

NHS FREE-FOR-ALL LAND-GRAB IN WOKING

Iain Wakeford 2017



I have written in these columns about local hospitals on numerous occasions – the founding of the second Surrey County pauper lunatic asylum at Brookwood in 1865; the building of the Woking Victoria Hospital as part of the town's celebrations in 1897 for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria; the creation of the first Woking Maternity Home in Oriental Road in the 1920's; and the various emergency war hospitals set up in the area during both the First and Second World Wars – but it is easy to forget that all the above operated before there was a National Health Service. It wasn't until 1946 that the National Health Service was created (and not until 1948 before the Act was fully implemented) and all of the little local hospitals and similar institutions absorbed into the one comprehensive government controlled service.

From now on there would be no need for local benefactors to donate land or buildings, no need for 'war memorial wings' to be paid for out of donations, and no need for 'hospital carnivals' to raise funds (although fund-raising did continue). Now everything was free – free glasses, free dental-work and free prescriptions (for everyone!) - with no need for private medical insurance or the charity that up until then the majority relied upon.

In Woking, just before the Second World War, it had been decided that the Victoria Hospital beside Wheatsheaf Bridge was too small. A new £100,000 hospital was proposed at Kettlewell Hill (the site having been purchased in 1937 for £7,000) and money raised towards its construction. In the end, of course, the Kettlewell site did not become Woking's 'New

Built in celebration of a Queen, expanded in memory of our war heroes, and demolished to make way for luxury waterside apartments. By 1948 Woking had raised tens of thousands of pounds for local health services, and yet what have we got to show for it?

Victoria', but was turned into a nursing home (with Kettlewell Hill Lodge becoming a hostel for nurses), until the NHS sold the land off for housing (Fairlawn Park now occupying the site).

The Victoria Cottage Hospital, despite its cramped site, still managed to expand slightly, with Riverside House on the opposite side of Boundary Lane as an annex -until it was demolished to make way for Victoria Way. New wards were added to the main hospital too, but in the late 1980's it was decided to close the whole site so that the NHS could sell off the land and luxury waterside apartments built in its place.



The ambitious maternity hospital of the 1930's might not have been built, but the grounds of Wilmington and Beechcroft were used as Woking's Maternity Unit until closure in the early 1970's.

The separately run Woking Maternity Home was also looking to expand before the war and with about £6,000 raised by the Woking Health Society and Linen Guild,. They took over a large property in Heathside Road called Wilmington where a new maternity unit was to be built. There were plans for a modern, two storey,

