

In a series of guided Heritage Walks around Woking, and in these articles, we investigate the stories behind H G Wells' famous science-fiction novel 'The War of the Worlds'

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CHAPTER SIX - THE HEAT RAY IN THE CHOBHAM ROAD

The original Red House Hotel in Chobham Road was demolished in the 1930's and replaced by a new hotel on the corner with Commercial Road (now O'Neil's) and Burtons (now Ladbrooks) on the corner with Chertsey Road.



'The news of the massacre probably reached Chobham, Woking and Ottershaw about the same time. In Woking the shops had closed when the tragedy happened, and a number of people, shop-people and so forth, attracted by the stories they had heard, were walking over the Horsell Bridge and along the road between the hedges that runs out at last upon the common'.

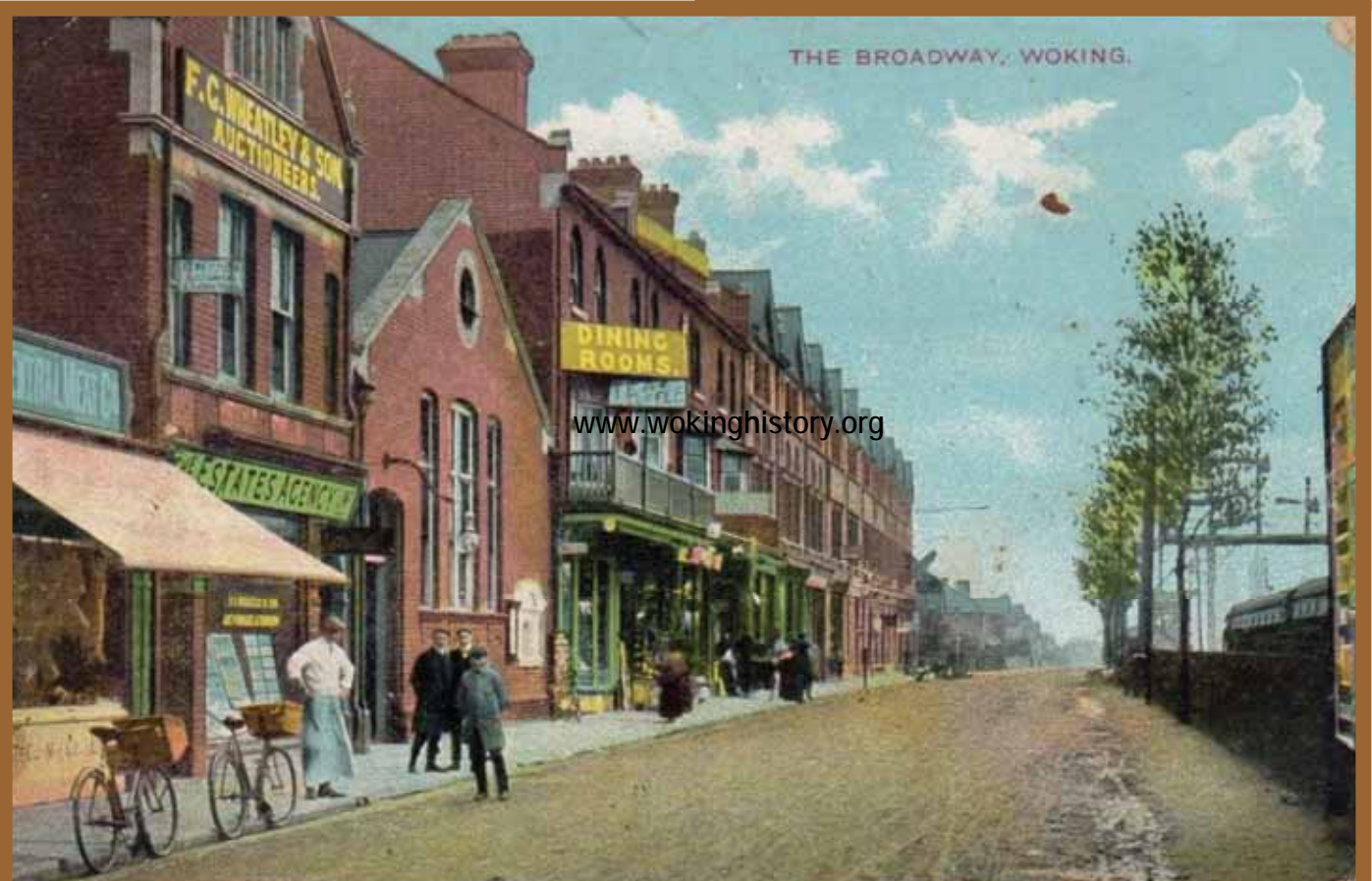
The Chobham Road beyond the Wheatsheaf Recreation Ground used to narrow where the barn of Kettlewell Farm (or Fenns Farm) jutted out into the road, before ascending Kettlewell Hill. There are still hedges on either side of the road just before it reaches the junction with Shores Road and the edge of Horsell Common.

