

# WOKING TOWN CENTRE - A DREAM OR A NIGHTMARE

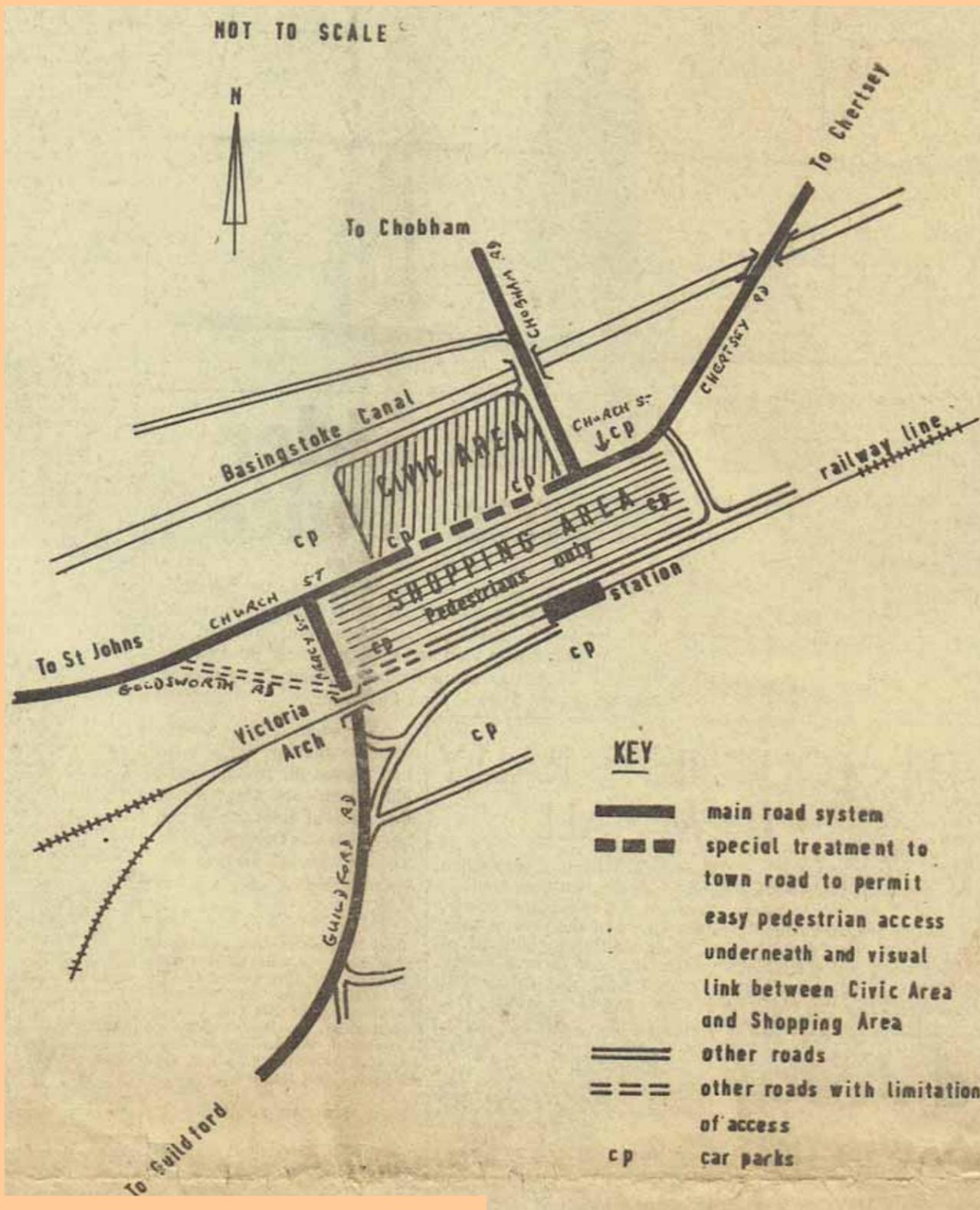
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**D**o you ever have dreams where you feel you are walking around somewhere familiar, but you suddenly find the landscape slightly different from reality - not just viewing buildings that are no longer there, but visualising new places that you know were never constructed? Just lately I have been having a series of dreams about Woking Town Centre, with public buildings and shopping precincts that I now we never had, intermingled with familiar vistas of multi-storey car parks, office blocks and shops (some of which have long since been remodelled or rebuilt).

I blame these 'nightmares' on my research for this column, and the numerous artists impressions, plans and diagrams that were printed in the local press in the early 1960's showing what Woking would be like 'in the future' - when it was finally redeveloped with its new shopping and civic centres.

