

Who'd Have a Concubine?

Well at least two of Purley's Rectors did. For those who have lead sheltered lives a concubine is a cohabiting woman without the benefit of marriage lines. In the days when the clergy were supposed to be celibate, many of them had a concubine, everyone knew about it but turned a blind eye. Occasionally however a new bishop came along and decided to bring things back to order. This seemed to happen in the 1390s in Purley just after John Waltham became Bishop of Salisbury. Each bishop was supposed to hold a visitation every three years at which the clergy had to present their credentials, the churchwardens had to prepare a report and all were subject to questioning by the bishop. We have quite a number of visitation reports for Purley from the 1700s, these are in the Wiltshire Record Office and are very readable. Churchwardens presentments from 1665 to 1835 are in the Berkshire Record Office and from 1836 onwards in the Oxfordshire Archives. We recently came upon some for Purley from the 1550s in the WRO. But in Bishop Waltham's Register there are copies of visitation reports for 1391 and 1394. This register has recently been published by the Canterbury and York Society and while we were hoping that there would be information about Purley, it is noticeable that the Purley returns are missing. For 1391 Pangbourne, Sulham and Tidmarsh are there but not Purley. The answer seems to be tucked away at the back of the Register where cases of recorded of two different vicars being accused of concubinage. William Smyth (vicar 1387-1390) had by the time of the 1391 visitation become Vicar of Chobham in Surrey, and hence outside the jurisdiction of Bishop Waltham. One can surmise that Isabel Seman had been named by William's successor, Thomas Bonelyth (vicar 1390-1391) and the matter referred to the bishop of Winchester. He no doubt took action against William and Isobel was kicked out. She would then have had to return to her own parish (Purley) as a destitute. Now she was within Bishop Waltham's jurisdiction and on 13th August 1394 she was summoned to the bishop's palace at Sonning and confessed that she had been William's concubine for 5 years and had had several sons by him, one of whom was still a babe in arms. As a penance she was ordered to go around Reading market place on seven suitable market days to receive public punishment. She had to go around bare headed and bare footed wearing only her under-tunic with her hair hanging loose. She had to do the same around Purley on the next seven festival days. The 1394 visitation seems to have caught Stephen atte Wall (vicar 1391-1405) who was still vicar and so came under bishop Waltham. The archdeacon was told on the 17th August 1394 to issue Stephen with a severe warning that his concubine Rose must leave Purley vicarage within three days. Stephen had confessed under oath that Rose had been his concubine but she was more of a housekeeper and he had not had intercourse with her for six years. However he was told in no uncertain terms that she must go and that there must be no improper meetings in suspicious places. He had to go to Sherborne in September 1394 to do his penance before the bishop.

The News of the World would have had a field day with the 1391 reports. The reports for Newbury Deanery especially are full of accusations of adultery, fornication and mal-practices. Stephen Albury of Thatcham was apparently paid 20s by John Chiseldon so that the latter could have intercourse with Stephen's wife Marion. The vicar of Bucklebury was fined 6s 4d for the woman living with him whom he claimed was his sister. The vicar of Kintbury was accused of letting his beasts foul the churchyard and allowing William Alisander to remove 300 lbs of lead from the church roof. Henry Sutter of Beedon was accused of not attending church on a Sunday, rather he set up a stall outside the church to sell shoes at service times. John Huntingdon the vicar of Basildon was cited for committing adultery with Agnes Schepard and Emma Tresher, both of Basildon. Also Thomas Pye vicar of Aldworth was involved with Agnes Clerke of Basildon. - A fascinating read!