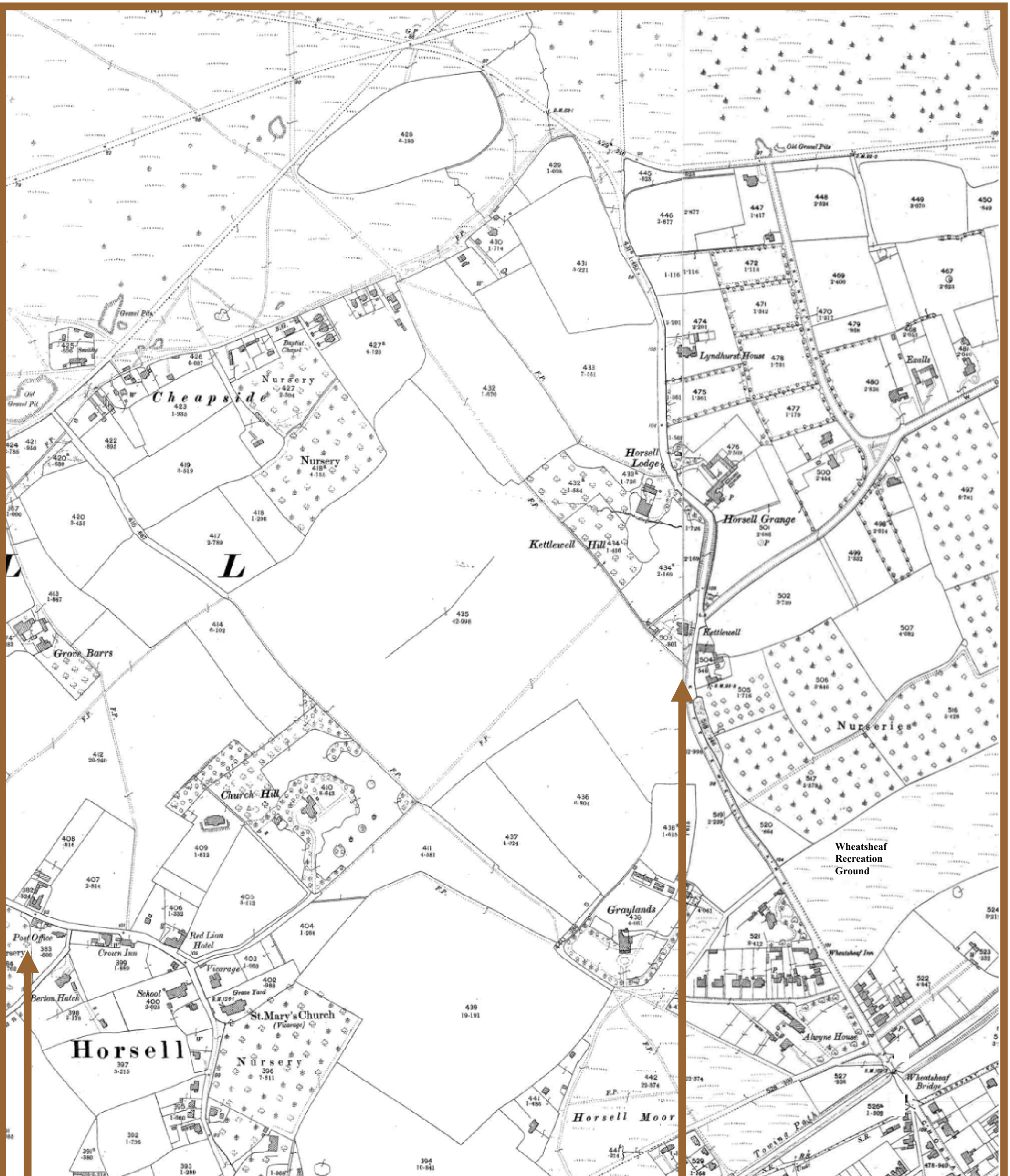
'As yet, of course, few people in Woking even knew that the cylinder had opened, though poor Henderson had sent a messenger on a bicycle to the post-office with a special wire to an evening paper'.

