1872 - WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF THE WOMEN PRISONERS OF WOKING.

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A contemporary drawing of one of the female prisoners at Woking

In previous articles we have looked at the opening of the Woking Invalid Convict Prison between St Johns and Knaphill; Brian Dillon and John Lynch, two of the fenians that were imprisoned there; and attempts on the life of the governor, Captain Bramley – but I haven't yet mentioned that there were in fact not one, but two prisons on the site, the second one being the Woking Womens' Prison, built in 1869 (partially with the help of labour supplied from the male invalid prison next door).

Like the invalid prison many of the women worked in the prison kitchens or laundry, whilst a number were employed as tailoresses, needlewomen or knitters. Whilst it is easy to see how these skills may have helped them gain employment upon release, the thirteen described in the records as 'Mosaic workers' probably found it harder to find similar work after they were set free.

By 1872 Woking Prison was well-known for its Mosaics Department where the women could earn 1s2d a day breaking up refuse marble to be laid as mosaic floors. Some were exhibited at the 'International Exhibition of Fine Arts and Industry' at the Royal Albert Hall in 1872, and it is thought that part of the floor of the church at St Johns includes examples of the local prisoners work.

Having recently visited the Museum of Childhood at Bethnal Green (originally built in 1872 as Bethnal Green Museum), I have discovered that the floor there was also made by the 'prisoners of Woking Goal'.

Each prisoner was given off-cuts and rejected pieces of marble that they had to cut to size, lay in a certain pattern, grout and then polish until smooth. You can see when you look at each individual panel which makers were more conscientious than others - and having studied most of the panels still on view at Bethnal Green, believe me there were quite a few who were obviously not that conscientious! But it should be noted that the two or three mistakes in the layout of the floor were not the fault of Woking's women, who for obvious reasons were not allowed out to actually lay the floor!

Spot the 'deliberate' mistake in the pattern – not the fault of the mosaic workers of Woking!

In fact it seems that the ones on display at Bethnal Green were not made by the best mosaic makers at Woking – their work it seems was reserved for the floor of what became the Victoria & Albert Museum (and possibly some of the floors of the other museums at South Kensington), and also for the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral where the mosaics around the tombs of Horatio Nelson and the Duke of Wellington both display the fine work of Woking's female prisoners.

It is often said that one of the mosaic workers at Woking was the infamous murderess, Constance Kent (above in 1874), although it appears that there is little direct evidence to support this. Constance was sentenced to death for the murder of her four-year old step-brother in 1865, but her sentence was commuted to life - serving her time at Milbank, Parkhurst, Brixton and Fulham (as well as Woking). Prisoners are known to have produced mosaics at Parkhurst, Fulham and of course Woking (if not the others), and it appears that it has just been assumed that Constance was one of them. I can certainly find nothing in the records to support the assumption that she was imprisoned at Portland where it is claimed she personally laid the mosaic floor of the nearby St Peter's Church as 'atonement' for her sins!

Having said that, the idea that mosaic work was 'virtuous' in Victorian times and that it would 'somehow be redemptive for the ladies' was very much in the thoughts of the authorities – and as the Prison Governor at Woking remarked in 1872 – 'it is sad to reflect how much power and talent, ingenuity and perseverance, must have been perverted in the lives of those who find their way into a place like this'.

The Woking Female Prison may have long since been demolished, but it is nice to think that the work of some of the ladies that were imprisoned there has survived, not just locally at St John's Church, but also in such prestigious places as the Crypt of St. Paul's Cathedral and the Victoria & Albert Museum!

