

Account of Purley on Thames

Restoration of Purley Church 1870

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A series of Articles published in Purley Parish News January - March 1981 by Jean Debney

An 1854 Directory described Purley as a "small parish and retired village." Other visitors from early 19th C to just before the last war, mention the dark woods of Purley, the church being in a most sequestered spot, buried in trees by the river. By the time that Nicholas Pevsner wrote his book, *Architecture in Berkshire* (1966) the church was reached along "a regrettable bungalow-scene".

During the 19th C, church restorations in England which had started as a breeze, soon gained gale-force proportions as old buildings were swept away. An early writer said that to be Christian was to be pointed (i.e. Gothic)--and 'to be pointed' Christian. Therefore; he argued, all churches should be Gothic and essentially 13-14th C as found in Westminster Abbey'. The journal of the Camden Society, took up this idea, advised the clergy on restoration, etc., promoted "good" architects and condemned those with ideas they did not approve of and thereby ensured a national uniformity of church architecture. Buildings which did not fit in to these new ideas were altered regardless of age and/or beauty.

By the late 1860s, the Rector and Churchwardens of Purley having seen almost every other church in the area restored, decided that although their church was "not in a positive state of dilapidation or decay, yet the work of restoration was much needed."

The architect, G E Street, was engaged (he also did Tilehurst church in 1856), and Messrs Wheeler of Reading were the contractors. The estimated cost was £1,400, but the final bill was nearer £2,000. Unfortunately, no plans have come to light of this work so that appearance of the church before and after restoration must be pieced together from a variety of sources, especially the Church Wardens, Appeal Leaflet for Restoration Funds!

The original church consisted of tower, nave and chancel. The 17th century chalk and brick-faced tower with its 3' 6" thick walls was left intact. A window in the east wall of the ringing stage was blocked up at some time (this would have overlooked the nave). There are six bells which date from 1627 to 1788 crammed into the belfry. It has not been possible to ring them for more than half a century as the structure of the tower has been weakened by age - but they have occasionally been 'chimed'.

The chancel was divided from the nave by the early 12th century Norman arch which measures only 6' 10" wide by about 10' 6" high. The size of the nave was the same as at present, but the chancel was much shorter. The chancel and nave were compass roofed and "ceiled", that in the chancel retaining some ornamented oak. In the 1860s both walls and ceiling were whitewashed.

The east window contained some well executed stained glass, which Ashmole described in 1666, as being of "St Mark and St John". By the 19th century the faces had been replaced by two coats of arms. On the south wall of the nave was a 15th century window of three cinque-foiled lights under a four-centred head (this is now the east window of the vestry). The other windows, in the north aisle were lancets of an "old design". Everything else was "comparatively modern" and "design in a debased and inappropriate style".

There were originally two entrances to the church. The North door, said to be Early English (i.e. 13th century) was blocked up by 1849. The only remaining entry was the South door, with "a most unsightly porch".

In the nave were "large high pews, a ponderous pulpit reading desk, and the west end was disfigured by a rudely constructed gallery". The outside walls were covered with a "bad imitation of stone work".

It was decided to "remove these defects and to make the Church more worthy of the Service of God" (fortunately, the "defects" did not include the Norman font, nor the 17th and 18th century monuments which were tidied away on to the west wall of the nave, banished into the tower, or hidden in the vestry.)

The work of restoration took 18 months and was started on 13th April 1869. During this time services were held in the Free-school, the schoolroom being duly licensed by the Bishop.

St. Mary's Church, Purley, was re-opened at 11.30 am on Wednesday, 5th October: 1870 by the Bishop of Oxford who preached the sermon. The following is compiled from reports in the Berkshire Chronicle and Reading Mercury, and describes the work that had been carried out during the previous 18 months;

The old church consisted simply of a nave, a small chancel and the brick tower. The chancel was lengthened and the north wall of the nave was replaced by an arcade of three arches with pillars of Bath stone, and a north aisle added. The south wall of the nave was refaced with flints to correspond with the new work. (The old south wall is much thicker than the newer north wall.) A vestry was built on the north side of the chancel. It was intended to leave the roof of the nave as it was, but as work went on it was found to be in a dilapidated condition, and a new roof of russet tiles was put on. (The roof line was lowered almost 2ft at the ridge, as can be seen by marks on the east wall of the tower). A new porch was built to the south door.

The chancel has a handsome ceiling of polished wood panels and has 5 windows - 3 lancets in the south wall one in the north wall containing some old fragments of stone (probably 13th Century), and the east window. This is divided into three lights in the lower part and is filled with stained glass, the central figure being the Crucifixion; This window was presented by Mrs C.B. Storer of Purley Park in memory of her sister.

The reredos is a very fine one with panels of marble and alabaster. The altar was covered with 'a deep crimson cloth, on which were two candlesticks and a burnished cross; the altar rail was of burnished brass. The floor was covered with Godwin tiles.

The old Norman arch, which formerly led to the chancel was reset in the entrance to the organ chamber. The vestry door is on the same side. (In the vestry there are fragments of Norman stone set in the north doorway and window; the east window was originally set in the south wall of the nave and is late 15th century. A lofty, well proportioned arch led from the nave to the chancel, and on the front of the arch was incised in red and blue letters the following: "Enter into His gate with Thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise."

The Norman font stands near the door and is thought to be as old as the 'original building.

The roof of the nave is open; the angle under each pair of beams being half filled with a partition which is pierced with two trefoil apertures. The nave on the south side has three elegant tracery windows (one of which contains stained glass presented by Mrs Sherwood), and there are the same number of windows in the north aisle but of a simpler design. The church was provided with convenient modern sittings which were all free.

There were more than ten Reverends in the congregation to hear the Bishop's sermon on a text

from Ephesians ch 3 v21 "Unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus", and to celebrate Holy Communion at the close of the service. After this, the important guest "took luncheon at the residence of Major Storer" who was one of the Churchwardens. And the church of St. Mary's, Purley, was ready for the next century of its long history.