

Account of Purley on Thames

The Advowson of Purley

R200298 22/6/2018

It is likely we will never know when Purley acquired its first church buildings and its own parish priest. It seems to have been well before the founding of Reading Abbey in 1121 as one of the Abbey's founding revenues was the pension of 2s pa paid previously to St Mary le Butts. It was ordered to be paid to the Abbot of Reading by Henry I in 1125 when the church at Purley was described as 'ancient'. However around 1150 Bishop Jocelyn of Salisbury confirmed that this did not give the Abbot any rights over the church at Purley. The Advowson, or right to Patronage was believed to have been held by the lords of the manor of Purley Magna until the mid 14th century.

In 1291 all churches were assessed for what was known as Pope Nicholas' Taxation, the purpose of which was to raise money to boost the eighth crusade which was failing. At this assessment the church of Purley was assessed as being worth £4-6-8 and a tax of one tenth, ie 8s 8d was demanded for the next six years.

This assessment was used for many centuries as the basis for a variety of taxes and patrons took great care to ensure that any new buildings were classified as lay and hence not subject to a revised assessment. It would have been used as the basis of a levy of a farthing in the pound to support a teacher of Hebrew at Oxford University which had to be collected from all the parishes of Berkshire by the Archdeacon and delivered to the Prior of Holy Trinity, London by 7th July 1321. He raised £1-7-6 of which Purley's share would have been about a penny.

The advowson had fallen into the hands of the College of St Edmund in Salisbury by 1361. This followed a national trend as during this period the religious houses were active in acquiring assets. The king, the pope and the bishops were all attempting to extract revenues from ecclesiastical property owned by laymen and devised a remarkable array of taxes and impositions. It became relatively easy for a lay patron to get himself seriously in debt and redeem himself by passing over the asset to a religious foundation who were usually exempt.

The College of St Edmund had been founded in Salisbury in 1269 by Walter de la Wyle. It provided a centre for 12 priests and a number of lay brothers. It had been struggling along as a relatively impoverished foundation, not fulfilling its founder's objects. In 1309 only six priests were resident and when Bishop Robert Wyville held an enquiry in 1339 he reported that there had never been more than seven there since its foundation, and its revenues were barely enough even to provide for seven. From 1339 under its Prior, Peter de Wymbourne, the College embarked on a policy of acquiring additional revenues and by 1362 it had a full set of priests. Undoubtedly it was as a result of this policy that the advowson of Purley came into the College's hands. Its successive Priors made presentations to the vicarage of Purley for many years until the College was dissolved.

Henry VII raised considerable sums of money through both Parliament and the Convocation of

Canterbury, mainly to finance his wars with France. The taxes were known as 'Benevolences' because they were intended to be paid only by the well off and Purley was exempted three times in 1487, 1491 and 1492 as being worth less than 12 Marks (£8). It was made to pay in 1489 when it was assessed for two payments of 3/4.

In 1534 King Henry VIII ordered a valuation of the assets of all religious houses and churches and the results were recorded in the 'Valor Ecclesiasticus' In it the living of Purley is recorded as being worth £12-17-3 and paying pensions of two shillings to the Abbot of Reading and twenty shillings to the Prior of the College of St. Edmund.

In 1539 the college was surrendered to King Henry VIII and on the death of Provost John Gough in 1543 the office was given to William St Barbe, a layman of the King's privy chamber. Dissolution came in June 1546 when the Mayor of Salisbury and others took formal possession of the College and all its assets for the use of the King.

Two months later William St Barbe purchased the College for £400 including the patronage of Purley which he held until his death, whereupon it reverted to the Crown. Queen Mary in 1554 was the first monarch to exercise her patronage. It was transferred to the Lord Chancellor's department in 1822 for convenience, where it remains today.