

NEW CIVIC OFFICES (OR NOT AS THE CASE MAY BE)

Iain Wakeford 2017

By the late 1930's it was obvious that the old Council Offices (built in Commercial Road in 1905) were becoming inadequate. Not only had the population of Woking increased, but so had the area under administration. Horsell had been added just a couple of years after the offices were complete and the number of councillors increased from eighteen to twenty-two and then twenty-five as the ward boundaries were re-drawn to take account of the growing urban area. With the addition of Byfleet, West Byfleet and Pyrford in 1933 another five councillors were added to the mix and the space within the council chamber must have become very cramped. That was nothing, however, compared to the space required for the burgeoning bureaucracy of council officials and their staff.

Part of the Grand Theatre next door was taken over by the council, but that was not enough, and so just before the war they looked at moving out of the heart of Woking Town Centre to a new site south of the railway, at a house called St Austin's in Guildford Road (between the junction of York Road and Mount Hermon Road). They had intended to build new civic



offices there, but with the intervention of the war the plans were delayed and instead the old Victorian property was converted (and temporary buildings added in the grounds) until hostilities were over.

Part of the Grand Theatre (left) was used as overflow offices by the Council before WWII.

Before the war Woking Council acquired St Austin's in Mount Hermon Road in order to build new offices on the site





During the war nearby properties were commandeered 'for the war effort' (handy that!), whilst others were acquired soon after. In June 1951 the agents acting on behalf of the owner of No. 1 York Road wrote to the Council's Clerk 'inquiring whether the Council would be interested in acquiring the property' and the following month the owners of 'Craycombe' in Mount Hermon Road were likewise appointing agents to negotiate a price for their property. With surveyor's fees (£66), loan costs (£17) and stamp duty etc (£132), the final cost to the council for the latter property came in at £3,675, but when it came to viewing the draft contract it appeared there were restrictive

covenants on the property which could make life difficult for the council. The solution was to compulsorily purchase the site, making the 'operation of these covenants suspended while the property was owned by the council' (and probably long forgotten about when they eventually came to sell it)!

Meanwhile negotiations also took place with the Ministry of Works and Surrey County Council for the sale of the old Council site for use as a new central post office (more of which in a few months time).

Whilst no doubt some in York Road and Mount Hermon Road had viewed with horror the

Properties in York Road, Mount Hermon Road and Guildford Road were bought to accommodate the ever-increasing administration of Woking Council.



prospect of the council becoming their neighbours (and actively resisted any attempts of compulsory purchase), there were others that saw the opportunity of getting a good price from a local authority that seemed to be prepared to build up a sizeable plot for the development of a new Civic Centre at almost 'all costs'.

In October 1954 a sub-committee was set up to 'investigate the possibility of providing new permanent office buildings upon the Council Office site in Guildford Road' and within a couple of years they had evidently come up with a grand plan. A report in the local press in September 1956 - when the model of the scheme was revealed to the public - noted that 'Woking's new civic buildings, still on the drawing board, will be a magnificent addition to the town. One can imagine a building of a formal, yet contemporary, design, built on three floors. A wide entrance fronted by spacious lawns facing the Mount Hermon Road-Guildford Road corner, with a block of administration offices leading to the public halls and committee rooms situated behind the admin buildings'.

They went on to hope that 'one might also imagine these halls and committee rooms booked night after night by one or other of the local organisations'. Unfortunately their



The houses and temporary offices in York Road, where Quadrant Court is now.

The 1956 plan for the new civic buildings in Guildford Road between Mount Hermon Road (on the left) and York Road (on the right).



prediction that it might happen 'within the next twenty years' was not quite accurate, as plan after plan was discussed, rejected (often because of cost), amended and finally abandoned.

It would not be until the 1970's that Woking got its new 'civic halls', and the 1980's before their 'civic offices' were constructed – in the Town Centre rather than Guildford Road site. That site, of course, would eventually be sold off for offices in the 1990's (ironically now used by Surrey County Council), but all those stories will have to wait to be told when their own time comes in our Chronological History of Woking.

The 1960's plan for the same site.

