

Account of Purley on Thames

Church - The Saxon Background

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The Saxon Background

During the Saxon period the church in England underwent a remarkable change which transformed it from an urban based missionary sect with only a minority following, to a rural based pillar of the establishment to which the whole population subscribed.

In Roman and Celtic times the church consisted of a bishop and his immediate entourage, usually known as his 'family' who ministered to a congregation of believers who were almost exclusively town dwellers. They would tend to meet at the house of a rich patron and only rarely would they have a specialised building set aside for worship. An example of such a building was discovered during excavations at nearby Silchester. Many communities survived the Saxon migrations and formed their own 'town equivalents' in a monastic setting.

Augustine and his contemporaries established similar communities although usually based upon the Court of the several kings. The English dioceses in consequence were very large and based upon the kingdom rather than the town, as for example was the case in Italy. When Christianity re-established itself in the towns it was an 'archpriest' rather than a bishop who ruled over the community. There remained a strong residue of Celtic communities and there was much tension between the old Celtic and new Roman traditions, particularly over the episcopal role and the date of Easter.

These new urban communities gradually evolved into the Minsters and Collegiate Churches and formed the 'Public' church. The Collegiate Churches, many of which were destined to become the cathedrals of later ages served the urban areas and the Minsters provided a home for priests who served the rural communities around the towns, although for major festivals and ceremonies the rural folk were expected to attend the town's collegiate church.

In Berkshire three such Minsters are known, at Lambourne, Reading and Sonning and Purley is believed to have been served from Reading at what is now St Mary le Butts.

Points at which rural worship was conducted were usually at the top of a hill or mound and marked by a cross either of stone or wood and often elaborately carved. They often coincided in location with the site of standing stones believed to have been associated with ancient religious ceremonies.

From the late seventh century however a new pattern began to emerge. Nobles built themselves private chapels and engaged their own chaplains who usually ministered to the nobles' servants as well. This practice spread gradually to the lesser nobles and the owners of estates who would often provide a small building for the use of their villagers, usually on the same site as the standing crosses. The process accelerated when ownership of such a church along with four hides of land became recognised as a qualification for an advance up the social scale from Ceorl to Thegn.

By the mid-eighth century these estate churches were widespread and by the time of the Conquest virtually every village and hamlet had its church. It is reported that the church of St James the Less was founded in nearby Pangbourne in 834 and we can surmise that Purley would not have been far behind. Rather than engaging their own chaplains most of the lesser lords were content to leave spiritual affairs to the priests from the Minsters as there was a severe shortage of clergy.

Most villages had churches by the time of the Conquest and many were recorded in the Domesday survey of 1086. None were recorded for Purley but this is more likely to indicate that the glebe lands

were either still owned by the proprietor, and hence included in his return or that there were no glebe lands; rather than implying that there was no church.

Purley's earliest known incumbent John was termed a vicar in 1248 and had control of meadow land but in 1332 Walter Fachel was referred to as Rector. However all his successors up to the time of Henry VIII were vicars and the living did not become a rectory again until the appointment of Richard Gatskyll by Queen Mary.

