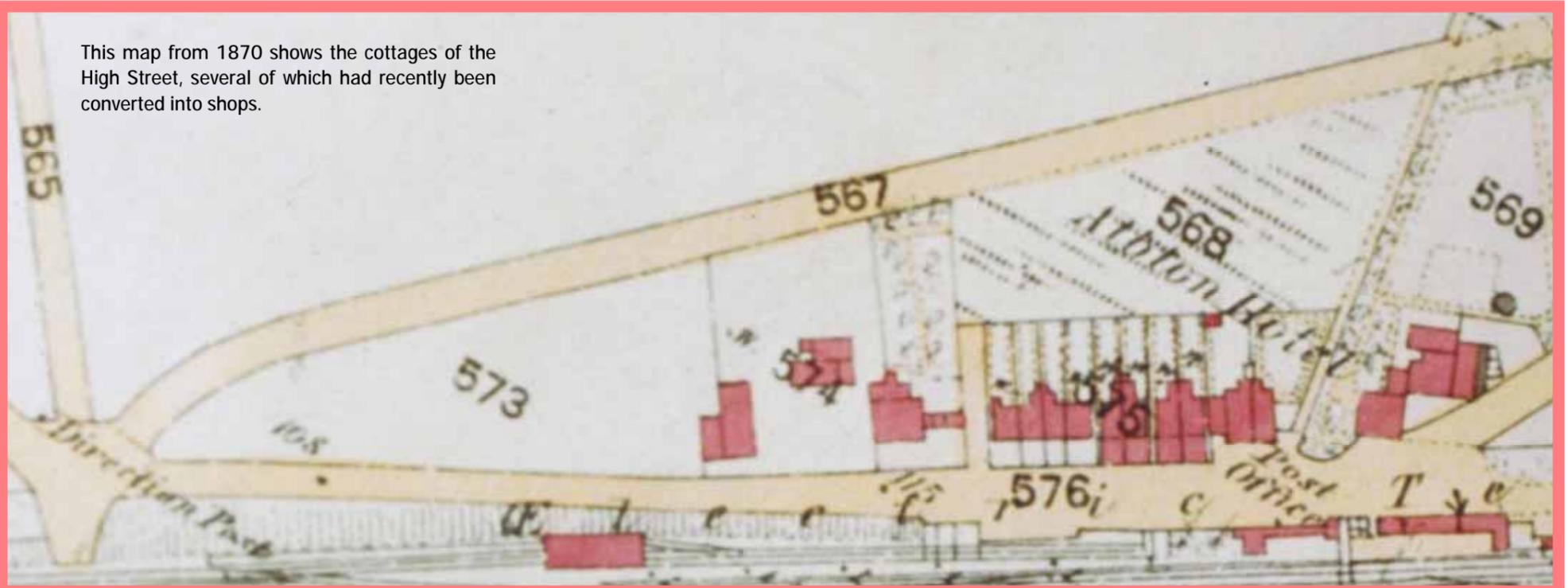


1870 - THE BIRTH OF WOKING'S SHOPPING CENTRE

Iain Wakeford 2015

From the end of the 1860's the pace of change, and the weight of historical documentation, increases so much that from now on we could look at the history of just one year each week and still not be able to cover it all. Some events are so monumental that the story is already well known, but in other cases we will have to dig deeper into the archives to find almost forgotten stories for each particular year.



In 1870 a row of newly constructed cottages, facing the railway in the High Street at Woking Station, were converted into commercial premises – giving birth to Woking's first 'shopping centre'. The front gardens of four of the cottages, which had only been built the previous year, had now been built upon with new shop fronts, with the other half a dozen properties between what was to become Church Path and Chapel Street being added to soon after.

The shop on the corner with Church Path had actually been built in 1865 as Woking's first Post Office, with the mail being sorted in the back room before distribution (on foot) to the far-flung corners of the district. The postmaster was James Mansell with his three sons Alfred (a post messenger), Jesse (post office assistant) and William (a telegraph clerk), working for him.

The other half of that building was a grocers shop run by Edmund Hunt who came originally from Kington Magna in Dorset with his wife Caroline, but had evidently been living in the Woking area since at least 1863 when their eldest daughter, Flora, was born.

The building next door to that is described as the 'Eating House' (Woking's first fast-food restaurant perhaps?), with a butchers shop next door run by William Major - another native of Dorset who had moved here via Fordingbridge in Hampshire.

