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PURLEY'S LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

MAY 2002 NEWSLETTER

No. 59

## REPORT ON THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting took place at The Parish Room off Beech Road, Purley on Thames on the 15<sup>th</sup> March 2002.

The Chairman, Jean Debney, began her report by saying that the Society celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> Birthday this year and the event would be marked at the meeting when members would be invited to have a glass of wine and a piece of Birthday cake. The cake, which was made by Jean Debney, had been iced by her sister and the wine was donated by John Chapman.



The Chairman cuts the Birthday Cake

The Chairman confirmed the past year had been one of continuing growth and more people than ever were attending our meetings. The programme had been varied and informative and had included Jean's account of her trip with Cliff to the Family History Library in Salt Lake City; George Fielder speaking about the Thames Navigation; David Downs talking about military medals and Roy Burton from the Betjeman Society.

In May David Downs led a tour of the Madejski Stadium and, in June, members visited "Milestones" The Hampshire Living History Museum in Basingstoke. In July, the society's annual Barbecue took place at the Mimosas in Purley Village. Despite not being blessed with the usual fine weather, the event was a great success and thanks went to Rita and Ron Denman for hosting the evening. The Christmas Party was again held at the Gatehouse, the highlight of the evening being the hat competition which was won by Rita Denman. Thanks went to Rick and Valerie for entertaining us so well.

Sadly, we lost two members last year; Bill Fisher who died in June and Barbara Mercer who died in December. Both made significant contributions to the Society over the years and will be greatly missed.

The Chairman concluded by thanking Tom and Rita Hine, our Treasurer and Secretary respectively; (Tom for handling the accounts and Rita for organising the meetings), Ann Betts (Minute Secretary); Millie Bordiss who has produced the Newsletter for 9 years and is now retiring, also Ron Denman who computerises the text and photographs for the Newsletter; Pat Deane who is compiling our archive register; James Heslop who has been the Oral History Leader but who must now step down due to ill health and Peter Perugia who is creating a database for the Society's collection of news cuttings. Finally thanks went to the rest of the Executive Committee for their support and, of course, to the members of Project Purley who make our Society such a success.

The Treasurer, Tom Hine, then presented the Society's accounts for the year ended 31<sup>st</sup> December 2001 and confirmed our finances continue to be in a healthy state. During the year membership reached a total of 34 plus 2 honorary members. Subscriptions will continue at £4 per person for the coming year and Mrs. Honeyman has agreed to act as Independent Examiner of the Society's accounts for another year.

Following the departure of Tom and Rita Hine from the Executive Committee, Rick Jones was elected as Treasurer and Rita Denman was elected as Secretary. The Chairman and the rest of the Committee were eligible and willing to continue and were duly re-elected en bloc. A full list of the new Executive Committee is shown on the inside back cover of this Newsletter.

Ann Betts

#### FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

Friday 17 <sup>th</sup> May 2002	"Walk About" in Purley led by the Chairman
Saturday 15 <sup>th</sup> June 2002	Outing to Kelmscott Manor
Friday 19 <sup>th</sup> July 2002	Barbecue at The Mimosas Purley Village
August	No Meeting

#### Barbara Mercer

In the last edition of the Newsletter, we announced the death of Barbara Mercer just before Christmas. In memory of her, I thought members might like to read the following poem. It was written by Barbara and was read out at her funeral.

Editor

#### RAIN

The baby-gentle rain of early spring  
Falls softly in a light caress.  
Fresh-smelling earth absorbs the kiss,  
And grateful plants,  
Lifting their hearts towards the pale sun,  
Expand and grow apace  
Until their fragile blooms are borne aloft.

The sudden thunder shower of summer,  
Disrupting fete and garden party,  
Is like an adolescent who,  
Beguiling now, and frowning then,  
Bewilders us with changing faces  
So that we run for shelter  
Until the storm is past.

In autumn, when the year has settled down  
Like well-worn shoes,  
Comfortable and middle aged,  
The foggy, misty rain  
Falls on steadfast maturity  
And wet leaves gleam with glowing colours,  
That soon will fade.

The shabby, freezing winter rain  
Shrivels our skins, as does old age.  
Driving along like icy lances,  
Prickling against the window panes.  
Umbrellas up, heads down  
We struggle feebly on,  
Beyond the dying light.