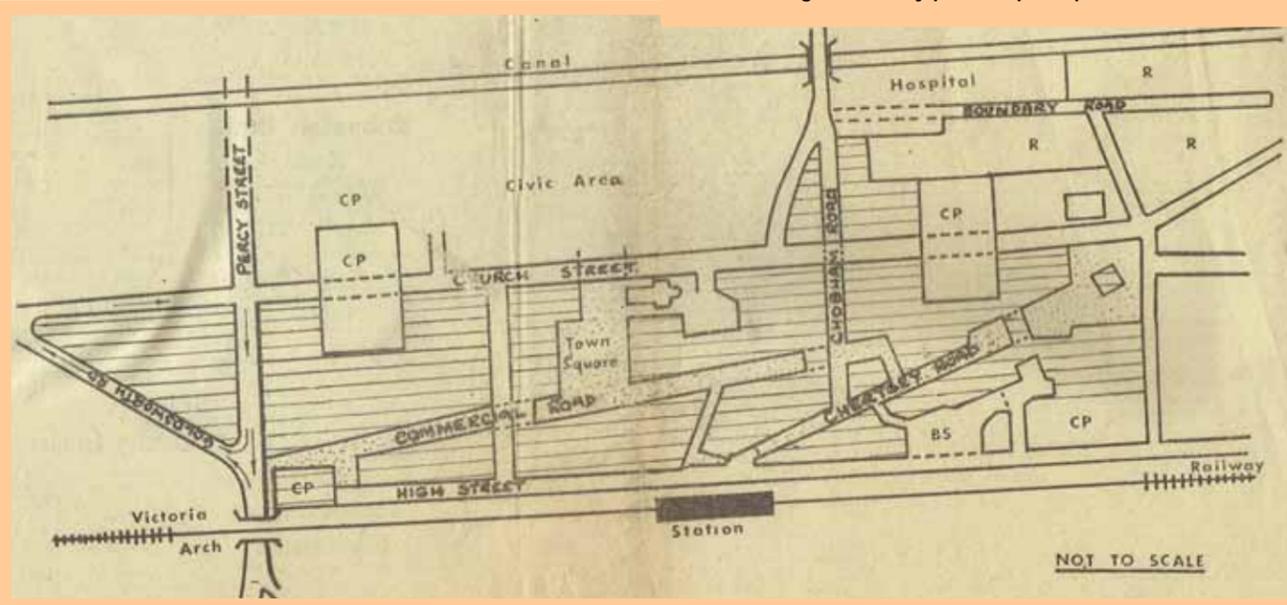
I have in my archive most of the local newspapers from the end of the 1950's to the present day, as well as copies of all Woking Council minutes (discussing it seems ad infinitum what the various plans should and should not include). I also have in my library numerous town planning papers, including Professor Buchanan's influential 'Traffic in Town's report from January 1964, which suggested that wherever possible cars should be kept away from pedestrians. That report appears to have caused quite a stir within Woking Council at that time, with one local councillor suggesting that 'Buchanan would drop dead' if he saw what Woking had planned!

For well over a decade Woking was discussing, planning and re-planning how it should look, and so viewing all these papers, I have these slightly different ideas finding their way into my dreams. Sometimes they merge into a utopian idyll of a town, but often they turn into a nightmare where hellish holes open up; huge hotels, apartments or offices are being built; and weird ideas are muted (such as constructing a car park under Wheatsheaf



The Plans of January 1963 (above) - Sometimes in my dreams the Council Offices appear beside a wonderful green 'park' beside the waters of the Basingstoke Canal.

What was envisaged in January 1964 (below) - Beyond Duke Street, Chertsey Road opens out into an oasis - another bright and airy public open space.

