

Account of Purley on Thames

History of St Mary's Church - Introduction

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Writing a Church History

This account of the history of the church and clergy of St Mary's Purley has been compiled mainly for my own satisfaction to document the results of many years of research. I have tried wherever possible to include references to some of the great changes that have taken place in the church in England over the past thousand years or so and to set these changes into the context of Purley's church history.

In writing the history of a church one has to make many choices of what to include and what not to include. Regrettably the majority of the history has long been forgotten and what remains is either documented in the written record and needs to be discovered or is evident in what remains. We know for instance that we have a perpendicular style window which has been dated to the fourteenth Century and the record tells us that it has been reset twice in the last 120 years. We have no way of knowing when it was built, whether it is a Purley original or came from another church or why it was built. But we can make reasonable assumptions based on knowledge of ancient practices and customs about its origins and so I have not hesitated to speculate or make assumptions where I believe them to be reasonable and this should be quite clear from the text.

The arrangement I have favoured is to take most events chronologically and relate them to the periods of tenure of our many clergy. This leaves a number of loose ends so there are a number of sections dealing with specific subjects.

I have tried to work in every fact that has emerged but as we approach the present day this becomes more and more difficult as the volume of material rises. It is thus not feasible to comment on every entry in the parish registers or all the material that is in the Parish Magazine today. All this detailed information is more of interest to those who wish to reconstruct family histories or to gain an insight into the day to day affairs of the people of Purley.

I must acknowledge my indebtedness to many who have helped me, but above all to Jean Debney whose passionate interest in the history of Purley brought to light many sources which would otherwise have remained hidden. Of the others may I mention David Evans, the former rector, Pamela Stewart the assistant archivist for the Diocese of Salisbury, Dr Brian Kemp of the University of Reading and Jennifer Thorpe formerly of the Berkshire Record Office. My thanks also to those bemused clergy around the country who were taken somewhat aback after a service when I said I was enquiring after one of their predecessors who left to come to Purley in 14xx. David Evans warned me that one day I would meet someone who did remember as if it were yesterday, but I haven't been caught out yet.

The Historical Background

The early history of the church in Purley is shrouded in the mists of time. In Roman times there were probably a number of Christians in the area which formed part of the territory of the Atrebatas, a tribe centred upon Silchester, or to give it its Roman name Calleva Atrebatum. The remains of what is presumed to be a Christian church have been found there during excavations. In recent years a Christian font, also dating from Roman times, has been found at Caversham.

In AD 635 St Birinus was sent to Wessex to supplement the work of St. Augustine in Kent. He was given a site in Dorchester on Thames as the seat of his see by King Cynegils whom he had converted to Christianity. For many years Birinus tramped across the downs preaching and founding churches.

The seat of the Diocese of the West Saxons was later moved to Winchester but for a while Purley came under the jurisdiction of the Bishops of Lincoln as Mercia engulfed this part of Berkshire in 758 . It eventually returned to Wessex in 851. Soon after, in 908, the Diocese of Winchester was split and Purley became part of the Diocese of Ramsbury which was formed essentially from Berkshire and Wiltshire. Shortly after the Conquest, Ramsbury, which had by then also taken in Dorset became the Diocese of Salisbury. There Purley remained until 1836 when it was transferred to Oxford.

The first church was probably built in Purley in the late 9th or early 10th centuries and was rebuilt or extended in the 12th, 14th, 17th, 19th and 20th centuries. It must be unique in that its incumbent was ejected or deprived almost every time there was a religious upheaval in England. The roll of Rectors goes back at least to 1248 and includes a good cross section of typical English clergy.

For many centuries the population of Purley was small and stable, but in recent years it has exploded and now the church serves a bustling community of commuters and suburbanites as well as retaining many of the characteristics of a rural parish

