

Account of Purley on Thames

Crofts, Shaws and Piddles

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When the Ordnance Survey began to provide detailed maps of the English Countryside they adopted a new system of identifying fields simply numbering all the fields in a parish in sequence. Later this was changed to a number derived from the OS grid reference of their centre point. This may have all been very efficient but what it resulted in was an almost complete disappearance of the ancient field names which were a glory of agriculture from mediaeval to Victorian times. Luckily many estate maps from the 18th and 19th centuries have survived and with them the names of many of the old fields.

Apart from the Pond Field and River Meadow none of the fields in Purley are commonly known by names today and even those two are modern inventions. Farmers often have names for their fields but few other than themselves ever use them. Names have survived for some wooded areas but often too these have been given modern names rather than preserving the ancient names.

The old field names often incorporate a word which describes its function as well as a naming word. For example Meadows and Meads were fields adjacent to water which were used for producing hay; Closes and Crofts were pieces of enclosed land usually used for keeping specific types of animals in (or sometimes out)

The Parish Council have decided to revive one of Purley's ancient field names for their new recreation ground adjacent to the burial ground. On June 17th this is going to be named Goosecroft. The original Goosecroft was somewhat bigger and covered all the present recreation ground area and a bit more beside. One may presume this was the field where the villagers kept their geese. Purley had several other 'crofts'; we can assume Horsecroft was used for keeping horses and I leave to your imagination what Duncroft was used for.

Several of the old names have been used to name roads in the village in recent years. For example Kernham Drive recalls a large field called Kernhams which covered roughly the area now occupied by Apple Close and Orchard Close. Similarly Elyham recalls the name of the whole area of the former Trenthams site. One name got slightly misunderstood. It was intended to be called Simmonds Close after the name of the family of village blacksmiths who gave their name to a field roughly where Cecil Aldin Drive now is. However when officialdom published the name it had been transformed to Simons Close.

Another interesting word used in naming was piddle or pigtel. Originally this was a small piece of land which formed part of one of the great open fields but these too gradually were enclosed. The emphasis is on 'small' as we still use this in a different context to describe something 'piddling' or so small as to be hardly worth while. We had quite a few of these in Purley although they were not actually that small; Ilsley Piddle was where the eastern end of Beech Road and Belleisle now are, Farmers Piddle was to the south of this. Block Piddle and Elms Piddle were to the south of Goosecroft and now form part of the large open field between Long Lane and Sulham Woods. Shepherds Piddle has largely been built on by the houses to the west of Long Lane and Purley Cross Piddle was roughly where Carew Close now is. There were several others in the village.

A warren was a parcel of land where rabbits were encouraged. This day and age one is not inclined to encourage rabbits but in former days they were a valuable source of fresh meat. The land to the east of Purley Hall was used for this purpose and the fields were known as Upper and Lower Warren. Little Warren was where Skerritt Way now is and it gave its name to the wood at the extreme east of the parish which was known as Warren Shaw. A Shaw is a small wood and its use is recalled in Pike Shaw. There were Meadows or Meads running alongside both the Thames and the Sul Brook and the boundaries of many of these are easily recognisable today. Working from the Lock one had first Lock Mead, then Elms Mead, Mr Powys' Meadow and Common Mead which took you to the Sul Brook. Past the Sul Brook was Saltney Mead and lastly Charley Mead. Alongside the Sul Brook was New Mead to the east and Emmetts Mead to the west. The latter name would indicate it was infested with ants, especially when you notice the field further to west was known as Dry Ground.

There is great controversy about the derivation of many of the names which preceded the functional word, traditionalists tend to assume they reflect previous owners or tenants but there are some who believe many are anglicised corruptions of ancient Celtic phrases which described the topography in the same way that many Welsh place names do today. Whatever the truth may be, place and field names are a fascinating study and one can learn a lot from them.