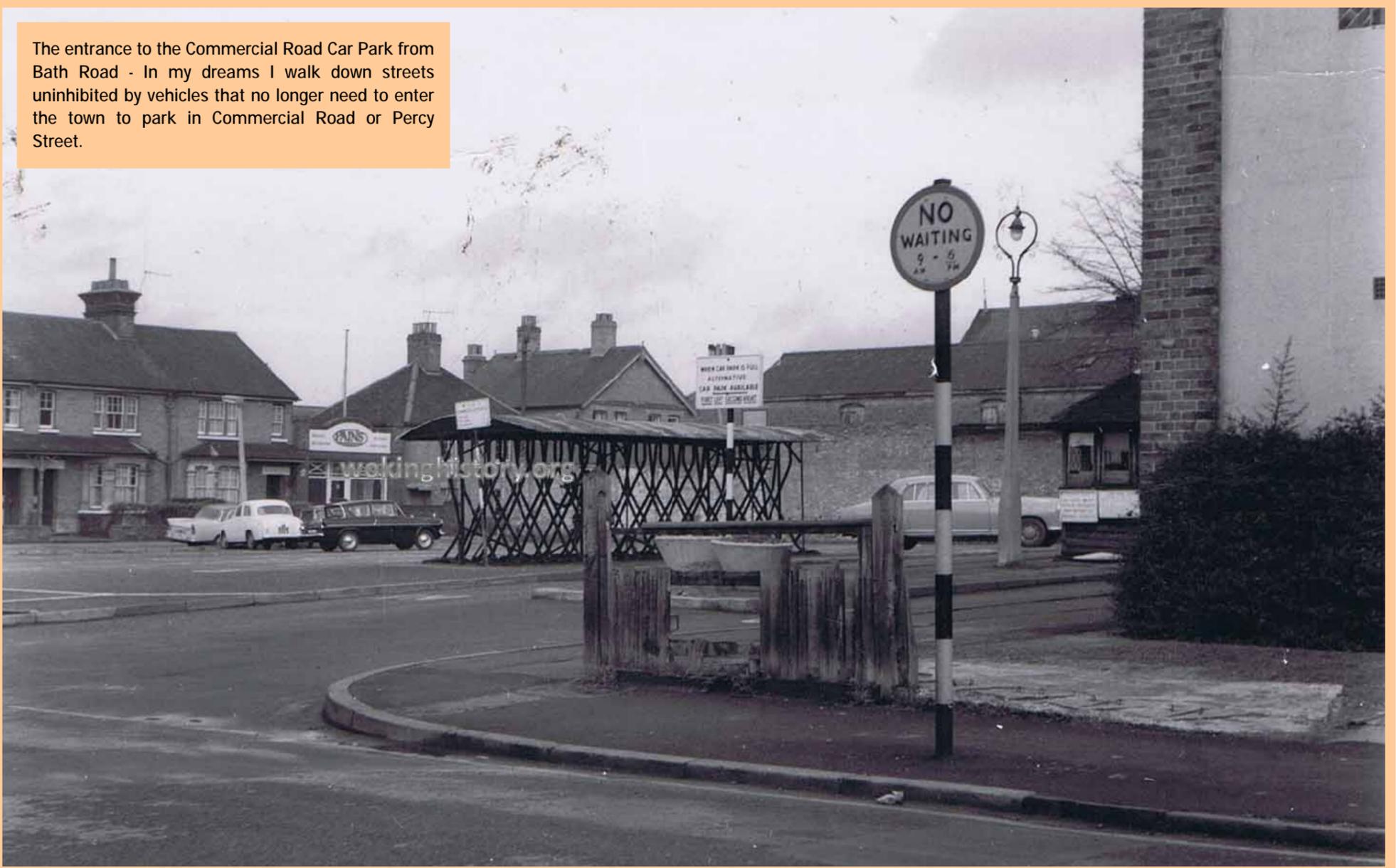


Common) - and then I wake up and realise that I am not actually dreaming of the plans of the 60's - I am living the nightmare of now!

I don't want to disturb your nights, but this week I would like to share with you some of those plans from the early 1960's that might have been - and leave you to imagine how much better (or worse) things could have turned out.

Take, for instance, the 'ambitious plan' from January 1963 with its aim 'to create a town centre of which residents can be proud' (are there ever any plans to the contrary?) - with 'spacious, low-level pedestrian ways' allowing access across perimeter roads, and two separate 'footways through the railway embankment' allowing the widening of Victoria Arch to four lanes. The Civic Area was to be to the north of Church Street, not cut-off from the

The entrance to the Commercial Road Car Park from Bath Road - In my dreams I walk down streets uninhibited by vehicles that no longer need to enter the town to park in Commercial Road or Percy Street.



canal by two carriageways of road, which would link nicely with the Victoria Hospital on the opposite side of Chobham Road.

In January 1964 another plan showed a bit more detail including the site of a spacious new 'Town Square' beside Christ Church, linking with a fully pedestrianised Commercial Road. Even

Chertsey Road was to be completely free of traffic and sporting its own public open space at the junction of the extended Stanley Road (which would then cross Church Street all the way to Boundary Lane).

By the end of 1965 the idea of routing the arterial road along Church Street (under multi-

storey car parks and Chobham Road) had gone, to be replaced with the more familiar dual-carriageway that we have today, but with car parks in the four corners of the town leaving the rest of the roads in the central area almost entirely free of traffic.

And then Victoria Way appears in the plans at the end of 1965 (below) – or worse, closed off as large holes are excavated beside it, so that I wake up in a cold-sweat and realise my dream has become a nightmare, and there is nothing I can do!

