

In a series of guided Heritage Walks around Woking, and in these articles, we investigate the stories behind H G Wells' famous science-fiction novel

## 'The War of the Worlds'

Iain Wakeford 2016

# CHAPTER TWO - THE FALLING STAR

*'Then came the night of the first falling-star'.*

Ogilvy thought that a meteorite *'lay somewhere on the common between Horsell, Ottershaw and Woking'* and rose early with the idea of finding it. *'Find it he did, soon after dawn, and not far from the sand-pits'.*



The sandpits in Wells' day were much smaller than they are now. The area of orange sand that most people now know, did not then exist – his sandpits being in amongst the trees to the west. Not that many of the trees would have been there in his day. In the mid 1890's Horsell Common would have been more open, as up to then the local 'commoners' had a right to graze their animals, helping to maintain the heath land that today the Common Society work so hard to promote.



Some of our best descriptions of Horsell Common in the mid 1890's come from *'The War of the Worlds'*. *'Sand and gravel had been flung violently in every direction over the heath, forming heaps visible a mile and a half away. The heather was on fire eastward'*. The *'Thing'* lay almost entirely buried in sand *'amidst the scattered splinters of a fir-tree it had shivered to fragments in its descent'*.

After a while Ogilvy realised that it wasn't a meteorite, but a Martian cylinder and as it was too hot for him to approach, he decided to go off into town to try to get help. It was about six in the morning and unlike today all he met on the road was a waggoner who didn't

understand what he was talking about and simply drove on. *'He was equally unsuccessful with the potman who was unlocking the doors of the public-house by Horsell Bridge. The fellow thought he was a lunatic at large, and made an unsuccessful attempt to lock him in the tap-room'*.

Horsell Bridge is what we would call *'Wheatsheaf Bridge'*, with the potman working at what is now the Wheatsheaf Hotel. The mention of a *'lunatic at large'* may be a reference to the second Surrey County Pauper Lunatic Asylum at Knaphill – later known as Brookwood Hospital.