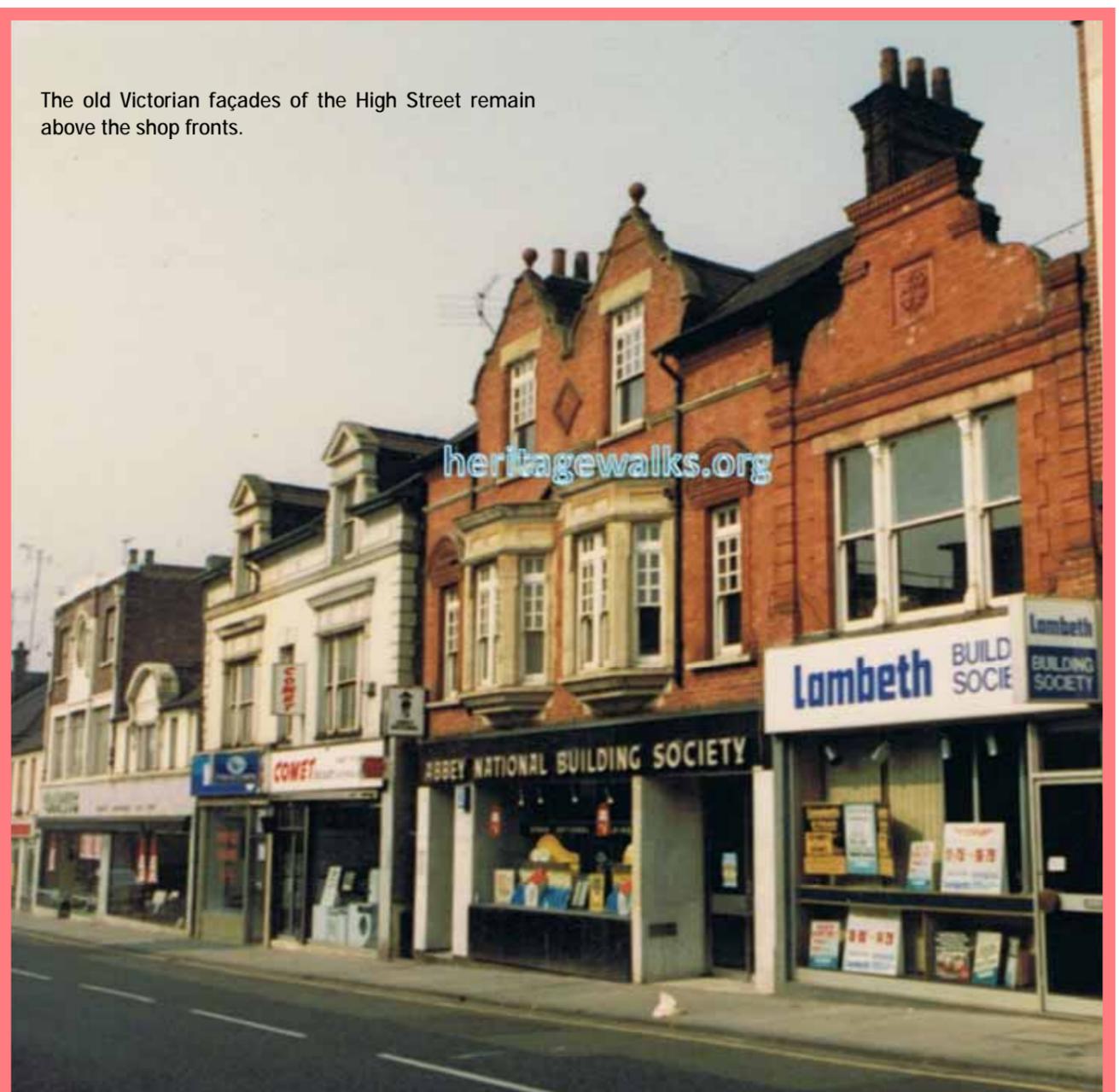
I don't know how long Mr Major remained in Woking, but the draper next door, Sparkes Cornelious Knight, was to go on to become a prominent member of the Woking business community, becoming a councillor when the Woking Local Board was set up in 1893 and elected chairman of Woking Urban District Council in 1909.

By then he had opened shops in Chertsey Road

and Goldsworth Road, as well as take over the properties of several of his High Street neighbours, but in 1870 he was just twenty-three, moving here from Crondall in Hampshire with his nineteen year old sister (who worked alongside him) and Annie Richards, a milliner

and dressmaker who was almost ten years his senior.

Forty odd years later he would recall that when he first came to Woking 'one could stand outside the station and look in the direction of



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Chertsey Bridge and not see half-a-dozen houses. Where the shops now stand were open fields' and the 'High Street was a little country lane with old-fashioned cottages, the front gardens of which faced the railway'.

Next door to Mr Knight, going down the road towards the railway arch, was another general shop run by another nineteen year old young lady called Sarah Collins, with her father Jeremiah Collins and her fifteen year old

brother, Elijah being listed as carpenters and joiners.

