

FROM COMMONERS TO CONVICTS

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Last week we looked at how the London Necropolis & National Mausoleum Company was formed and started to build their cemetery at Brookwood. But even before the cemetery was opened the company were apparently making moves to try to sell off what they were already calling 'surplus land'.

When it was first proposed to use Woking Common for a vast 'national' cemetery they thought that anything between 10,000 and 50,000 people would be buried here each year. In the end the numbers were more like 3,200 – and even that was after the cemetery had been open several years.

Delays and incompetence from the start meant that by 1855 the Necropolis Company were in serious financial difficulties and an Act of Parliament allowing them to sell off 'surplus land' was sought. Many people point to this Act as proof that the Necropolis Company were not really a cemetery company, but a building company in disguise. The fact that Henry Drummond, the MP for West Surrey, predicted when the cemetery was established that only 400 acres would be needed adds to the intrigue!

Parliament were not willing to give free reign to the Necropolis Company and set a time limit of ten years for them to sell off their land. They even predicted that a new town might be built around Woking Common Station and insisted that land be set aside for a church and school somewhere close to the station. It appears from early sales maps that the area where Dukes Court now stands was the site favoured – but exactly who favoured that site is not known.

In 1855 some Necropolis land was set aside for a new church, but it wasn't by the station, it was in Knaphill where a small iron room was opened dedicated to the Holy Trinity.

But whilst the land sales around the station were not going well, the Necropolis were starting to get interest from various public bodies, including the Home Office who were looking to build a new type of prison, and the hillside between Knaphill and St Johns seemed ideal.

They bought just over 64 acres in 1858 for the Woking Invalid Convict Prison, an institution not just for disabled prisoners, but for those suffering from mental illness too. Later a female prison was added to the complex that together with the invalid prison eventually closed and became Inkerman Barracks (now the site of the Inkerman Estate) – but that is a story for another time.

The main prison building was designed by Sir Joshua Jebb and Arthur Blomfield and consisted of two large wings on either side of a large central tower. The west wing was for the chronically sick and insane, whilst the east wing was for some of the more able-bodied prisoners.

An eighteen feet high wall, the bricks of which can occasionally still be found on the escarpment down towards Robin Hood Road, surrounded the whole site.

Work began on the building in 1858 with prisoners and officers brought in from Lewes, Carisbrooke and Dartmoor to help with the construction.

Physically and mentally disabled prisoners were kept in separate wings on either side of the main central tower.

The north-east wing was opened on the 28th April 1859, although the official opening of the whole site was not until the 22nd March 1860 when three-hundred prisoners were transferred from the already cramped and inadequate Lewes Prison in Sussex.

The average number of prisoners at Woking was 613.

Life in the prison was harsh by today's standards, but much more relaxed than in many other establishments at the time. During the summer prisoners would rise, wash and clean their cells or wards at 6 a.m., before having breakfast at 7.30 to 8.15 a.m. In winter prisoners rose half an hour later, but from then on everything was the same as the summer times, until the evening labour session.

After breakfast everyone went off to work – some learning new trades such as shoe-making, carpentry or bricklaying – work that would help them to find a trade after they were released. Bookbinding and oakum picking were two other activities, as was work in the kitchens or the prison farm. The site was almost self-sufficient and even had its own gas works off Robin Hood Road (where Foresters Close is today).

For Catholics work was interrupted at 8.50 a.m. for morning prayers and mass, whilst Protestant prisoners broke up at 9.50 a.m. for their prayers (each service lasting no more than 40 minutes).



The prison was built on the hill between St Johns & Knaphill, where the Inkerman Estate is today

