

# PREMIER HOUSE & RYDE HOUSE - THE START OF WOKING'S TAKE-OVER BY NORWICH



The Woking Water Company Office & Grand Theatre just before demolition to be replaced by Norwich Union's new Premier House.

Last week I noted that in October 1962 the rebuilding of Robinson's new department store in Chertsey Road (now the site of MacDonalDs) was delayed when the County Planning Department suggested that it should include parking for thirty-four cars. The store protested that less than that number of parking spaces had recently been provided in total for a number of contemporary developments in the town, and they could have further strengthened their case when you look at two other schemes announced at that time – both as large (if not larger) than the Chertsey Road site, but each with fewer parking spaces in their designs.

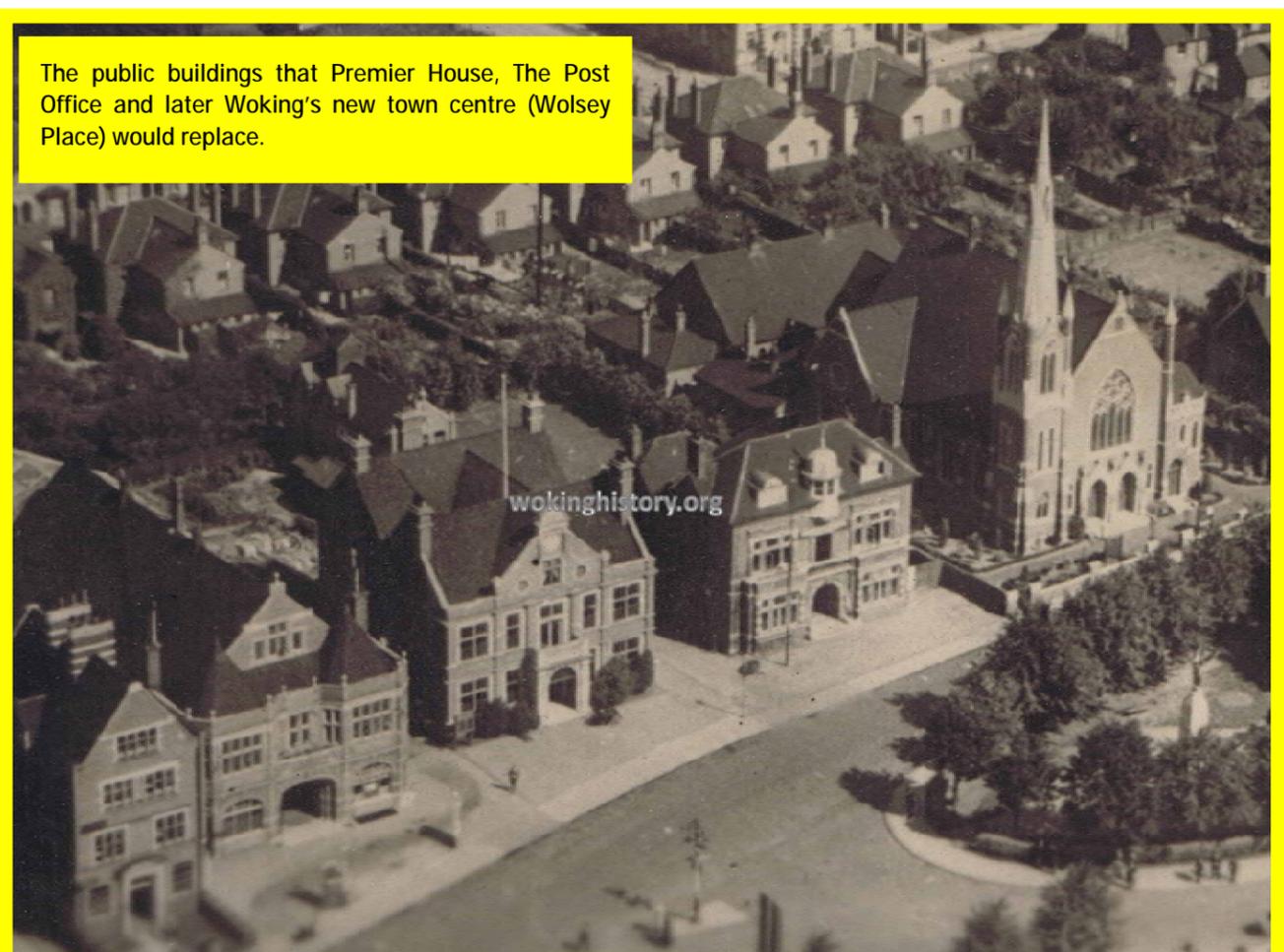
The first was Ryde House, which was eventually constructed by local building firm W Deakin & Co Ltd, on part of the site now occupied by Victoria Gate in Chobham Road. Before 1962 Ryde House was a small Victorian property used for many years by a succession of General Practitioners. The new building was to cover five floors with 12,000 sq ft of office space and a retail area on the ground floor of about 2,500 sq ft. All it had in its plans was a small car park at the rear, hardly adequate for all the projected office workers, let alone the retail staff and their customers.

The second building was Premier House (later re-clad and re-named Globe House) which was built a couple of years later by James Miller and Partners (Hayes) Ltd, on what is now part of the

Victoria Square development. Up until the early 1960's its site had been occupied by the offices of the Woking & District Water Company (on the corner of Commercial Road and what was then called Percy Street), with the Grand Theatre (or Woking Public Halls) next door. Those buildings had stood on the site since the late 1890's, one of a series of public buildings

constructed over about a decade, all of which were gone within a few years of each other in the early 1960's.

