



Account of Purley on Thames

Flooding

Introduction

These days Purley gets a flood of some sort every year and frequently hits the local or even national news on account of it. However if one looks at the geography of the Thames basin at Purley one can see we have the steeply rising banks to the north becoming the Chilterns and the wide plain to the south averaging about half a mile before rising steeply to the Tilehurst plateau. If we look farther afield we are just below the Goring Gap which drains most of central England and just above the confluence of Thames, Kennet and Loddon. Around the Tilehurst station area the north and south banks converge leaving a much narrower channel, so, when there is an excess of water, it is going to pile up just upstream of this narrowing. The problem is that this is just where people have chosen to build their houses and all their pleas for 'something to be done about it' fall upon deaf ears as there is nothing practicable that can be done, especially when one realises that only about a third of the water is held in the river bed and two thirds flow through the river gravels just below the surface. The best that can be done is to slow the rate of flow by building bunds as it is the force of moving water which causes most damage.

Water Meadows

In past centuries however the flooding has been welcomed as it rejuvenates the ecology of the area. The meadows alongside the Thames have retained their value because of regular flooding. In mediaeval times flooding was actually encouraged as it provided an ideal way to re-invigorate the grasses which were so essential to the well being of the animals of the village.

The term 'water-meadow' usually implied a fairly sophisticated method of controlling the flow of water so that the maximum benefit could be obtained, and there seems to be evidence of such control in the area where the Sul Brook enters the Thames. In 1734 the Lord of the manor of Whitchurch laid claim to the Pangbourne water meadows for himself and his freemen. The section of meadows between Pangbourne and opposite Hardwick had long been shared between the parishes of Pangbourne, Whitchurch, Sulham and Purley and always seemed to have had a very special status, indicating the sort of management which went along with a water meadow. Even today much of the ground is still undulating showing fairly clearly the shallow channels which were a feature of water meadows.

It would probably have worked by partial damming of the brook and diverting the water along shallow depressions to provide the maximum spread of water. In very dry summers this could easily yield a complete extra crop of hay. In some parts of the country it was used to grow water cress but this seems unlikely in this area.

In any event there was usually two or three floods of the meadows each spring and after exceptional rains almost the whole valley floor could be submerged.

The Great Floods

Flooding on a large scale is usually a noteworthy event and as such will often be recorded. In Purley's case this was often in the Parish Register. The earliest bad flood recorded was in 1648 when there was also a failure of the harvest bringing near starvation to many villages. (ref 427)

On March 11th 1774 the rector, Benjamin Skinner recorded: The greatest flood in the river Thames remembered to have happened within the memory of the oldest inhabitants. The water ran into the church which is an event of which there is no tradition ever to have happened before. The water in the church was ankle deep and continued there for several hours' The church is in fact built on a slight mound and so the water must have been exceptionally high. (ref 27)

On 29th October 1848 it was noted 'There was so high a flood this day that the congregation were conveyed to and from the church in waggons'.

In November 1852 the rector noted 'A very high flood, the churchyard impassible. Divine Service in the schoolroom for two Sundays

In 1862 the note read 'After a very dry and mild winter a high flood in March, not so high as '48 or '52'

In 1873 Mrs Leila Fullerton recorded ' Church Walk raised from farm gate owing to constant flood' On 25th October 1875 she recorded ' The highest flood ever known here, rather higher than the great flood of 1852'

The highest ever flood was recorded at Mapledurham lock in November 1894 at 4 feet 4 inches.

In January 1915 there was a very bad spell of flooding which evoked considerable comment in the local papers. On 9th Jan it reported that Pangbourne had been hit by the highest flood for 20 years and that there had been no services in Purley Church. Large tracts of land had been submerged. In late December and early January there had been incessant rains during which the river had risen steadily. It reached its peak on Wednesday 6th Jan and with a short spell of better weather it fell in many places, however at Mapledurham it continued rising. For the 9 weeks ending Jan 5th there had been 12.36 inches of rain in the Thames Valley equivalent to 3.015 Billion tons of water spread over 3812 square miles. Another inch had fallen up to the 16th. This was well over twice the average for this period.

The Mercury published a table of statistics for Caversham Lock which read:-

Date	head	tail (feet-inches)
Nov 1894	12-6	4-6
Feb 1900	10-11	3-8
June 1903	10-9	3-1
Feb 1904	10-10	3-6
Dec 1910	10-11	3-6
5 Jan 1915	10-9	3-6
6 Jan 1915	10-9	3-5 ½
7 Jan 1915	10-8 ½	3-5
8 Jan 1915	10-9	3-7

Flood Control

Coping with Emergencies