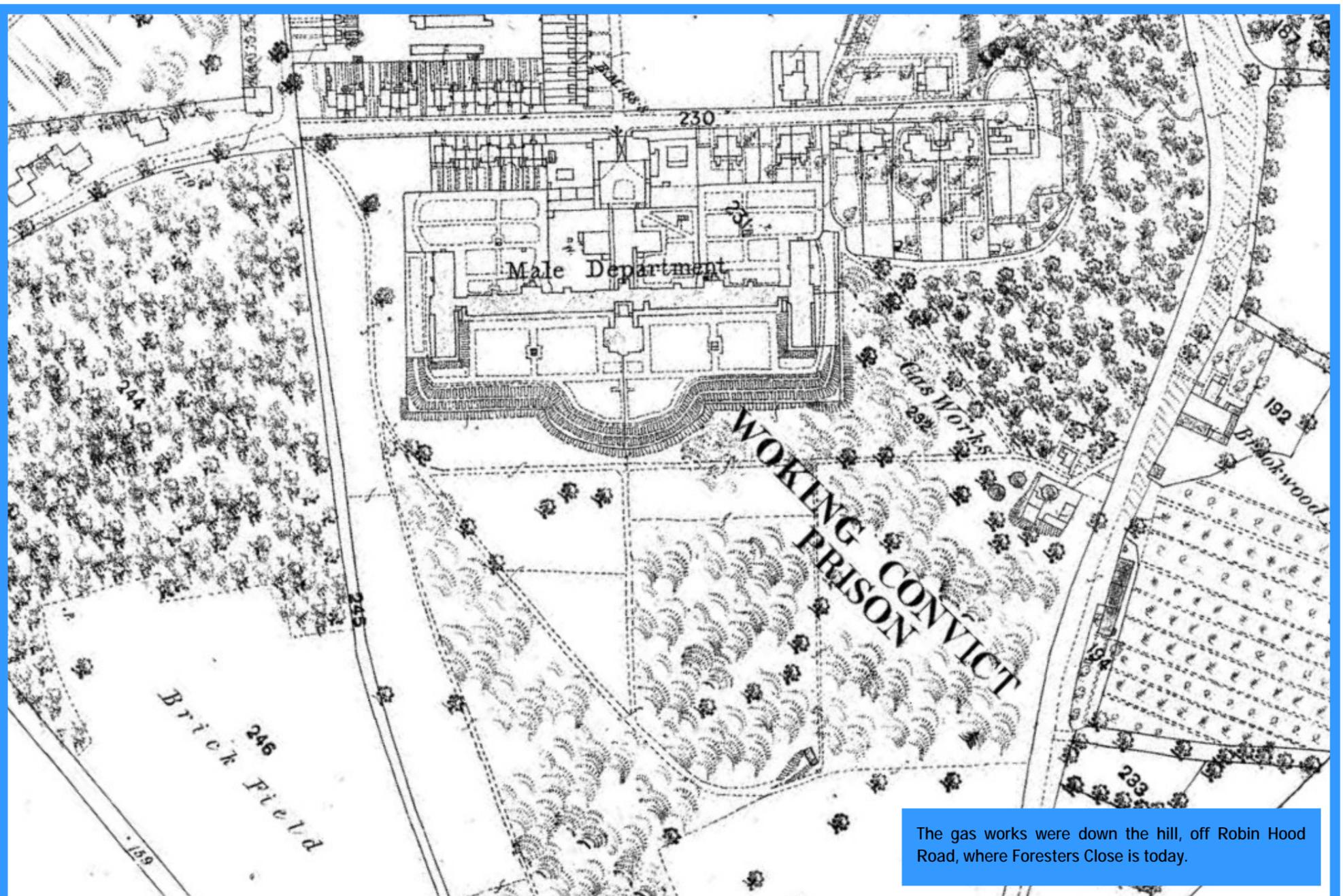
Lunch was from 12.15 until 2.00 p.m., after which the scraps were collected from the tables and labour and exercise took place.

Supper lasted for thirty minutes between 5.30 and 6.00 p.m., followed by evening labour until 8.00 in the summer and 7.30 in the winter.

A forty-five minute period of reading or 'private devotions' was allowed before the hammocks had to be made up and lights turned off (9.00 summer, 8.30 p.m. winter).

An evening school was held five times a week, with examinations in the three 'R's'.

The opening of the prison in the late 1850's had a major effect on the area, with not just the prisoners, but the prison officers and their families adding to Woking's population at this time – although as we shall see next week, it was not the only institution to open in the area at that time.



The gas works were down the hill, off Robin Hood Road, where Foresters Close is today.