And yet, the rain that's falling now,  
Has fallen for a million years,  
And will again.  
The whole immensity of time  
Is gathered  
In a single drop.

Barbara Mercer

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Tom Hine tells us that Roger Stanley sat next to him in school in 1948 and 1949. He was evacuated to Knowl Hill during the War and went gleaning on Bowsey Hill just past Warners Brick Kiln. The "Gran" he refers to is not a relation but the lady he was staying with and he used to go with her into the cornfield in the early 1940's. He sent Tom this description of what happened in every village after the men with the scythes had departed.

### THE GLEANER

When I first saw Millet's painting - *The Gleaners*, I was able to look at it from a professional point of view. There was certainly enough suffering in the twists of form and the shapes of the body; the aching back could be felt and the sparseness of the landscape epitomised the struggle for life.



*The Gleaners* - Jean François Millet (1814 - 1875)

My interest was not that of student or art critic, but of one who has also been a gleaner. As a young child evacuee during World War 2, I was introduced to many aspects of rationing and the need for frugality; amongst these was heading off to the wheat fields on the morning following the harvest.

With double summer-time (clocks were put forward two hours), the farmers and their teams of workers would work through until nearly midnight before it got too dark to see.

The corn would be cut and, in those days, tied into sheaves and arranged eight to a stack in neat rows across the fields. Probably because the stacks resembled small tents, they were a favourite playground for us children and, occasionally, from memory, also for older people. I had no idea then why adults would want to play in our tents, but we saw them crawling in and staying there for what seemed ages. If we got too close, we were told to "bugger off."

The stacks of sheaves were collected up by as many people as were available, including us kids. Long flat trailers were pulled by furry footed Clydesdale horses and, sometimes, by an ancient tractor; they moved slowly along as the sheaves of corn were stacked neatly on to the trailers. The gathering of the harvest was, even in wartime, a celebration and, as the corn was taken to the threshing machine, there was singing and laughter.

Early the next morning, the gleaners walked into and onto the bare fields and, without any instructions, without talking, they stood next to each other about a yard (100 cm) apart, like soldiers on parade. The corn stubble about six inches high marked where the rows were and each gleaner worked along four rows at a time. It was a systematic sweep of the whole field, no row was missed and none was worked twice.

Each ear of corn on a stalk that had been cut and dropped or missed during the harvesting was snatched up with one hand and passed across to the other and when the second hand could hold no more stalks, the gleaner stopped. With relief, they stretched their aching backs and twisted about a quarter of the stalks around the rest and into a single knot. This secured the small bundle which was then placed into the hessian sack carried by the gleaner. The sack on the back had a "strap" of baling twine and was small enough not to become too heavy when full. On average it took about an hour to collect enough to fill the sack which was then emptied into the large sacks, which had been placed at the anticipated most convenient spots. There was no hesitation in finding the exact spot where the gleaner had last collected the ears of corn. If there was no stalk, just a full ear of corn, this was put straight into the sack; they were always picked up carefully so as not to drop any of the grains which were encapsulated within their protective husks.

It always seemed to be oppressively warm at gleaning time and sweat ran into eyes, stinging them and encouraging curses to be yelled at no one in particular. The longer stalks dug into bare arms and the stubble scratched and tormented ankles. Flies during the day and midges at dusk ensured that discomfort was enhanced to accompany the aching backs.

Us little'uns stopped often to stretch our backs and to walk to the nearest hedge for a pretend pee, just for the break. Bottles of water were soon tepid and flicking open the spring-loaded top was hurried to get the liquid on to dry tongues as quickly as possible.

A voice would call out that it was time for a break. Gran or some other adult had brought a basket of food and this had been left under a hedge, although that still didn't stop the few sandwiches from being dried out and curled up at the ends. There was lettuce and usually brawn inside the bread and, although there was never butter or margarine, there was always a liberal dollop of home-made pickles.

Each field in the village had its own group of residents and there was never any attempt to go into another's territory. There were comments shouted by the adults across to another group in their field and occasional laughter at what had been said. From memory, these were often ribald jokes or comments about, "could do with a good man." There were only women and children who went gleaning. The farmers and farm labourers were by then doing the threshing at the farm; I suppose the rest of the men were either in the forces or had some other special job. Even when the big sacks were full, they didn't appear to be too heavy as they were each carried by one woman on her shoulders; there were frequent stops on the way home and cheerful farewells as each person went their own way.

