known, personally took over the landscaping of the entire property. He was one of the first people in Britain to plant successfully mature 30ft trees. Many of the long-term employees came to Purley with the Company and were joined by new employees from the area. Before long Trentham's was a respected name in the local community, known to regard its employees as individuals. If a carnival or procession were to take place, an immaculate Trentham vehicle would be in service. At Christmas a children's party was part of the festivities with Santa carrying a sack of toys arriving on a suitably disguised mower. A group of disadvantaged children was always invited to the parties. Every employee received a turkey and sausage meat as a seasonal gift from the management. The Trentham Bowling Club was a very important area of recreation and a first class green and clubhouse was kept in tip top condition by the groundsman. The grounds as a whole were

beautiful and a delight to the eye, the groups of trees, spring bulbs and colourful shrubs being a relaxing background to what was sometimes frenetic work.



*View of the Bowling Green and Chiltern Hills Beyond*

I became an employee in 1978/9 and was with the Company as Head Cook for just about 5 years. It was a fascinating job as I came into contact with everyone from the Chairman to the newest employee. It was my responsibility to run the canteen for those employed in the offices, a separate area for what was known as The Black Hand Gang, that is all those who were engaged with the plant and machinery, a small restaurant for the Heads of Department and also the Director's Suite. The Director's dining room, furnished and decorated in traditional style, was in frequent use and it was always a pleasure to support the company by putting on the best possible meal and service. The Chairman hosted shooting parties in the winter and enjoyed fishing in the summer and it was a regular duty of the canteen staff to prepare a packed lunch on these occasions. When Mr Donald arrived on site in the morning he parked the car in

his parking space next to his office and opposite the kitchen. He always sat for a few minutes observing what was going on. The canteen staff were then on the lookout, waiting for his signal that he was ready to go into his office and for his tray of morning coffee.

Mr Donald supported the St John's Ambulance Brigade recognising the value of having someone who could render immediate first aid on busy sites. Apart from the excitement of the special Christmas meals and party, the canteen staff prepared two to three hundred mince pies to be sent to the Church of St Lawrence Jewry, the Guildhall Church of the City of London, for their carol service.

The days were full and varied. The Chairman's compliments and appreciation were valued by all the canteen staff. It gave me greater pleasure than he realised to be presented with a copy of the privately published book *The Trentham Story* from which the greater part of this article is taken.

The Company continued to win contracts but times were changing and the commercial world was becoming more hard-hitting. The family, paternalistic atmosphere and moral stance which had been engendered by the Trentham Family for 150 years was passing. In 1982 the health of the chairman was giving cause for concern. He overcame a serious illness and was ordered to take several months of convalescence. After a while he was back at the helm at Head Office but in late 1983 he was again taken seriously ill which caused great anxiety to all those at Pangbourne and beyond. As I waited to cross the road at the top of Nursery Gardens on a dismal November day I watched the Trentham Standard being lowered to half-mast and knew that we had lost our Chairman. A beautiful service of thanksgiving for his life and work was held at St Lawrence Jewry, which I was privileged to attend.

It was another watershed in the history of the Company. After a couple of years Trentham's moved out of the Pangbourne offices and

the Crown Green Estate was built. The Bowling Green remains as a reminder that the Company which built hundreds of landmarks that we all know, was once a neighbour in Purley.

*Notes. It has not been possible to refer to all the family members who have played their part in the development of the Trentham Company, nor to the many legendary names of the employees of the Trentham Company through the years. The area offices were integral to the Company and have their own histories. The contracts too numerous and varied to mention have been described as Trentham Town. Everyone who has worked for the Trentham Company has their particular memories and anecdotes and there are still a good many around Purley to relate them.*

*I acknowledge with grateful thanks the information contained in **The Trentham Story** written by George Bruce, and Mr Peter Trentham's permission to include this article in the Project Purley Newsletter & Journal.*

*Rita Denman*

## *Finale by Rita Denman*

*The story was continued by Rita in the Project Purley Journal of January 2015:-*

In 1982 Trenthams was a thriving Civil Engineering firm. The Headquarters had been in Purley since 1951. The old Belleisle Farm house had been extended and was in use as offices together with a newer block to the east and several smaller buildings serving as laboratories. In the grounds were Kennel Cottages originally built for workers of the South Berks Hunt and two prefabricated houses built by Trenthams. In the north east part of the site was the bowling green which often served as the venue for County matches. On Long Lane there were three more cottages built for employees, one of which was occupied by Fred Saunders who was later awarded the BEM for his work with the Red Cross. When he died his widow planted an oak tree on the verge in Long Lane in his memory.

The Chairman of the Company, Mr Donald Trentham died of a heart attack in 1983. At that time the market was relatively difficult for smaller concerns such as Trenthams and within a few years the company moved to other premises and the Purley site was sold for housing development.

The Egerton Company began the development which was to be named Crown Green. Part of their agreement for Planning Permission involved dedicating the site of the bowling green to the Parish Council to satisfy the 'open space' requirement. The Parish Council promptly leased back the site to the Bowls Club on a long lease and a valuable parish amenity was saved. Egertons built a few houses along Bowling Green Lane and then went into administration.

The main development was continued by Bryant Homes. The farmhouse was adapted to apartments and the bowling green pavilion was refurbished becoming a focal point. . It was planned to convert the old Purley barn to residential use. Everything else was demolished. It was a number of years before the whole site was developed but the barn had become a problem. With its historic connections there were difficulties balancing conversion with commerce. Following discussion with the Parish Council, Bryant Homes generously offered to transfer the barn( yet again) to a new site at the recreation ground and present it to the Parish as a community facility with the use by the local Scout Troop particularly in mind.

A new roundabout was built on the main road and this involved moving our ancient milestone about 40 yards to the east. The Barn is now a valuable asset to Purley and the estate has settled into an attractive area but locally it is still known affectionately as 'Trenthams'.

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