1856 - THE ALBION HOTEL



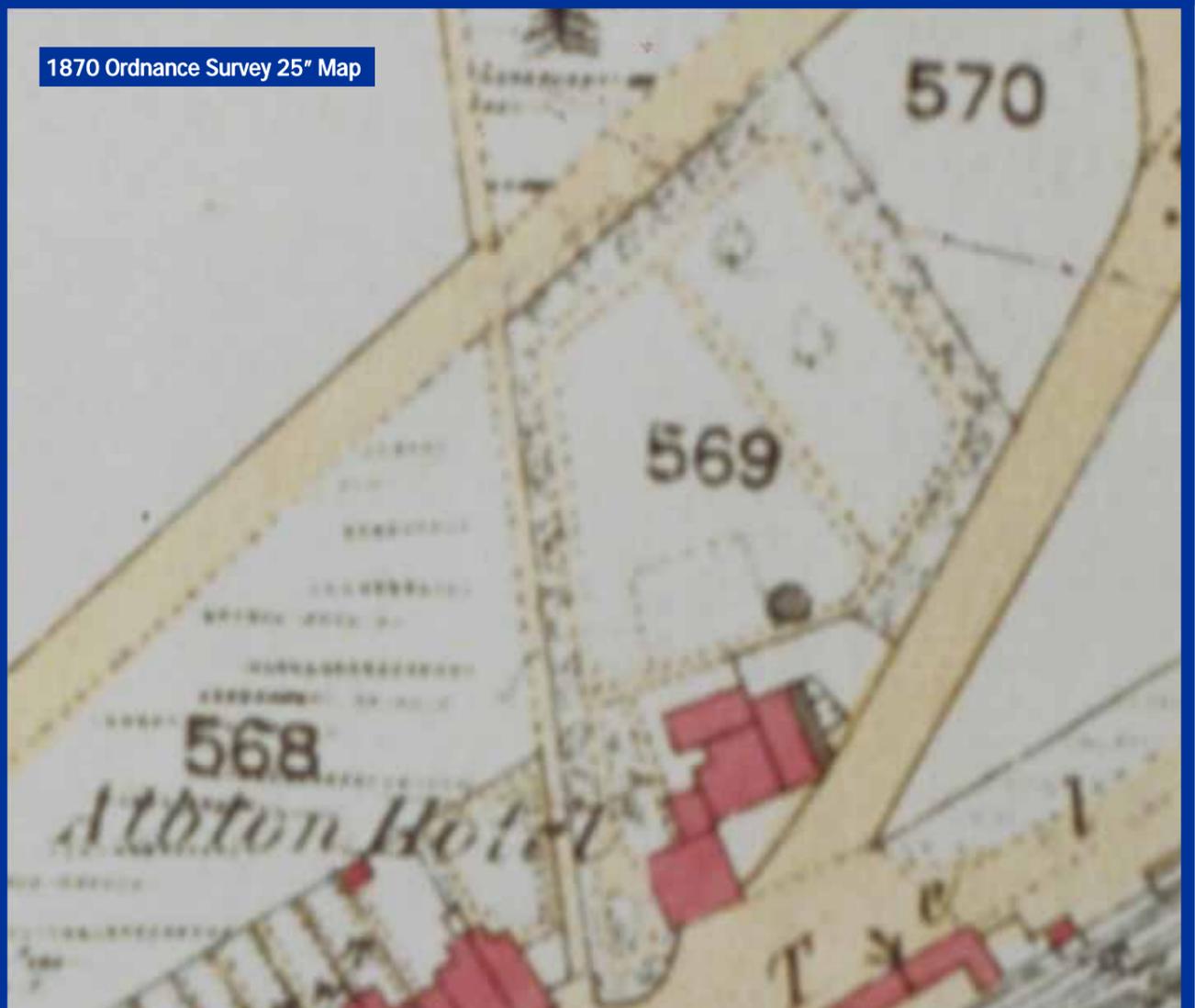
By the time the Necropolis Company arranged their first major land sale around Woking Station they had already sold privately a few pieces of land.

To the south of the railway, along what would later become Oriental Road, John Rastrick a wealthy railway engineer (who lived at Sayes Court in Addlestone) bought several acres of land where his sons would build a house called Woking Lodge (more of which in a couple of weeks).

On the opposite side of the station (the back entrance as the main station buildings faced south – where the stage coaches from Guildford had come), the former landlord of the Wheatsheaf in Horsell, Reuben Percy, built the Albion Hotel.

It was a tall, square, building with stables and other buildings behind and to the right, and a garden that stretched down the Chertsey Road almost to its junction with Chobham Road, and bounded on the north and west by what is now Commercial Way and Church Path

It wasn't long before others followed Reuben Percy's lead, but in 1856 this was all there was of Woking Town Centre!



1856—TIME FOR CHANGE AT ST PETER'S



As I said last week, the aim of these articles is not to just randomly pick on an item of history but to chronicle Woking's story in more detail than others are perhaps willing or able to do.

This week we are taking a detailed look at the late 1850's when the Necropolis Company's land sales were having a major impact on the area, but there were little changes taking place

in Woking too at this time, and one of those was the installation of a new clock at St Peter's Church in Old Woking in 1856.

About 1730 the Rev John Flutter was concerned that the clock on the north face of St Peter's church tower would not keep the correct time, so commissioned a sundial to be installed to ensure it could be properly set. But by 1856 that single-faced clock was in need of replacing

and a more efficient clock built by a W Triggs of Guildford was commissioned with faces on three sides of the tower to help keep the village on time.

Apparently fifty locals subscribed to the fund of £105 for the clock, which can be seen on this old postcard of the church.