

THE SHAPING OF WOKING – IT'S GEOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY

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In this series I want to take a look at this area's history from the time man first set foot in this area during the last Ice Age, right the way up to modern times. I want to show that not only does Woking have a unique history (and indeed prehistory), but also, perhaps conversely, that many events of the everyday national history can also be found played out in our past. We will see how Prehistoric man first had an influence on our landscape; how the Saxon tribes may have divided up our land; how major events such as the plague, peasants revolt, and the War of the Roses impacted our area; and how the Tudor reformation turned the world upside down for many local people. We will see the gradual changes brought about by the agricultural and industrial revolutions and the major upheaval in our area that the Victorian period brought about. We shall see how Woking was at the forefront of some things and perhaps behind the times on others, and in doing so, I hope, we will all gain a greater understanding of the history and heritage of our town.

Some people may think that our history is irrelevant, that only the present or what is planned for the future matters. But like it or not the present is built on the past and like a house with poor foundations, if you do not take care of your heritage – if you do not learn from past mistakes (or even from past glories) – then you may very soon live to regret it.

But before we start on the history or the prehistory, I want to take a brief look at the geology and geography of Woking, because without some understanding of the natural resources and features of the landscape that attracted man to this area, you don't get the full picture of how or why Woking gradually developed the way it has. So let us go back a few million years to a time when geologists tell us that all this area was under a large tropical lagoon.



When they were digging the Goldsworth Cutting in the mid 1830's they discovered fossilised Shark's teeth in the lower levels of the Bagshot Sands, proving beyond doubt the marine origin of our soils.

I have to admit I find it quite hard to envisage the vast amounts of time Geologists have to deal with. Apparently the Bagshot Sands, upon which most of Woking lies, were laid down as sediments on the floor of that tropical lagoon relatively recently - between 25 and 56 million years ago. To understand exactly how 'recent' that was imagine that all the time since the earth was formed to the present day was condensed into one calendar year – with the Big Bang (4.54 billion years ago) happening just as Big Ben strikes the first dong of midnight at the start of year. You would have to wait until sometime on the 27th December before the Bagshot Sands were formed. Later that day, and into the 28th December, earth movements were to form the Alps and at the outer edge

THE OLD FOSSILS OF ANCHOR HILL



The Shark's teeth found by the navies building the London and South Western Railway through Goldsworth Hill in the 1830's are not the only evidence of the long lost seas beneath our feet. Other fossilised sea creatures have been found in the clay deposits below the Bagshot Sands on the slopes of Anchor Hill and the ancient escarpment towards St Johns.

In 1898 members of a group called the Woking Field Club visited the brickfields at Anchor Hill – the report in their minute book making interesting reading.

“On Saturday the Field club had an interesting excursion to Knaphill under the direction of Mr F Meeson, who last year conducted the visit of the Geologists Association to the same spot.

The object of the excursion was to explore the sections of middle Bagshot Beds of sandy clay exposed in the brick fields and to collect sharks teeth and other relics of the life in the old sea in which these beds were deposited.

The party - set to work on the section and were very well rewarded. One sharks tooth was found by Mrs Garland. Mr Unwin unearthed a number of disc shaped ferruginous bodies and several members found specimens of a very beautiful bivalve”.

The works at Anchor Hill, run by the Cook Brothers, closed in 1925 (Hillside Close being built on part of the site).

Notes.

The visit conducted by Mr F Meeson in 1897 was reported in the *Proceedings of the Geologists' Association, Volume 15, 1897-1898*, p185, published in 1899 - 'Excursion to Woking, Saturday, July 3rd, 1897'.

Reference to the finding of shark's teeth at 'Goldsworth Hill' in the 1830's (and subsequent discoveries when the cutting was widened at the start of the 20th century) were reported in *Nature* (September 1901) p523.

Robin Hood Road running along the slope of Bagshot Sands from Anchor Hill to St Johns, with the alluvial basin of what is now Goldsworth Park below. The clay mixed into the Bagshot Sands at this point was extensively exploited from the 18th century onwards, with bricks produced near Kiln Bridge for the construction of the Basingstoke Canal and off Robin Hood Road for the Prison and other buildings in Woking.



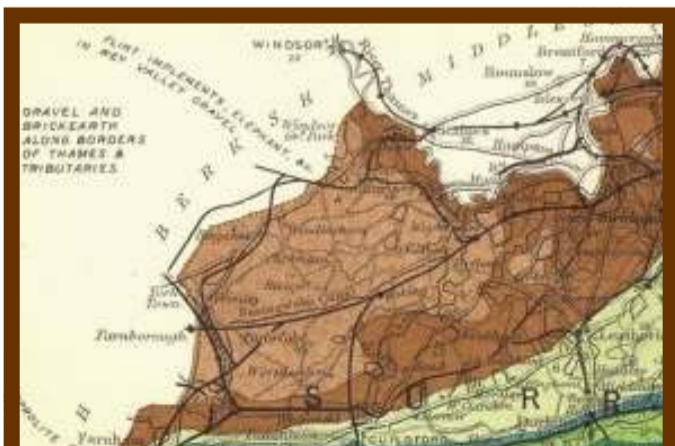


The fertile alluvial soils of the Wey Valley (and other streams in this area) were the obvious choice for early settlement, so as you can see why the geology and geography of our region is important in understanding how and why Woking developed as it did.

bring the sedimentary rocks of our region above the waves, so that the process of erosion could continue again, forming new sedimentary rocks in the Thames Estuary and elsewhere all along our coast.

The earth movements that brought the ground up out of the sea created ripples and ridges, hills and hollows, that not only influenced early man's choices of where he settled and what he did, but have influenced us ever since. The fertile river valleys with their abundant (sometimes too abundant) supply of water, the fordable streams and dry sandy ridges affording easy movement in Medieval times, and the fine open views from local hilltops attracting a premium price from Victorian developers.

Incidentally, in our Geological timeline, the earliest man to leave evidence of his existence in this area only did so about an hour before the end of the year. Our land is just a few days old, our prehistory just over an hour, but our history (the time since written records first appear in our story) lasts just a few seconds. Now there is food for thought!



The Geology of our area - the light brown the Bagshot Sands, the dark brown the Alluvial Sands of the Wey & Thames Valley

THE FLOODPLAIN OF OLD WOKING - the clue is in the name.



The villagers of Byfleet and Old Woking might be forgiven for thinking over the last couple of weeks that the area was once again under a vast lagoon - although as my daughters (pictured here in the floodwater by Woking Palace) and I can testify, this time it was far from 'tropical'!

But if you look carefully at the background you will see that the old buildings on the palace site were (just) above the floodwaters, proving yet again that our ancestors knew where to build better than some modern developers. In Old Woking the heart of the village - the Saxon Settlement around the church - was above the floodwaters, as was the old mill site (although granted getting to it involved getting your feet wet). The same applied to Byfleet where the church was high and dry - it was just the more modern developments that were under water.

Perhaps the developers, and dare I say it our town planners, could take some time to learn about our past, rather than be hell-bent on destroying it. Sometimes open countryside has been left undeveloped for a reason.