



Communal Pyrford

In 1830, the year of the Swing Riots, the head of the Wisley-cum-Pyrford social ladder, the Reverend George Onslow, the parish pastor, appended his signature to an appeal to the then Home Secretary, Robert Peel, for a squadron of dragoons to put down a potential riot in Guildford. Onslow of Dunsborough House, Ripley, his distinguished relations at Clandon House and the Lovelaces of Ockham were the local aristocracy at the time; there was no resident lord of the manor in Pyrford to lead the community. Indeed, the village was a loose-knit amalgam of three hamlets: a cluster of humble cottages nestling beneath St Nicholas church; agricultural homesteads along the Lower Pyrford Road, and a further group around Coldharbour Farm towards West Byfleet. The several tenant farmers and small-holders benefited from the alluvial soil of the Wey valley and verdant downland; on Bagshot sand scrub vegetation was kept in check by a thriving rabbit population.

Few Pyrford people had to seek 'shelter' at the Chertsey workhouse opened in 1835; the rate-payers maintained a small 'poor-house', boarded out waifs, and the parish administered an old charity founded by one Henry Smith which gave out alms, often in kind and usually coal in winter. Before the First World War, the sexton had the task of slaughtering the parish pigs in autumn and distributing the meat to those without a porker. Local government for this sleepy back-water was the responsibility of the parish vestry. In 1843, this body was comprised of five or six elected rate-payers chaired by the church warden; all were unpaid and often reluctant to serve or spend money. The following year they appointed three constables - at a time of major unrest up and down the country - but these positions were not maintained. It was not until after the 1897 Pyrford 'riot', with burning barrels being thrown at the game-keeper's cottage and "rough music", that a policeman was deployed to the village.

Another community hazard - the risk of fire - was largely ignored. Such negligence, however, had its price when, in 1904, Green Farm's hayricks were destroyed by a blaze which had been quickly brought under control by a Woking engine first to the scene. When the brigade responsible arrived from Chertsey, they found that their hose would not stretch to the nearby pond and had the wrong connections, hence the wider destruction.

In general, fresh air and hard outside work kept the population free of nineteenth century public health scourges, but the average age at the

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1851 census was less than twenty-three. At the time there was a medical officer appointed for Weybridge, Byfleet and Pyrford, but no doctor lived in or near the village. There has never been a clinic in Pyrford and midwifery was in the hands of the old school dame, Jemima Allgrove, until her death in 1908. It was not until 1915 that a subscription scheme for a parish nurse - shared with Send - was organised by Agnes Hamilton, the pastor's wife.

Right down to the mid-1920s Pyrford was an ill-lit vicinity, often flooded along the Lower Pyrford Road in winter and cut off from Wisley. The vicarage and St Nicholas above it did not receive electricity until shortly after the Second World War. The one social amenity before the First World War - the old one-roomed parish hall - was destroyed by a falling tree in early 1915. It redounded to the Reverend Cuthbert Hamilton (pastor from 1913 to his death in 1948) and his wife to spear-head the creation of a real sense of community.

The catalyst was the high casualty rate the village suffered during 1914-18, some twenty-four dead, a 'black-spot' in Surrey. The result was a new hall opened to their memory in October 1922 and funded by public subscription. This was augmented by a generous donation from the *de facto* lord of the manor, Viscount Elveden (later the earl of Iveagh). He had arrived in 1905, married an Onslow and built Pyrford Court. Also in the early 1920s the Pyrford Cricket Club, strongly active since the 1890s (and more doubtfully claiming foundation in 1856), was blessed with its present ground, elicited from Lady Lovelace by opening batsman, Parson Hamilton.

The Second World War brought a halt to the many social activities at the Memorial Hall, but soon after, the former "Lads' Club" was re-invigorated by the creation of the Social Club; its modern premises, built in 1966, provided a pub in the centre of the village. After the demise early in the century of the old Sun Inn on the border with West Byfleet, toppers had been obliged to cross the river to drink at the Anchor, a place of ill-repute, including murder - but that's another story.

Not surprisingly, in 1879, the drinking water still supplied in the second half of the nineteenth century from wells was found to be "bad". It was, however, over twenty years after the 1870 Gas and Water Works Facilities Act that the Vestry applied to the Board of Trade for a provisional order to break up the roads in Pyrford for the laying of pipes. The impetus, too, came from a new middle class population moving into large houses being built along the Old Woking Road.

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Elementary education in the wake of the 1891 Education Act, which abolished school fees, finally replaced the St Nicholas church room 'dame' school in 1894. The new Board School at the top of Engliff Lane was the forerunner of Pyrford Primary School, since 2000 a Church of England-denominated institution.

In the absence of a framework for developing a sense of community, it was the Church that ran affairs in Pyrford down to the First World War. It was Cuthbert Hamilton, however, who grasped the reins and helped turn a Dickensian rural backwater into a thriving and prosperous village able to pay its dues and send funds to those less well-off in the UK and abroad. This far-seeing clergyman persuaded Lady Lovelace in 1937 to sell the land on which the Church of the Good Shepherd was built in 1964. Along with Hamilton's other creation, the Memorial Hall just along the road, it remains at the heart of Pyrford community life, for all the reported falling off of support for formal religion and devotion to couch-ridden computer games.

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