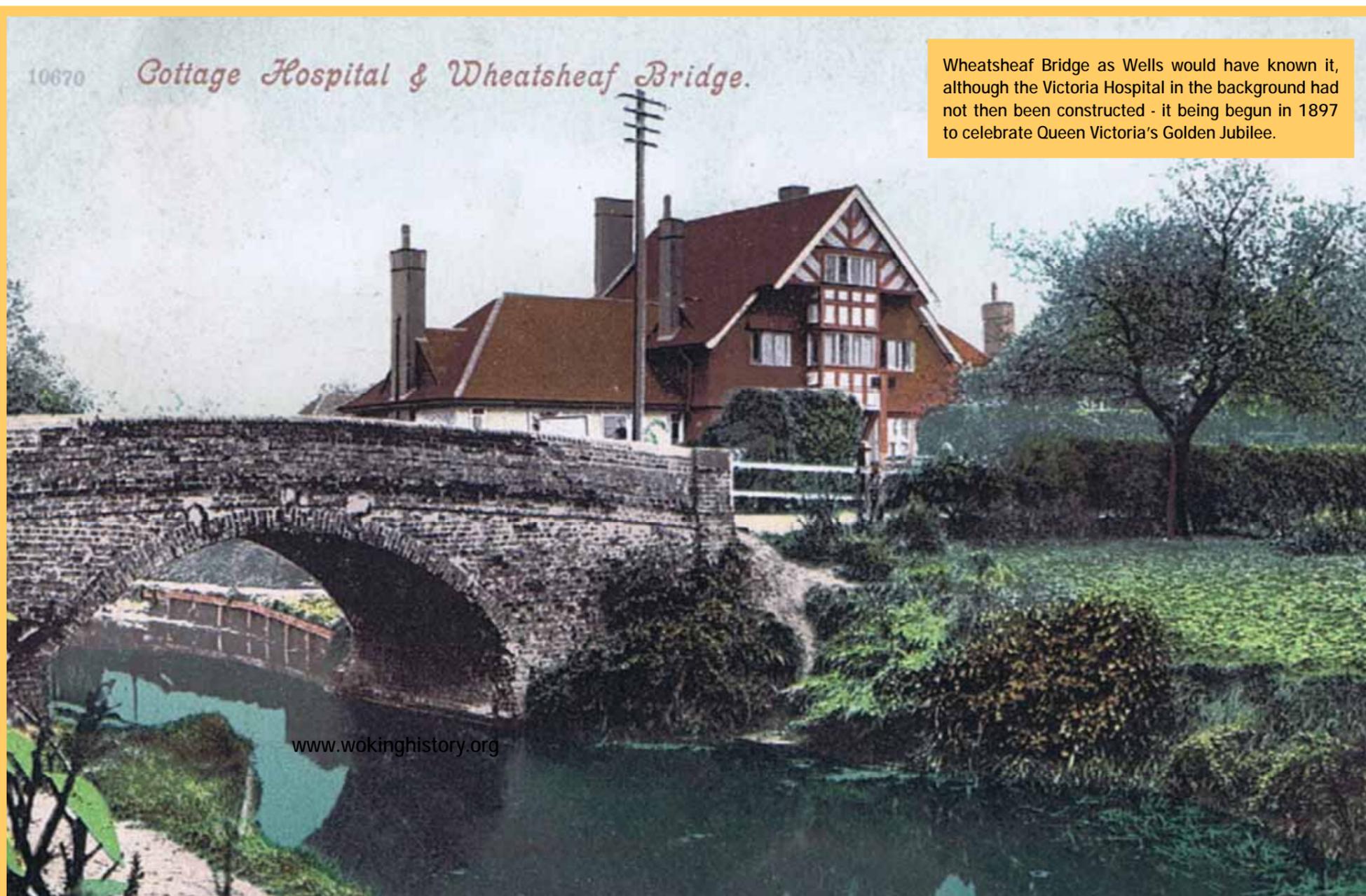
The Wheatsheaf would have been the '*public house by Horsell Bridge*' with Henderson living in the houses of either Ferndale Road or Chobham Road

Having escaped being locked in the tap-room Ogilvy then met '*Henderson, the London Journalist, in his garden*' and finally made himself understood. Henderson's house was most probably one of the houses along