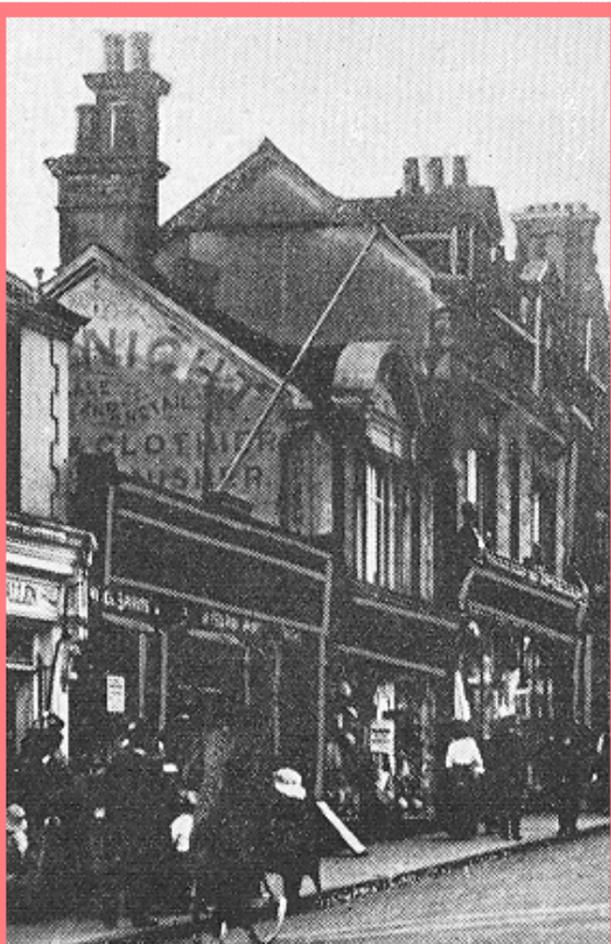
They were not the only tradesmen in the street, as next door but one (in one of the three properties where Woking Lighthouse is today) was Thomas Cruchley a builder's foreman, possibly working for James Harris (from Tisbury in Wiltshire) whose builders yard and buildings are marked on the 1870 Ordnance Survey map as plot number 574.

The only other properties in the street at that time was the house of William Abraham (who lived in a large house that was later replaced by two shops, part of which is now Hugh Harris'), a

By the early 20th century Mr Knight had taken over the premises of several of his neighbours in the High Street, as well as open shops and storerooms elsewhere in the town.

horticultural auctioneer and nurseryman originally from Portsmouth, and Mr Barfoot, an accountant, who lived next door to the Collins' (with the house on the other corner of Chapel Street being vacant at that time).

This, in 1870, was Woking's only shopping centre and perhaps the reason why in July 1991 Woking Council granted the High Street (and other Victorian streets nearby) 'Conservation Area' status – presumably to ensure that this part of Woking's history would be preserved!



For many years Mr Knight's painted sign could still be found on the side of his premises

1870 - THE GREAT FIRE OF OLD WOKING

In Old Woking in 1870 a couple of major events were the closure of the paper mills (as mentioned last autumn in my article on the Papermaking and Printers of the area) and the 'Great Fire of Woking' at 'Mr Bayley's farm' in the High Street.

The fire, on Wednesday 15th June, started in a haystack and was apparently discovered at about 9.40 in the evening. At the time the only fire cover Woking had was a small handcart and pump owned by Mr Hilder of Roundbridge Farm (which was used to some effect), but it was clear that more help would be needed so a messenger was sent to Guildford where the volunteer fire brigade had a much better engine, pulled by four horses from the White Lion Inn in the town.

By the time they had arrived quite a crowd had gathered, the fire being visible from as far away as Knaphill.

According to a report in the Surrey Advertiser 'fortunately water was available from part of the river which runs through the High Street and was brought to the spot through 200 yards of hose' and 'a number of hearty and willing pumpers – and gentlemen gave excellent service'.

'On arrival of the brigade an unoccupied cottage next to Mr Ross's school was ablaze, but the fire was prevented from spreading further' although had the wind been blowing



from the south east they feared that 'nothing could have saved a large portion of the town from being destroyed'.

From the above it appears that Mr Bayley's

farm was possibly Ford Farm or Parsonage Farm (where Manor Way is today) as Mr Ross's school is known to have been in what is now called The Old Manor House (shown here on the left).

OTHER NEWS FROM 1870

As we saw last week in the item on John Lynch, Woking Prison was often hitting the headlines internationally, let alone locally. In 1870 another event occurred that brought the journalists scurrying to St Johns when an Italian prisoner by the name of Georgia Beula Routa stabbed the Governor of the prison, Captain Bramley, just below the collarbone. Fortunately the wound was not fatal and Captain Bramley was soon back to work.

On a much more parochial theme, according to the Whitman's in their book on *Victorian*

Woking, the annual Toy Fair, granted by Henry VI to take place on Whit Tuesday each year 'continued until around the year 1870' after which it died out until the Old Woking Village Association revived the idea of a Whitsun Weekend 'Charter Fair' towards the end of the 20th century. Unfortunately that too 'died out' recently with no hope of revival now that its venue, the garden of The White Hart, has been destroyed.

Finally, according to Edward Ryde in his diary Hoe Place (below) was sold at auction for

£11,500 to William Wainwright. He had been a wealthy sugar refiner (or sugar baker as he is sometimes called), and was probably the William Wainwright whose factory in Washington Street, Glasgow had been totally destroyed by fire in May 1849. By 1859 the Wainwright family were shareholders in Wainwright, Wright & Co, but having sold their shares to an up-and-coming refiner by the name of Tate (later to be joined by a Mr Lyll), William went into partnership with James Gadesdon of Ewell before retiring to Woking.