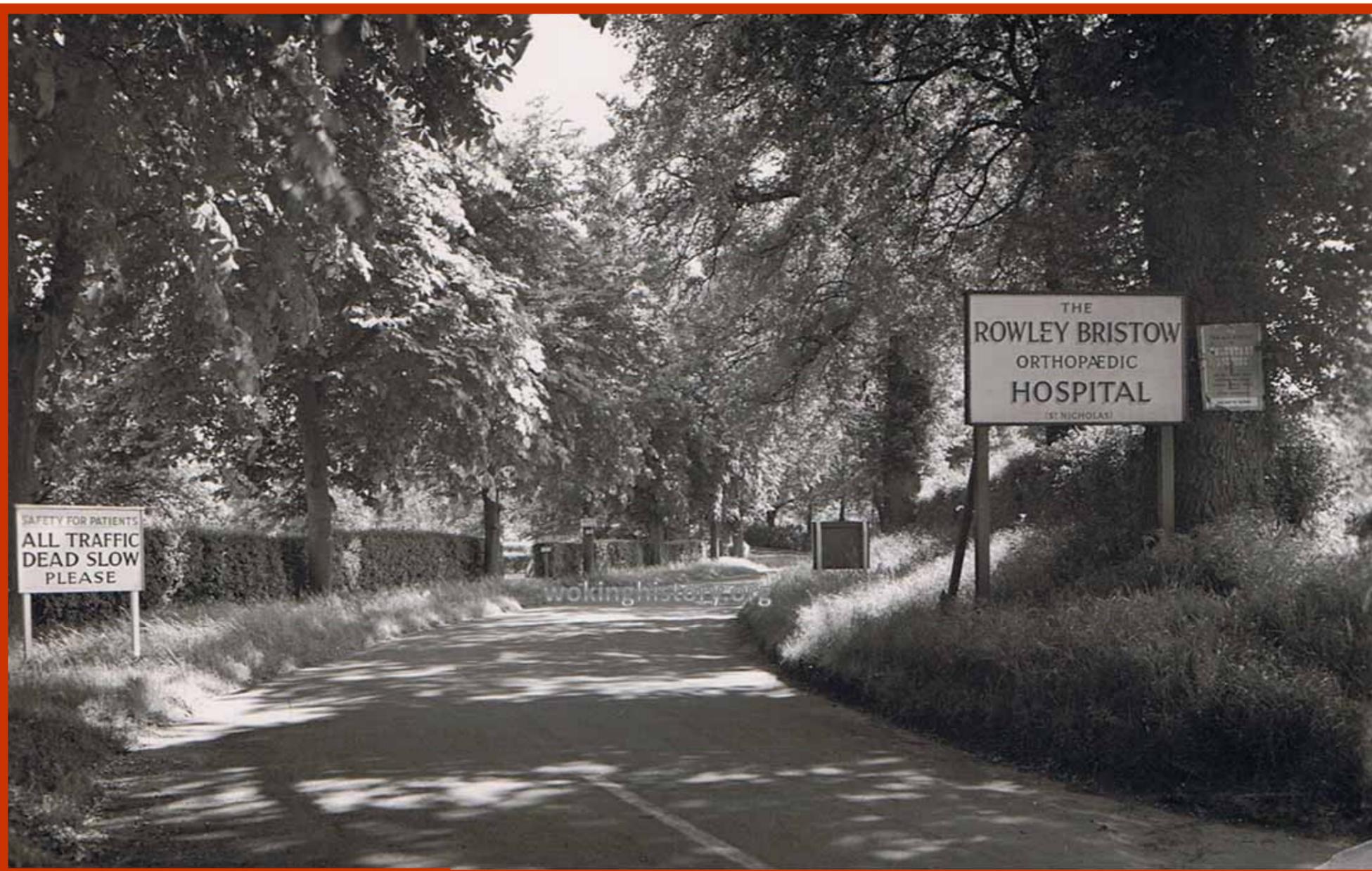
thirty-six bed home (complete with isolation room and premature baby unit), but again the war intervened and the original plans went out the window. The old Maternity Home at Wynberg in Oriental Road (turned into an emergency hospital during the war) became part of the Southern Railwaymen's Homes (before it too was sold for housing).

In 1943 the house next door to Wilmington – Beechcroft House (itself used as a War Hospital by the British Red Cross during the First World

War) – became a home for nurses, before it was eventually converted into more accommodation for the Maternity Hospital and a less ambitious maternity home built in its grounds. I was born there in 1963, but seven years later the maternity unit closed and the site was turned into the Beechcroft Hospital, a geriatric ward attached to the Woking Victoria – expectant mothers from then on having to travel to St Peter's at Chertsey (so that from the 1970's onwards few could claim to be truly 'Woking born and bred')!

The building's survived for a few decades more as the Beechcroft Geriatric Unit.