THE RESTORATION OF WISLEY CHURCH IN 1872 - IN MEMORY OF CHARLES BUXTON OF FOXWARREN, WISLEY

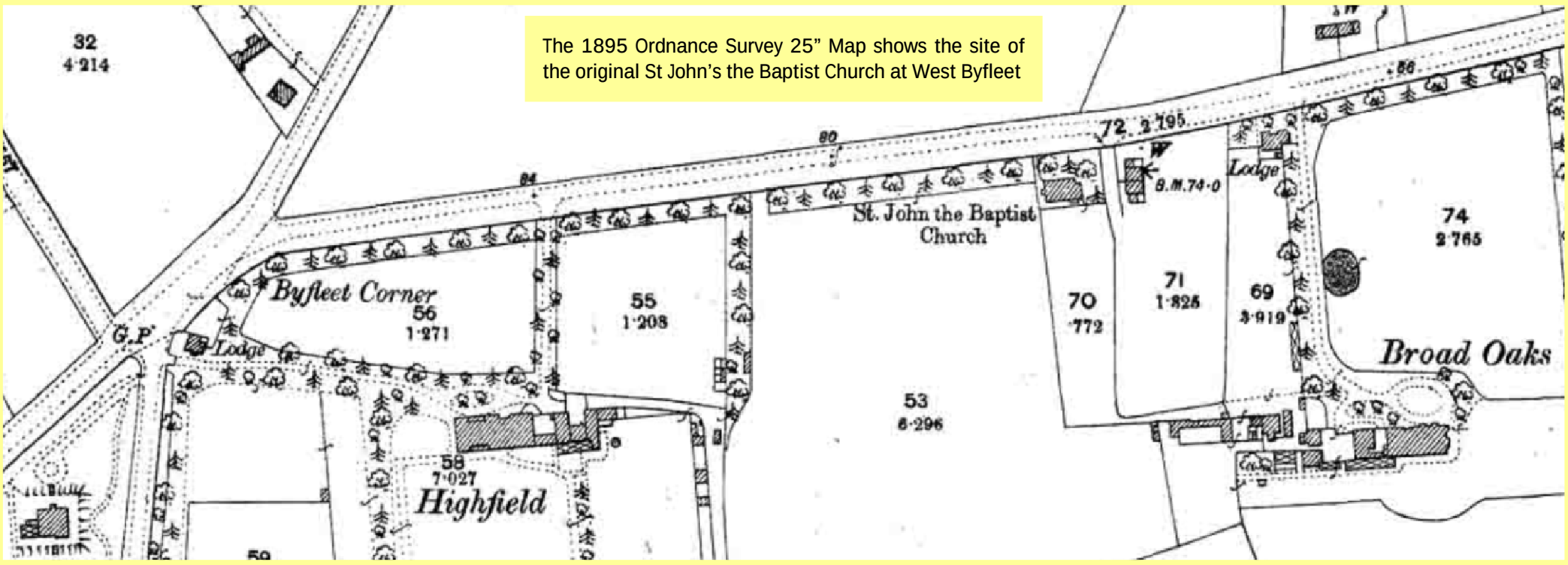
Many Victorian's (as we have already seen) were great philanthropists, founding orphanages, schools, hospitals and other great institutions, and building or restoring hundreds of places of worship, such as the tiny Norman church at Wisley – restored in 1872 at the expense of Mrs Emily Buxton of Fox Warren in memory of her husband Charles who had died only the previous year.

Charles Buxton was the Liberal M.P, for East Surrey (previously representing Maidstone and before that Newport on the Isle of Wight), and a major shareholder in the family brewery of Truman, Hanbury, Buxton & Co in London, and a great social reformer, like his father Sir Thomas Buxton, who had been one of the driving forces behind the abolition of slavery.

Charles Buxton had built Fox Warren in 1855 in Redhill Road (then in the parish of Wisley, but now in Cobham) largely to his own design - an imposing house with equally imposing gatehouses and other buildings (all now listed buildings), said to be the inspiration for E H Shepard's illustrations of Kenneth Graham's 'Toad Hall' in 1908.

Sadly that was the year that Emily herself died, leaving an estate valued at £113,502 - so I suspect that the cost of restoring Wisley Church had been a drop in the ocean at the time!