The telegraph office in Woking was in the single-storey gabled building in The Broadway - behind the Post Office which had moved to a new building in Chertsey Road in 1894.

Whether 'Martians' were involved in the destruction at that time is debatable - who knows where town planners and architects come from!

The shops of the Broadway had only just been built when Wells came to Woking





Horsell's Post Office was on the corner of Bury Lane and the High Street (the building in later years being Benstead's Garage)



In Wells' time the barn of Kettlewell Farm jutted out into the road, and although it was demolished in the early 20th century for road improvements the road still grows narrow between high banks as it crosses Kettlewell Hill towards Horsell Common.



Inkerman Barracks were between St Johns and Knaphill, where the Inkerman housing estate is today.

'By half past eight, when the Deputation was destroyed, there may have been a crowd of three hundred people or more at this place, besides those who had left the road to approach the Martians nearer'.

The 'road' could have been any one of the tracks across the common as none of the roads in the area at that time were metalled.

'Stent and Ogilvy, anticipating some possibilities of a collision had telegraphed from Horsell to the barracks as soon as the Martians emerged, for help of a company of soldiers to protect these strange creatures from violence'.

The post office in Horsell, run by the Spooner family, was on the corner of the High Street and Bury Lane (later to be known as Benstead's Garage). At the time Wells was living in Woking, the post office in Horsell didn't have a telegraph office, but by the time the 'war' took place 'early in the 20th century' it would have done, so the deputation's ability to telegraph from Horsell could be claimed to be one of Wells' other great predictions, along with the invention of laser-beams, flight and the destruction of Woking!

The 'barracks' was Inkerman Barracks between Knaphill and St Johns. The buildings had originally been constructed in 1859 as the Woking Invalid Convict Prison - the first prison in this country to be built specifically for disabled prisoners. Later a female prison was added to the site, but in 1889 it was decided to close the male invalid prison and in 1895 the female prison, with the site being turned into barracks that year for the 26th Company of the Royal Engineers. The barracks were therefore very much in the news at the time Wells was researching and writing the story.

Getting back to the common, *'the beam swung close over their heads, lighting the tops of the beach trees that line the road, and splitting the bricks, smashing the windows, firing the window-frames, and bringing down in crumbling ruin a portion of the house nearest the corner'.*

There are a number of houses on the edge of Horsell Common (along Shores Road), and it could be anyone of these that Wells is referring to, but the one that seems to fit best is the house on the corner with Grange Road, now part of the Nuffield Hospital.

'Sparks and burning twigs began to fall into the road, and single leaves like puffs of flame. Hats and dresses caught fire. Then came a crying from the common. There were shrieks and shouts, and suddenly a mounted policeman came galloping through the confusion with his hands clasped over his head, screaming'.

'Everyone was turning and pushing at those behind, in order to clear their way to Woking again. They must have bolted as blindly as a flock of sheep. Where the road grows narrow and black between high banks the crowd jammed and a desperate struggle occurred. All that crowd did not escape; three persons at least, two women and a little boy, were crushed and trampled there, and left to die amid the terror and the darkness'.

I wonder if a boy and a couple of women got in Wells' way as he was cycling from the common towards Woking prompting a note to be made in his mind, if not a notebook! The road still grows narrow near the top of Kettlewell Hill (although not as narrow as it used to).

