

A TALE OF TWO FIRE BRIGADES

Iain Wakeford 2015



Eventually Woking did get their steam-powered fire engine, and a new fire station.

Last week we looked at H.G Wells and his famous science-fiction novel 'The War of the Worlds' where Martians landed near the sandpits, setting fire to Horsell Common and much of nearby Woking. I told of how he had included references to local people, places and events (and even a local legend), but one thing I find remarkable about the whole story is that nowhere does Wells make any mention of anybody attempting to put out the fires in Woking! It is as if the local fire-brigade didn't exist!

In 1888 an organisation called the Woking Torchlight Society was founded and on November 5th held their first Bonfire Night procession to the Mount Hermon Estate, then only sparsely occupied by houses. Within a few years their annual event was apparently the 'talk of West Surrey' and at the suggestion of one of their leading members, Charles Sherlock, the society agreed to use some of their funds and members to establish a volunteer fire brigade in the town.

Before it could be set up, however, the newly formed Woking Local Board jumped on the bandwagon and promised to set up a brigade with equipment and uniforms being paid for out of the rates (although the firemen would still only be unpaid volunteers). In May 1894 they voted to buy a fire engine, with hoses to be distributed to four fire-stations at Knaphill, Old Woking, St Johns and Woking Town Centre.

The Narrator in H.G. Well's science-fiction novel 'The War of the Worlds' escapes the fire & destruction of Horsell Common - but where was Woking Fire Brigade when you needed them?

Then as now acts of arson had to be tackled on Horsell Common - although normally Martian's are not the main suspects.

