

Account of Purley on Thames

Trenthams and the Railway

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An extract from an article in "Trentham News" June, 1968 reproduced in Purley Parish News

The Purley Tithe Award map of 1840 showed that, as late as the middle of the 19th century, Purley had a "Hither Common Field." and a "Farther Common Field" each of considerable area but owned and cultivated by dozens of different people in "furlong strips," the original English measure of land. Our farm (Trenthams) was shown in detail and almost precisely as it was when we took over 111 years later, but its name was given as "Elyham House", possibly derived from the name of the field it was built in.

Although owned by Anthony Morris Storer, the antiquary and Lord of the Manor, it was occupied in 1840 by a man whom we might describe as an "entrepreneur", Edward Sherwood. The name first appeared in 1830 when a Mrs. Sherwood was noted as living in Purley - perhaps a widow living modestly in the country on a small pension. Two years later Edward made his name as one of the three registered electors living in Purley and, by 1838, although still living in a cottage, he owned and occupied considerable property and has become the Parish Overseer. Could it have some connection with the new railway which cut through Purley in 1840 or was it just phenomenal luck that enabled Edward Sherwood to move from his cottage into an elegant farm house and to farm 700 out of the 877 acres of land listed as "under cultivation?"

1840 was the year when Reading was the terminus of the Great Western Railway and the gangs of "navigators", fresh from building the canals which gave them their name, were employed on extending the tracks to the West as fast as possible, incidentally hastening the failure of the Canal Companies. The Tithe Award map shows the tracks running through Purley, one in each direction, but it is interesting to note that the rails were set to a gauge of 7' 0" instead of 4' 8½" of the Roman chariot wheels. Brunel was the Chief Engineer to the Railway Company at the time with a salary of £2,000 a year, and he designed to a 7' 0" gauge so that his trains could be stable at high speeds.

The 60lb rails were "bridge-shaped with wide wings or flanges" and were made from Welsh Iron from Dowlais, Ebbw Vale and Rhymney. They were set on a strip of felt and screwed down to continuous half timbers of American Yellow Pine. The London to Bristol line was conceived as just one part of the route from London to New York with the sea crossing by the "Great Eastern" taking only 11 days. Brunel thought big the "Great Eastern" was more than four times bigger than any other ship in the world.