WEST BYFLEET'S 'TIN TABERNACLE' BUILT IN 1872 & WOKING THE WILD-WEST TOWN OF SURREY

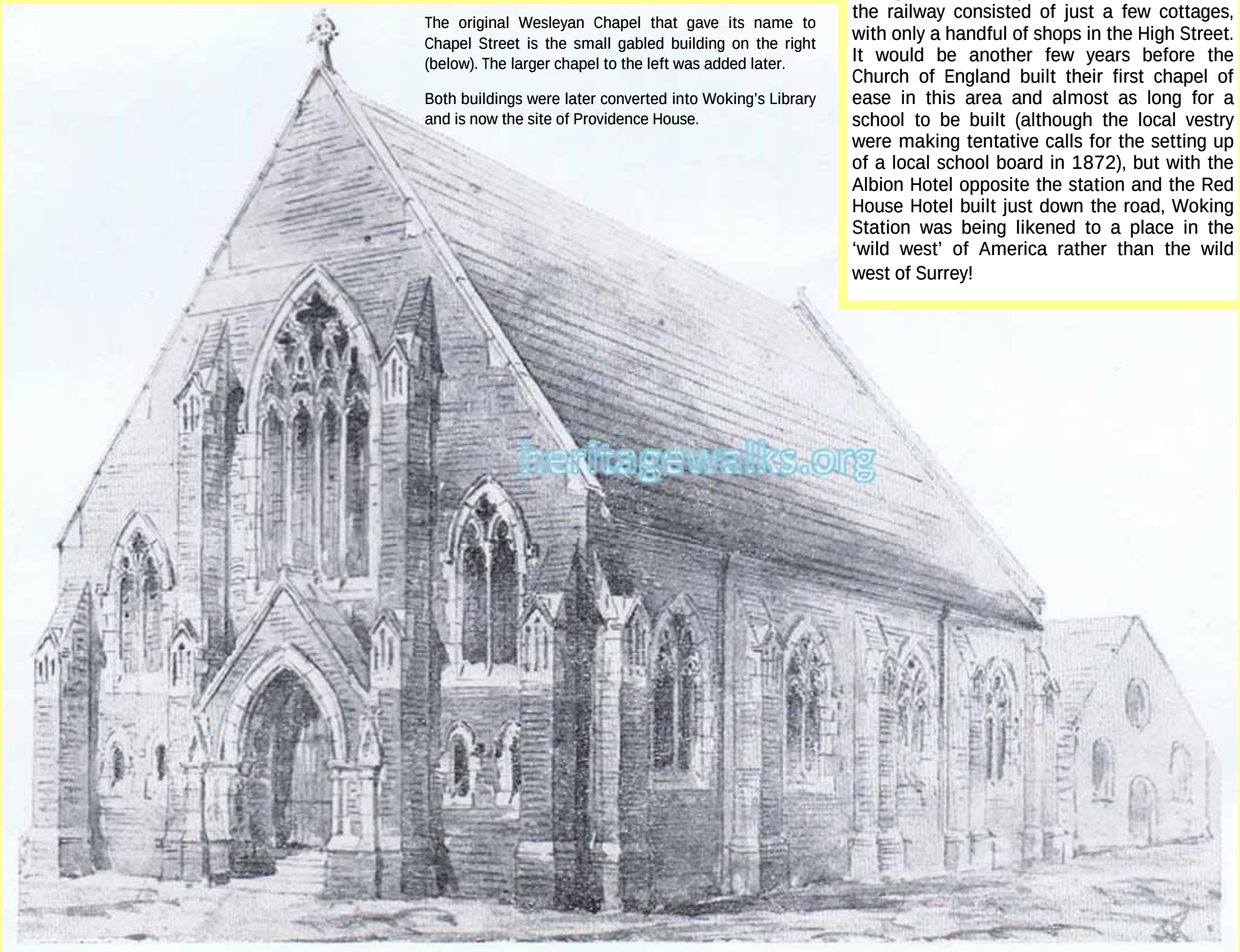


The 1895 Ordnance Survey 25" Map shows the site of the original St John's the Baptist Church at West Byfleet

Whilst Wisley Church was being restored in 1872, just a few miles north, a new church was being erected in the grounds of Sheppard's Farm on the Parvis Road to the west of Byfleet.

Sheppard's Farm was later re-developed into Broadoaks and the common land to the west of Byfleet would in time become West Byfleet – but in 1872 the area around the little 'tin tabernacle' as it was affectionately known was mainly referred to as 'Byfleet Corner' where a couple of years previously Mr John Leyland had founded his Industrial School for destitute boys not convicted of crime.

Near Woking Station another small chapel was also being erected, this time for the local Wesleyan movement in the lane that was to become known as 'Chapel Street' – the first place of worship in what would eventually be the new town of Woking. Up to now, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, the area to the north of the railway consisted of just a few cottages, with only a handful of shops in the High Street. It would be another few years before the Church of England built their first chapel of ease in this area and almost as long for a school to be built (although the local vestry were making tentative calls for the setting up of a local school board in 1872), but with the Albion Hotel opposite the station and the Red House Hotel built just down the road, Woking Station was being likened to a place in the 'wild west' of America rather than the wild west of Surrey!



The original Wesleyan Chapel that gave its name to Chapel Street is the small gabled building on the right (below). The larger chapel to the left was added later.

Both buildings were later converted into Woking's Library and is now the site of Providence House.