

Account of Purley on Thames

Perspectives of Purley

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Introduction

One can look at Purley from several perspectives. The perspective seen by the vast majority each day is that from the train. Many thousands of people rush through Purley every day at speeds of 125 miles per hour without realising where they are or really what they are seeing, that is if they are even looking out of the window at all. The number of travellers who pass through by road is still much larger than the resident population but considerably less than by rail.

Perhaps the most important group is those who live here and see it as the setting for their home. They see the outlook from their home, they see the streets as they journey about their business or the footpaths as they get their daily exercise.

Then there is the smaller group of people who regularly come into Purley to work or to visit friends or relations. They see the route into where they are visiting, but rarely anything beyond.

The final three groups are very small. These are first the river travellers who pass leisurely by on the river, second the explorer or rambler who finds himself in the village and finally the air traveller who speeds overhead in the airliner, military plane or private plane who happens to glance down at just the right moment.

What sort of a picture do they see of modern Purley and how has that view changed over the years. These are the questions which are to be answered in this section.

From The Railway

The rail traveller will in fact see very little of Purley even in winter-time when the trees are bare. Approaching from Tilehurst station one has the river Thames on the right and a steep cutting side on the left.

If you look up to your left you can just see fleeting glimpses of modern houses and you pass under four red-brick Bridges. Suddenly just beyond Westbury Lane you emerge from the cutting to be greeted by the caravans at Caravanners, then as the ground drops away you are perched on an embankment with a glorious view across the Pang Valley to the wooded hills above Sulham to your left and above Tidmarsh to your right. You look out over fields in cultivation to the main road in the distance, more fields beyond and only a limited view of housing. Suddenly the railway crosses the Sul Brook and your view is overtaken by the council estate at Marsh Farm and you are into the built up area of Pangbourne.

For the passenger looking to his right from Tilehurst, the river scene suddenly becomes obscured by trees as the river swings northwards and away from the railway. The marina bursts into view in the winter time and frankly looks very delapidated and forlorn. This is not a good time to look at boats. In the summer time the marina is almost totally screened by trees. There is a very brief open aspect when you can catch a glimpse of the church, then the roofs of the council houses in River Gardens. Once you reach the first bridge under New Hill the cutting rises very steeply and as on the other side you can just catch fleeting glimpses of modern houses. As you emerge from the cutting past Westbury Lane however the view is dramatic. Framed by the steep hills of Hardwick and Whitchurch beyond the river, one can see the extensive vineyards, followed by the cluster of

Buildings dating from the 17th century to modern times which form the last residues of Purley Parva, the flat fields of the flood plain, spoilt by a high tension electric grid line on ugly pylons, down to the river which is now clearly visible again. As you rush over the Sul Brook the sewage farm becomes visible and attracts the attention and then after passing the Pangbourne playing fields and the meadows beyond, the built up area of Pangbourne takes over.

The views have changed very little since the railway was first opened in 1840. The early traveller would not have seen the modern buildings and the cutting was not so well endowed with trees, but the views from the embankment just before you get into Pangbourne would have seemed very rural and unspoiled, a really glorious pastoral scene.

From The Main Road

About 13,500 vehicles a day (1988) pass through Purley along the Oxford to Reading road. As you leave Reading the scene changes abruptly to a surprising rural aspect with trees dominating both sides of the road except for the very obtrusive Shanley estate which will need years to regrow its flanking trees. On the right you see the close boarded fences of the back gardens of Skerritt Way and on the left are first the entrance to Roebuck Rise and then to Theobald Drive. Finally the entrances to houses with very long drives which were part of the earlier ribbon development of the Oxford Road. You are just aware that you are travelling through a built up area, but only just.

As you reach the edge of the Wimpey development the first house on Goodliffe Gardens stands out like a sore thumb. There is the roundabout ahead and even more houses all around, you can get a clearer view of the housing in Purley Beeches and the aspect is distinctly urban.

Around the roundabout and as you climb the hill the banks rise again on either side and the more typical Purley view again prevails. In time the vegetation on this stretch will re-establish itself to soften the ravages of the developer. A paved footpath leads off into Purley Beeches and New Hill joins on the right.

At the Long Lane traffic lights the scene changes again. On both opposite corners there are buildings, a modern block of flats to your left and a more traditional cottage to your right. Soon you approach a rather garish roundabout and the milestone to your left gives a clue that this was once a turnpike. Also on your left is a large white house to be turned into flats. As you pass along Purley Rise the scene is that of a typical strip village with a few shops, a thatched cottage, 1970s and 1930s type houses, junctions, parking problems but otherwise very undistinguished.

