

# THE WONDER OF WOOLWORTHS

Iain Wakeford 2017



When Woolworths first opened their 3d & 6d Stores in Chertsey Road in 1926, Woking was still very much a 'sleepy' little commuter town, content with its small shopping area and the numerous little local traders. The International Stores, Sainsbury's and Boots were practically the only 'national' firms trading in Woking at that time, but soon Timothy Whites, Dolcis (shoes), and Burtons followed and by the end of the Second World War Woking had gradually consolidated its position as one of the main shopping areas for the North-West of Surrey.

It is clear that Woolworth's were very happy trading in the town and wanted to expand, as within a few years of opening they were looking to buy out some of their neighbours. In 1934 plans were finally approved for a new shop, 'subject to an undertaking being given regarding the rear of the premises', but whether such an undertaking could not be found, or other events conspired against them, it is clear that no significant redevelopment actually took place at that time.

During the war one event did seem to go in their favour when two doors up the road the menswear shop of John Bright's was completely demolished by a bomb (presumably intended for the nearby railway station)! With the purchase of the A1 Boot Stores next-door, Woolworths now had the space to really expand, and after the war the firm renewed its fight to secure better premises for itself.

'Fight' appears to be the right word as Woking Council continually thwarted their plans – although rarely actually turning them down outright. Parking restrictions in Chertsey Road

Chertsey Road in the days when it was Woking's main shopping street. Teeming with shoppers on a busy Saturday morning (and probably completely empty on a sunny Sunday afternoon), the street was once the home to most of the town's big-name stores. Now the 'big-names' of Chertsey Road are pub chains and fast-food outlets!





The ornamental brickwork of the shops of Duke Street (built in the late 19th/early 20th century by Drowley & Co of Woking) can be seen in the background of these pictures of the construction of the new Woolworths store

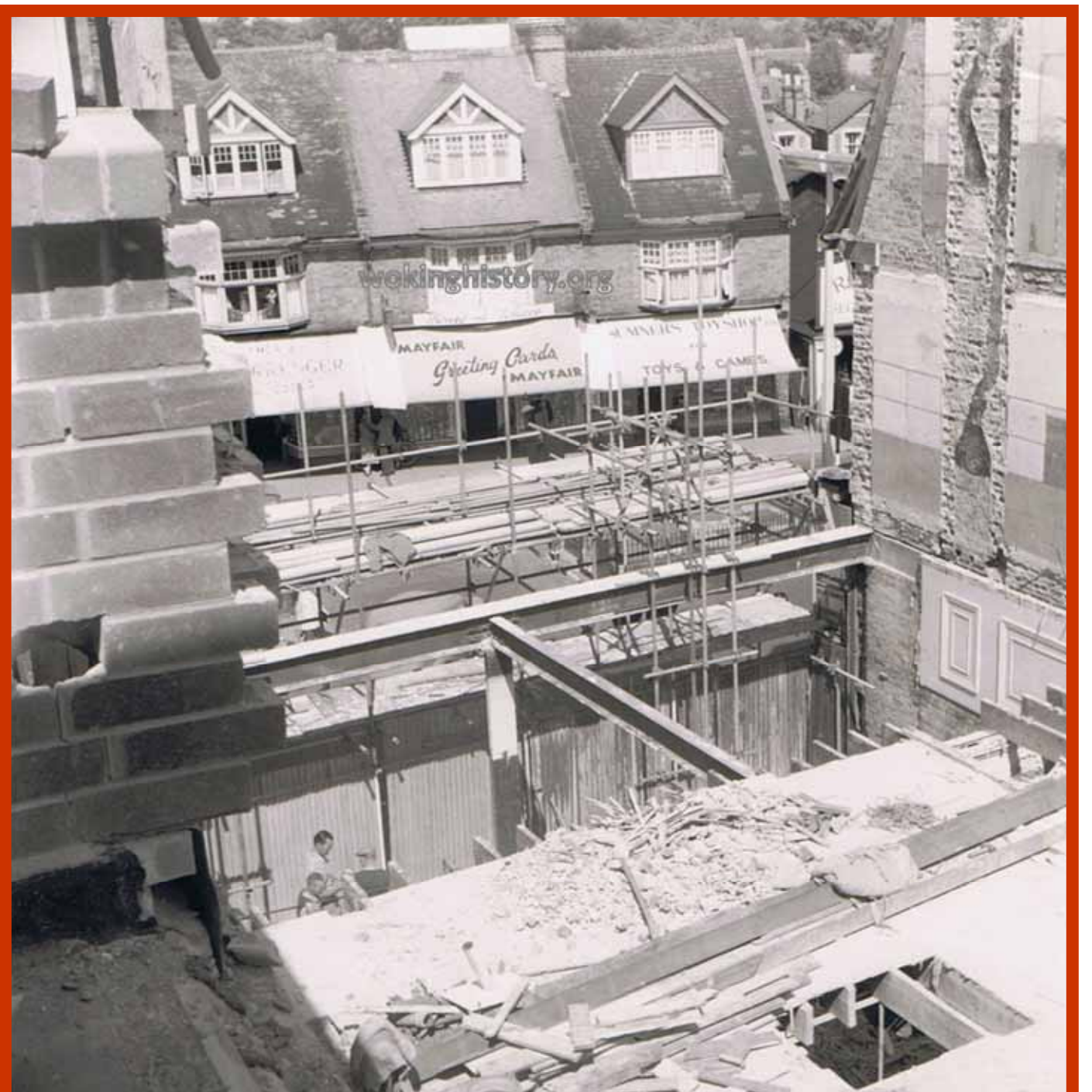
and Duke Street; possible road widening; and a suggested bus depot at the rear of the store, all seem to have been excuses for a new shop not to be built - yet. Could it be that some of the local traders in the town, whose representation on the council was quite strong at this time, were doing all they could to stop their wealthy national neighbours (surely not)!

The breakthrough seems to have come in the late 1950's when it was decided after all not to widen Duke Street, and in 1958-59 work



commenced on the un-stoppable ultra-modern store. Photographs show the concrete framed construction with the old shops of Duke Street and Commercial Road in the background. From just two units at numbers 55-57 Chertsey Road the new shop spanned four (51-57) and it was soon clear that Woking's shopping experience was starting to change.

Other developments in the area were also on the cards (as we shall see over the coming weeks), but Woolworth's was one of the first – just as when The Peacocks was developed in



The shops of Commercial Road are in the background of this view, including on the right the edge of Robertson's furniture depository which before long was also to be demolished and replaced by Woking's new Tesco supermarket (later used by Perrings and later still the Rat & Parrat public house - another site due for redevelopment yet again)!



The new Woolworths store overshadows the small single-storey shops on the corner of Chertsey Road and Commercial Road

the early 1990's they would be amongst the first to recognise that Woking's shopping centre was moving away from Chertsey Road.

There are still a few shops in Chertsey Road (possibly more than in recent years), but the road now seems to be more for eating and

drinking than shopping. Wetherspoon's occupies the ground floor of the three storey building - as well as the old shop on the corner with Duke Street that for many years was Barrenger's Leather Goods shop (and before that Lewis' tobacconists) – whilst a gym utilises the space above.

A small display in the window of the pub gives a brief insight into what could be found on the site in its heyday as Woolworths, with numerous old photographs on the walls inside (many provided by yours truly when the pub was first opened in the 1990's) illustrating not just that site, but much of the history of the town.