The next day was the day to separate the "corn from the chaff." We sat on chairs around the big sack and we each had the small sacks we'd used to collect the corn. You would take just one of the small tied-up bundles from the sack and, holding on to it, place it in the small sack and shake like billyho. A few rubs against the sack would ensure that all the seed had dropped; a quick look at the bundle to make sure and then the straw was thrown on to a pile in the centre. During this slow process, there was often singing, usually popular hymns or sentimental songs from Gran. I remember one called, "A little grey home in the West."

The whole purpose of the gleaning was for the feeding and bedding of the chickens. The discarded corn stalks were used for bedding and stuffed into sacks for storage until needed. The little sacks of corn seed and husks were then processed carefully by Gran and, once we learnt to do it correctly, we also helped. This was the "winnowing" stage and there was a large (3 feet across?) earthenware bowl which Gran balanced between her outspread legs and on to her "pinny." The small sack was on a table in front of her. She would take out a double handful of corn from the bag and let the corn and husks trickle through her hands. Then she would blow!!!! We all blew so that the light husks went everywhere except into the bowl where the cleaned corn seed fell and piled up like gold. We were all covered in the husks which stuck to our hair, sweaty faces and clothing. We itched and scratched and laughed. It all seemed such good fun.

The cleaned grain was then stored in sacks in the out-house (laundry) to be used for supplementing the chicken feed by throwing a handful into the chicken pen. This became a ritual and talking to the chickens at the same time was part of it too. I remember how they ran around clucking and pecking away until every grain had been eaten. There was usually sufficient to last until the next harvest and I remember quite clearly thinking at the time, "Why doesn't Gran plant some of the seeds herself and have her own little cornfield?" Although I did plant some, I've no idea whether it grew and was weeded out or not. I wonder if anyone who went gleaning ever used the grain for grinding into flour? I'm sure that there would be some people doing it today to get "wholegrain" flour.

Gleaning was only done in the corn or wheat fields, not where barley was grown. Barley ears had long spikes on the end and I remember how they stuck into my hands and it was very hard to shake the husks off the grain; maybe that's why they weren't collected. I also remember that, if there had been rain before gleaning, we were told NEVER to collect ears that had started to sprout; these were bad for the chickens' bowels and the green sprouts were nourishment to be ploughed back into the soil, so I was told.

Roger Stanley (Victoria, Australia).



## REVIEW OF MEETINGS

Medals can be made of worthless material or valuable gold. They can be struck for a commemorative occasion or to mark a deed of great valour. At the meeting in January David Downs gave a talk about the many kinds of medals that are awarded and the reasons behind them. The first kind of medal that comes to mind is those awarded during a career in one of the Services. As a boy David lived near to Brock Barracks and was taken to see the annual Remembrance Day Service Parade. When David was very young the medals that were worn on those occasions fascinated him and also the many coloured ribbons on which they hung. As he grew older he took an interest in the Army Medals that had been awarded to his father. The three medals that were awarded to Servicemen for the 1914 - 1918 war have become well known as Pip Squeak and Wilfrid, or Freeman Hardy and Willis. The name and service number of the individual is inscribed around the edge of each medal, so the owner can always be traced through records.

David was fortunate to purchase a Military Cross Medal from a Reading shop and researched the Supplement to the London Gazette of 17<sup>th</sup> September 1917 which published the awards of the Military Cross, and discovered that it was awarded to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Arthur Graham William Browne Shrops L.I. Spec. Res. for conspicuous gallantry during a hostile raid and giving the details.

The earliest medal in David's collection is the China Medal dating from 1837. It is the China Dragon, which is the school badge of Rhaniket School.

David was a mine of information about service medals, and the reason they were issued. The ribbons were as interesting as the medals, each colour representing an aspect of the campaign at which they were issued. The Ribbon colours of the Defence Medal issued after the 1939 - 1945 War are green for fields, black for the black-out and orange for the flames of the blitz.

Also in David's collection were books on medals for collectors, and other information of particular interest among which was a brochure from an auction house offering the memorabilia of Johnny Johnston the well known W.W.11 R.A.F. pilot. Also memorabilia of Ginger Lacey, another R.A.F. pilot who is accredited as having shot down the plane that bombed Buckingham Palace. These kinds of memorabilia are part of the national archive, and are usually bought by museums. It was a very full evening, with much to look at and think about. Members brought their own family medals to be viewed. From Service medals to good conduct school medals, all had a story to tell. To end the evening David told us that he happened to see in a newspaper that a reader wanted to know

what all the medals worn by Lance Corp Jones in 'Dad's Army' were for. David was able to answer the query by naming the 11 medals, which were accurate, and in date order.