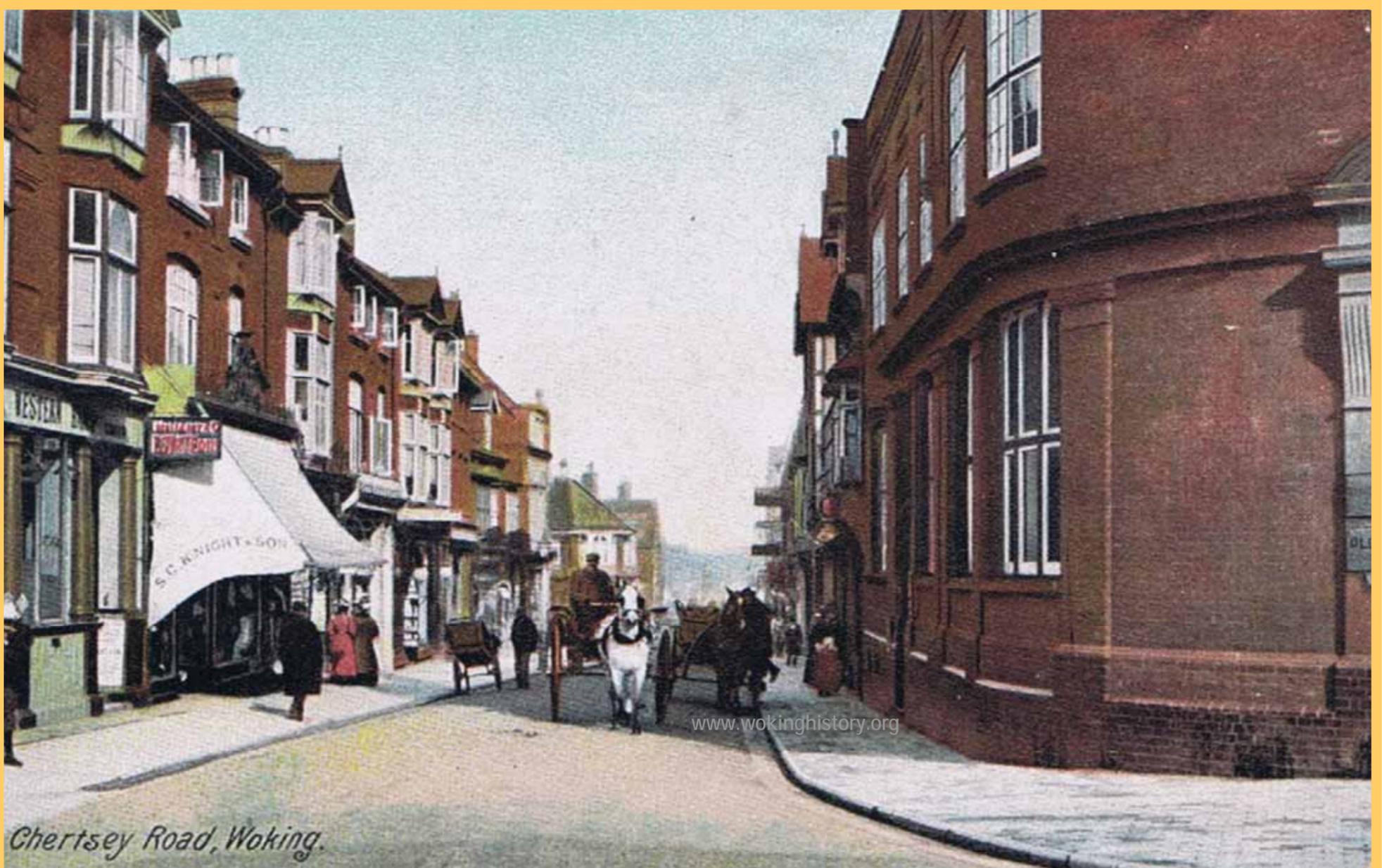
Chobham Road or Ferndale Road which were being developed in the mid 1890's. Sadly I can find no contemporary references to show that any journalists lived there at that time, but I would not be surprised if one did as Woking then

(as now) offered an excellent train service to the capital - which was probably why Wells came to live in the town in the first place.

In the story Ogilvy and Henderson return to the



Wheatsheaf Bridge as Wells would have known it, although the Victoria Hospital in the background had not then been constructed - it being begun in 1897 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee.



*Chertsey Road, Woking.*

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common but the cylinder is still too hot for them to approach so the go back to town – 'running up the little street in the bright sunlight just as the shop folks were taking down their shutters and people were opening their bedroom windows'.