I thought 'progress' was supposed to offer some kind of 'improvement', but when I look at the old photographs of this part of the town, I am not sure how much Woking actually



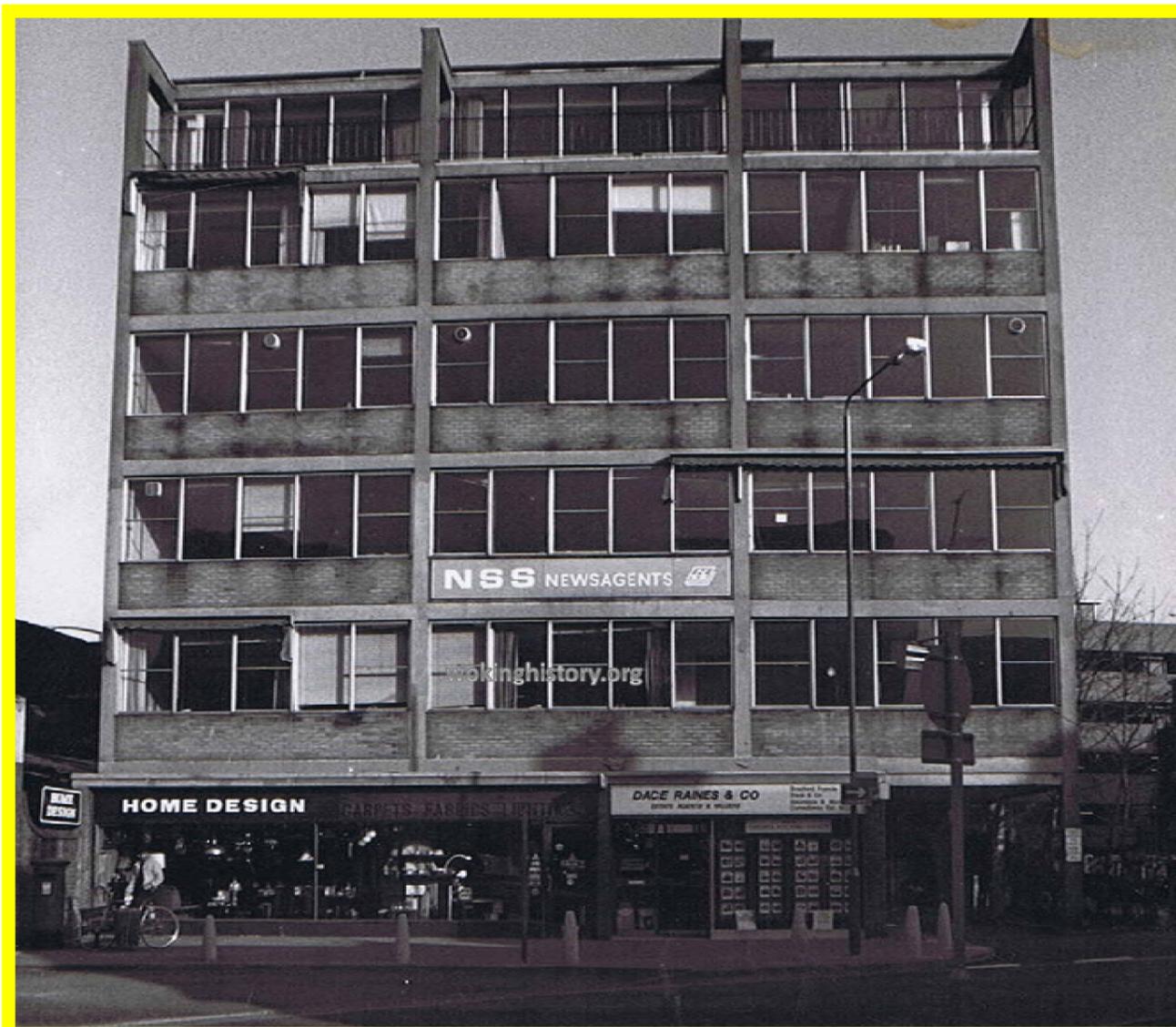
The public buildings that Premier House, The Post Office and later Woking's new town centre (Wolsey Place) would replace.

progressed (architecturally) in the 1960's and early 70's (let alone now)!

In the press release promoting Premier House, presumably sent out by Mann & Co, the letting agents for the site, in November 1962, the office block was described as occupying 'a striking corner site', with five floors of 'well-appointed offices' covering an area of 32,000 sq ft, above a ground floor retail space of 7,000 sq ft and basement parking for 30 cars. Again this was clearly not enough for the number of office and retail workers employed on the site, although in fairness compared to Victoria Square, the number of spaces per occupier was probably quite high. The current plan for 75,000 sq ft of retail space (including 50,000 sq ft for Marks & Spencer – assuming that they don't decide to pull out), a 196 bed Hilton Hotel, a health centre and 390 apartments is just 284 additional parking spaces!

Getting back to 1960, both schemes were designed by local architects, Osborn & Hollis, with the quantity surveyor being Mr E P Stevens (also of Woking), and Hockley and Dawson of Kingston being the consulting engineers. Both were also built for the Norwich Union Life Insurance Society, their first investment in office and retail space in the town, which would eventually lead some to suggest that Woking should be re-named 'New Norwich'.

Together with all the other little developments as recorded in recent weeks in this column, the early 1960's residents of Woking must have



wondered when all the disruption of new developments would end.

With hindsight, of course, we now know it never would, as these first multi-storey offices would

soon be joined by others, most of which (like these two) would then be re-designed, demolished and re-built. I wonder how long we will have to wait to see the Victoria Gate and Victoria Square replacements?

Ryde House in Chobham Road was another early 1960's office development by Norwich Union Life Insurance Society - the first of many they would embark upon in this area in the 1960's and 70's.