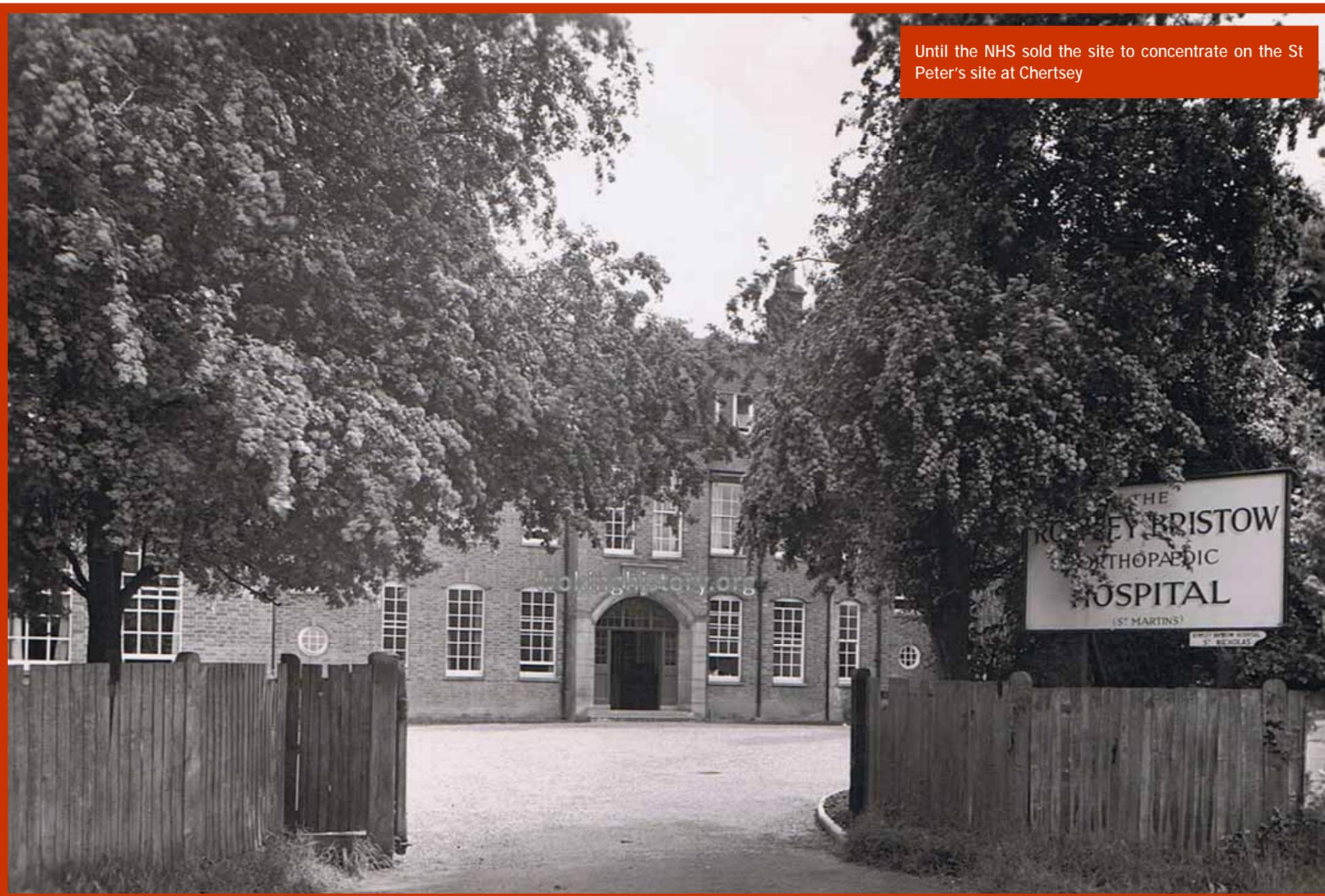


The tranquil grounds of the Rowley Bristow at Pyrford

Meanwhile at Pyrford, the St Nicholas and St Martin's Homes (run by the Church of England Waifs & Strays Society) was taken over by the NHS and renamed the Rowley Bristow Hospital.

The name came from the surgeon who between the wars had worked there on the treatment of crippled children, and who with colleagues from St Thomas' Hospital in London had expanded the site during the Second World War so that

adults with similar conditions could be treated. When the NHS decided to close that site and sell off its land for housing the Rowley Bristow Unit was transferred to the St Peter's site, where it still thrives to this day.



Until the NHS sold the site to concentrate on the St Peter's site at Chertsey



Brookwood Hospital before all the original buildings were demolished to make way for new housing (and some of the later buildings converted into more luxury apartments).

Brookwood Hospital too eventually succumbed to the modernisation of the NHS and was closed (although a small specialist unit still survives on the site). It seems the story of the 'nationalisation' of health services in Woking

ended up being one massive 'land grab' by the government and the numerous charitable and local authority funded institutions that once treated local people have all been lost forever. All that is left now is the Woking Community

Hospital that was built on the old Beechcroft site – small compensation, some might think, for the thousands of pounds and hours of fundraising that the people of Woking had provided up to 1948.



Wilmington House in Heathside Road - the grounds of this (and Beechcroft next door) having been used as the maternity home and then geriatric unit, is now partially the site of the Woking Community Hospital - all that Woking has to show for all our local health fundraising efforts!