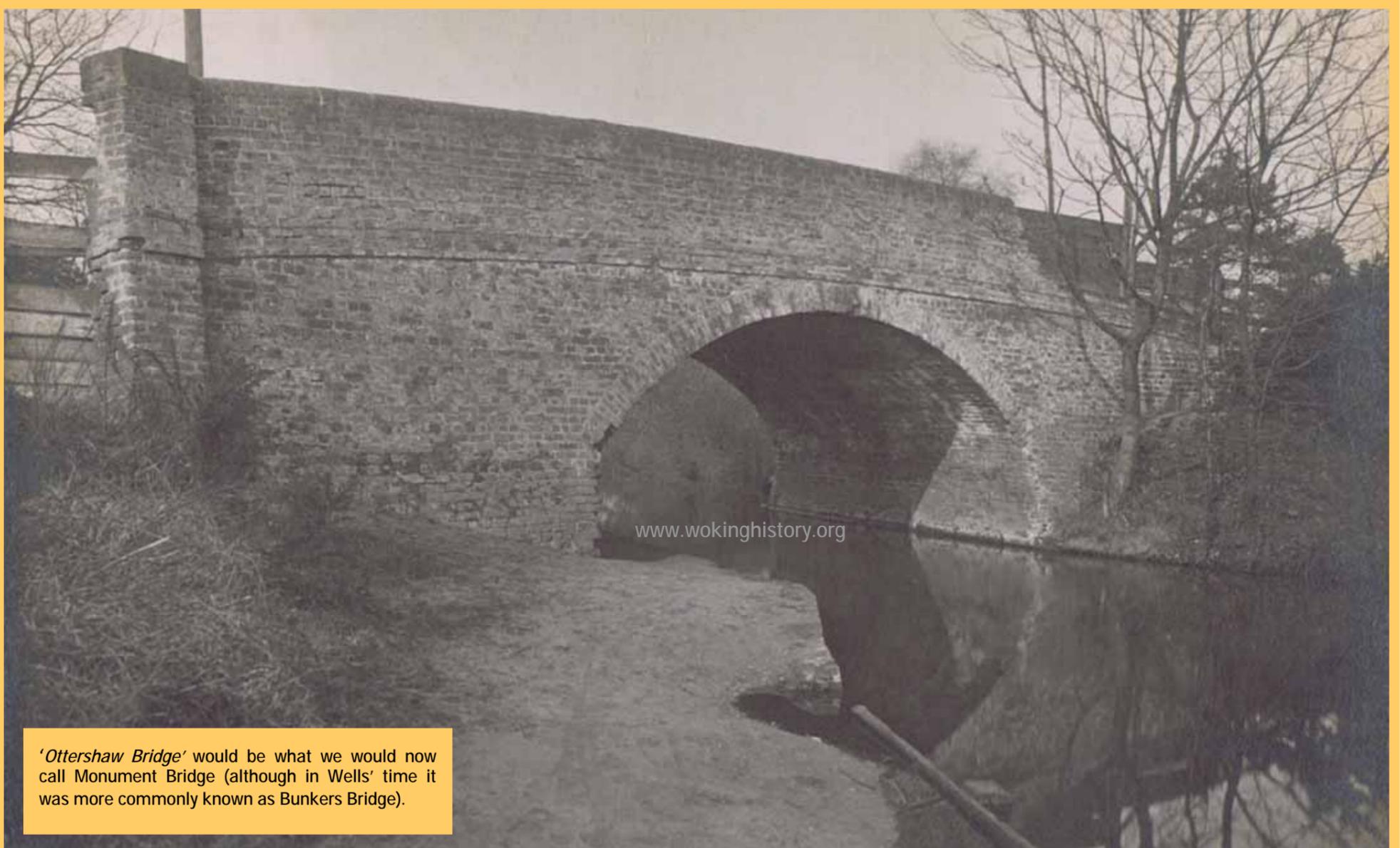
Henderson 'went into the railway station at once, in order to telegraph the news to London',

so that 'by eight o'clock a number of boys and unemployed me had already started for the common to see the 'dead men from Mars'.

The Narrator 'heard of it first from my newspaper boy about a quarter to nine' and lost no time in 'going out and across Ottershaw Bridge to the sand-pits'.

The 'little street' with the shutters and the people living above the shops was either Chobham Road or Chertsey Road.

The bridge on the road from Wells' (and the Narrator's) home towards Horsell Common and Ottershaw was known in Wells' day as Bunkers Bridge, although now it is more commonly called Monument Bridge.



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'Ottershaw Bridge' would be what we would now call Monument Bridge (although in Wells' time it was more commonly known as Bunkers Bridge).