On 15<sup>th</sup> February, Roy Burton came to talk about John Betjeman. Even those people who are not particularly interested in poetry would almost certainly recognise the distinctive rhythms of John Betjeman's writing. Roy Burton a member of the Betjeman Society, spoke with great knowledge and affection about the poet he never met. John Betjeman was born in Highgate in 1906. He attended Byron House School in Highgate and was a boarder at the Dragon School Oxford and was at Marlborough College, Wiltshire from 1920 - 1925. Having failed the Divinity Examination at Oxford twice Betjeman spent a brief spell at teaching. He joined the staff of the Architectural Review in 1930. In 1933 he was secretly married to Penelope Chetwode. A son was born in 1937 and a daughter in 1942. He held a variety of posts including film critic, press attaché to The Ministry of Information and to Publications Branch of the Admiralty. In 1934 the couple moved from a London flat to Uffington in Berkshire where he became a churchwarden of St. Mary's Church Wantage.

In 1941, John was posted to Dublin as Press Attaché to Sir John Maffey, the British Representative. He and Penelope rented a Georgian mansion called Collinstown, near Dublin Airport where a second daughter was born. John's reports were read with pleasure in Whitehall, but at first he was widely regarded by the Irish as a British spy. In 1945, the Betjeman family moved into a late 17<sup>th</sup> century house, formerly the Rectory, at Farnborough Berkshire. In 1951, the family moved from Farnborough to The Mead, a Victorian house in nearby Wantage. A friend and authority on Alfred the Great, thought it likely that the house stood on the site of Alfred's Palace. In the 1950's John, whose main income now came from book reviewing, broadcasting and his poems began dividing his time between Wantage and a house in Cloth Fair in London. In 1960 John Betjeman was awarded the O.B.E. and The Queens Gold Medal for Poetry and was named Poet Laureate in 1972. From his boyhood John Betjeman came to know the County of Cornwall where family holidays were spent. He retained a love of Cornwall throughout his life, and died on the 19<sup>th</sup> May 1984, at Trebetherick and was buried at St Enodoc's Church Trebetherick.

Excerpts from the poetry, which is known and loved by so many, punctuated the talk. The Betjeman Society was founded in 1988. This is a flourishing Society with a membership approaching 700. There are 60 members in the Wantage area where he lived. The aims of the Society are to promote the study and appreciation of the Poet's life and work. Applications for membership are welcome from all who are interested in the aims of the Society.

Following our AGM and election of new officers, Rita Denman proceeded to enthral us all with a talk similar to one she gave at St. Mary's Church recently.

Rita opened her talk by showing us an old sword and gun found buried in the garden behind Jasmine Cottage in Purley Village at some time before 1963.

Rita spoke about the village pond close to Ivy Cottage whilst husband Ron changed the pictures on the screen. Other lovely pictures followed as Rita continued - St. Mary's Church, a painting of the old Manor House, the Infants School. There were pictures of cottages now long gone. Interesting to learn that the pond was used for cleaning the farm carts as a Saturday ritual. Rita touched on the fact that she was able to find out further information on the village from Lloyd George's survey carried out just prior to World War I. She reflected on some of the gossip and intrigue of various locals in the community of yesteryear. A few shots of some of Purley's earlier residents were shown.

Coming more up to date, Rita spoke about the Trenthams building establishment that flourished for many years, now remembered by the roundabout on the A329 at Purley - "Trenthams Roundabout". Among the many prestigious buildings completed by Trenthams mentioned were the Gatwick Airport Control Tower and a large block in Reading.

In closing the talk a lovely anecdote arose when a lady seated in the gathering told us that her husband was, in fact, a relative of a female shown in one of Rita's slides! The picture showed a lady standing in her doorway. She was a certain Lottie Luker of whom our guest's husband had spoken about over the years.

Thank you Rita and Ron - that is what Project Purley is all about.