Beyond Glebe Road and the top of the Rise the scene reverts to the wooded embankment on the left and more houses on the right. After about half a mile the houses give way to hedges on the right and the suddenly you round a bend and see the gatehouses of Purley Hall on your right.

Beyond Purley Hall the hedges are somewhat sparse and you can see into the fields beyond on either side. The views are quite interesting unless you are driving and having to keep your eyes strictly on the road. As you cross the Sul Brook you are into the built up area of Pangbourne. In the days of the stage coach the main highway through Purley ran in a cutting, it was known as Purley Cutting until the 1930s. The banks on either side were topped with trees and hedges and the embankment itself was covered in scrubby growth. There was little sign of Purley which nestled below with two or three steep roads down to the village.

From Long Lane

The other ancient road regularly traversed by through traffic is Long Lane. From its junction with the Oxford Road at the traffic lights it rises at around one in twelve on average with houses and the occasional side road to the right. On the right there used to be the glorious screen of whitebeams surrounding Trenthams but much of the scene has been spoilt by fences before you reach Long Lane School. The houses on the right are generally newer and larger than those on the left but there is

nothing of any distinction to see. Further up Long Lane gives a particularly urban aspect even though just beyond it the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty begins. Unfortunately this cannot be seen from the road, except for a brief glance across Long Lane School's playing field. A better view is to be had across Denefield School's fields which are just outside the Parish.

Long Lane has changed dramatically within recent years. Until the 1960s it was a narrow country lane, very like the stretch beyond Dark Lane. There were huge elm trees on either side whose branches met overhead to form a tunnel-like aspect. Most of these trees were lost to widen the road and the last few perished as a result of Dutch Elm disease in the 1970s

From Knowsley Road

This is the only other road which is traversed by people who do not wish to stop in Purley. It was planned as the main distribution road for the Wimpey estate and does just that. From the roundabout on the Oxford Road it rises fairly steeply with houses on either side, although there are a few houses which actually front onto the road, none of which are in Purley. It is a very undistinguished modern road through a modern housing development.

Purley from the River

To most people passing by along on the river Purley hardly exists. One approaches it past Tilehurst station and the railway line hugging the river bank, preventing even a tow path. Then the entrance to the marina looms and one can see the miscellaneous collection of boats and boat houses through the trees which does little to enhance the river scene.

Then you pass the short stretch of River Gardens which is now much improved over what it was thirty years ago when a writer on the Thames described it as a dreary bungalowscope. Some of the houses now are very impressive but there is the occasional glimpse of one of the old shacks. From here the Towpath starts and until Pangbourne is reached there is always the chance of seeing a walker or fisherman.

Beyond River Gardens the houses fall back and the scene gives way to river meadows. The river is pointing due north at this point with several small islands to break up the scene. At this point the eye is more naturally taken across towards Mapledurham with its great house and mill. At the lock the traveller passes through Purley for the only time.

Until recently the Oxfordshire boundary lay about two feet in from the southerly river bank as it borders Purley but from 1991 the boundary has been the centre line. It was only because the lock was constructed across a promontory that the boundary was breached by the river navigation. The lock gives a good impression as it has always been well cared for by its lockkeepers and they take a real pride in the gardens and flowers.

Beyond the lock you could be a million miles away from Purley. The buildings have disappeared in the far distance, if you can see them at all. The river wends its way along a very rural scene, perhaps one of the most beautiful stretches anywhere. This was spoiled somewhat recently when large fences were erected around Springs Equestrian. The banks rise steeply on the northern side and the only sign of habitation is Hardwick House.

This scene persists until you finally begin to approach Pangbourne on the left and Whitchurch on the right.

The View from Hardwick

There is one further way in which Purley may be viewed and that is from across the river. The best spot is from the hill above Mapledurham and Hardwick. What immediately strikes you is the number of trees. Most of Purley is hidden in what looks like a dense wood on the side of a rising hill.

As you scan from left to right the first scenes are mainly the river as it flows past Tilehurst station with distant views of Reading above. Then the tower of the church stands out above the cluster of houses forming the river estate. More houses straggle up the hill poking through the trees, but one hopes that eventually the scars of the Wimpey estate will be softened as newly planted trees mature.

Lister Close stands out like a sore thumb and then the white shape of Belleisle Farm House can be seen, now very exposed as the trees in front of have been felled. Purley Rise can be seen topping the roofs of Glebe Road and then the houses disappear. The glorious view over the Pang Valley can be seen with the broad fields of the plain forming a frontispiece.

Pangbourne is almost invisible but the flats on Hartslock Close stand out above a very rustic scene of the river and the Whitchurch Toll bridge.