Tom Hine

#### Mapledurham and other local areas featured on film and television

During my search for information about various water and wind millers, I do find some interesting facts which I collate just in case one day there might be some sort of interest somewhere along the line. For instance, of local interest especially to T.V. and film buffs, Mapledurham Mill (and one or two other local mills) were used as film and T.V. settings. Most folk are aware that the late 1970's film, *The Eagle has Landed* starring Michael Caine used the village and the mill for much of the action. In fact the mill and lower millpond benefited much by way of restoration by Kelso Films and, of course, the rebuilding of the dilapidated water wheel. (In the film where the unfortunate soldier is caught up in the water wheel, you may be surprised to know that the water wheel shown in the film is in the wrong place. If you study the film closely, you will see that, where the wheel should be,

there is just a large hole in the brickwork where the shaft should run through!) The film plot is about the attempted assassination of Sir Winston Churchill somewhere in Norfolk.

Mapledurham was used for part of the filming of the T.V. production of *Vanity Fair* and also *Children of the New Forest*. At least one episode of the T.V. period drama *Sharpe* (a favourite programme of mine) was shot around the mill. An episode of *Inspector Morse* featured the lovely old mill and the makers of *Class Act* also chose this location.

Mapledurham Mill was again featured in the Children's Workshop Foundation film, *The London Connection*. It was filmed in the 1970s and recently shown again on Television. One scene showed bullets burying themselves in the door of the old mill...so realistic was the scene that, when the current miller, Mildred Cookson, turned up the next day at the Mill, people were waiting for her - they requested some bullets for souvenirs!

So, there are seven titles I have, can you add any more to my list?

I have many more mills used as film backdrops throughout England, Europe and America. However, back to base and not too far away, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* was filmed just north of Henley at Ibstone. Cobstone Windmill is perched on a hill overlooking the lovely village of Turville. (Well worth a run out one Sunday afternoon to walk off the Sunday lunch and enjoy some marvellous views). The film contained some wonderful aerial footage showing the mill sails turning merrily.

Westwards from Purley twixt Newbury and Hungerford, *A Quiet Weekend* was set around Hamstead Marshall mill on the River Kennet (I saw the film at least twice).

The last one I have listed and not too far away was *Charlie Moon* made in 1955 and starring Max Bygraves. This setting was at Greywell Mill on the River Whitewater near Basingstoke.

Now, if you don't mind, I am going to settle down and watch a good film on T.V. It's a Jonathan Creek detective mystery - and, oh yes, featuring Shipley Windmill in Sussex!

Tom Hine

Sources of reference include:

1. S.P.A.B. Mills section
2. Reading Evening Post
3. Joan Wilcox (Pangbourne W.I. talk)
4. Purley Parish Magazine
5. John Vince papers
6. H.E.S. Simmons papers (Kensington Imperial Library)
7. River Whitewater booklet
8. B.B.C. T.V.

In the January Newsletter we promised to show some photographs of the Christmas Social. True to our word .....



## COMMITTEE

- Chairman: Jean DEBNEY 8 Huckleberry Close  
(0118) 9413223 Purley on Thames  
e-mail: jeandebney@onename.demon.co.uk
- Treasurer: Rick Jones The Gatehouse  
(0118) 9623793 Purley Lane  
Purley on Thames  
e-mail: jonesrj@uk.ibm.com
- Secretary Rita Denman The Mimosas  
(0118) 9844682 Purley Village  
Purley on Thames  
e-mail: RMaryDenman@aol.com
- Editor: Ann Betts 4 Allison Gardens  
(0118) 9422485 Purley on Thames  
e-mail: annb@ntlworld.com
- Committee Millie Bordiss 2 Hillview Close  
(0118) 9415777 Tilehurst  
e-mail: milliehenryb@hotmail.com
- John CHAPMAN 5 Cecil Aldin Drive  
(0118) 9426999 Tilehurst  
e-mail: john@purley.demon.co.uk
- Pat DEANE 183 Long Lane  
(0118) 9426180 Tilehurst  
e-mail: pat@terramech.co.uk
- Cliff Debney 8 Huckleberry Close  
(0118) 9413223 Purley on Thames  
e-mail: cliffdebney@onename.demon.co.uk
- David Downs 99, Long Lane  
(0118) 942 4167 Tilehurst



PICTURE QUIZ



Do you know where this is?

*No prize is offered for the first correct answer received.*

Solution to January 2002 Picture Quiz: - Greys Court, near Henley-on-Thames