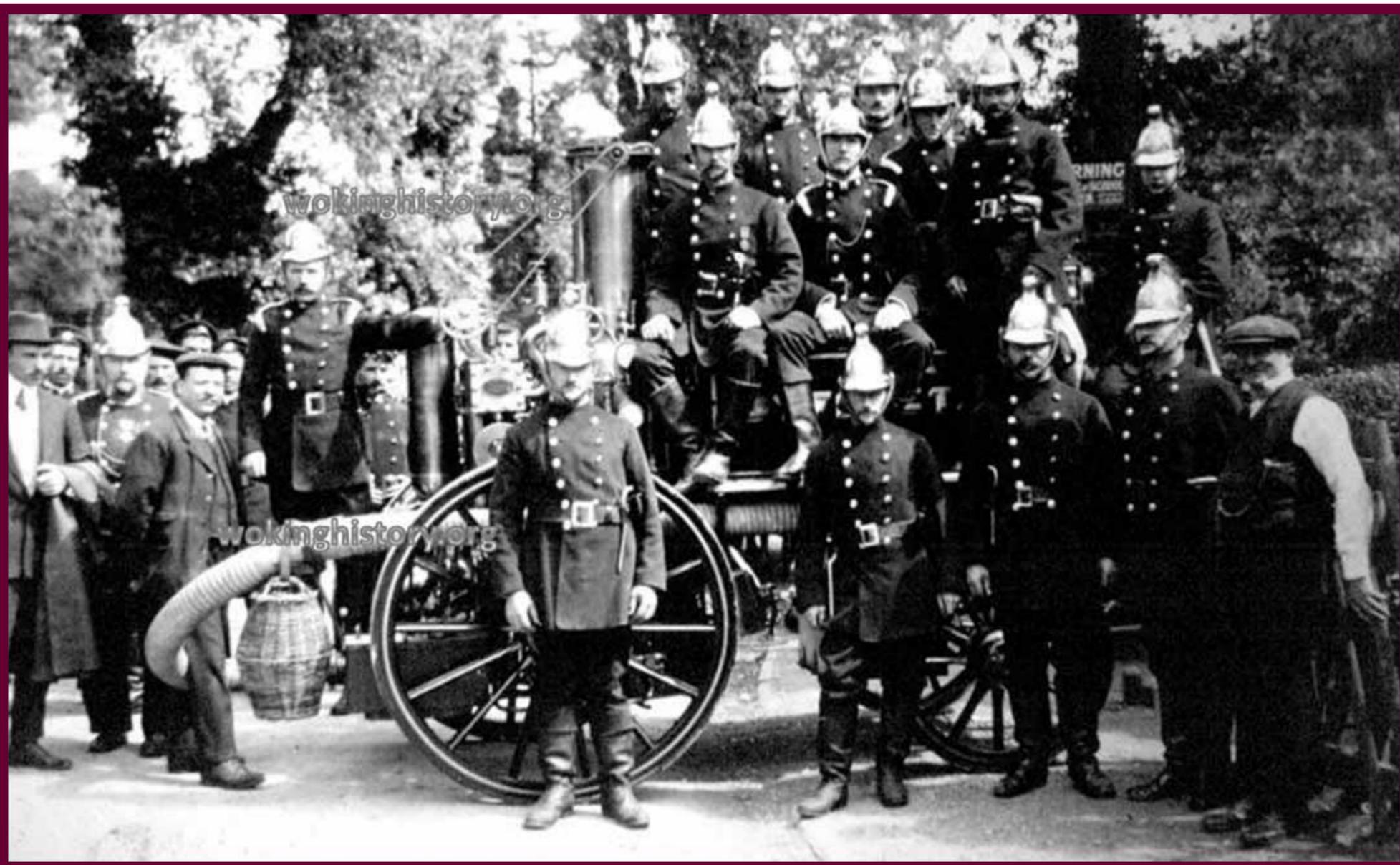


Unfortunately the new Local Board members in August 1894 were not so keen to spend rate-payers money and cancelled the purchase of the fire engine. This decision caused uproar and when the Woking Local Board was replaced by the Woking Urban District Council in 1895 the new councillors promptly reversed the decision to cancel the engine and provisionally accepted the tender of Messrs Merryweather & Sons of Greenwich for a steam-powered fire engine.

Woking at last was to get its own fire brigade with not just a central fire station (in a tin 'shed' in Chertsey Road), but also outlying 'fire huts' (disparagingly referred to as bathing huts) in Knaphill High Street, near Kiln Bridge at St Johns and at Hiplely Bridge in Old Woking.

But in another astonishing turn around in October 1895 Woking Council voted once again to cancel the fire engine contract and voted instead to spend just £300 on 'one jumping sheet, a 35ft ladder and two short ladders' for each of the four sites!

So the Woking Volunteer Fire Brigade was finally set up in December that year with Mr Sherlock as its first Captain. But it wouldn't be long before tensions between him and the chairman of the council's Fire Brigade Committee, Councillor James Kitteridge, came to a head with Sherlock insisting that the brigade should have a steam-powered fire engine, and Kitteridge insisting that the council couldn't afford it!



The Whiteman's in their book on *'Victorian Woking'* recall that in December 1895 the brigade 'received its baptism of fire when it went to an outbreak in a stable in Goldsworth Road. In October two years later, three outbreaks occurred within a week and at each the brigade was almost powerless on account of inadequate equipment. The Council had turned a deaf ear to the request for a 'steamer' and an enthusiastic public meeting on 23rd December 1897 demanded proper equipment'.

Perhaps it should be no surprise that H G Wells didn't mention a fire brigade in his story of the

Byfleet too saw progress with their own steam-powered fire engine in the late 1890's.

destruction of Woking – there was hardly a brigade to mention!

Meanwhile in Byfleet the local volunteer fire brigade had been happily operating for years – set up in the mid 1880's by Sir James Whittaker Ellis with a private manual engine that he had provided at his own expense (following a fire at his home, Petersham House

– now Lloyds bank). In December 1893 the Chertsey Rural Sanitary Authority, anxious to help out as much as they could, made arrangements under the Public Health Act of 1875 to levy a special rate to help fund the volunteer brigade. In February 1894 the Parish rented the engine and uniforms at £10 per annum and after 1896 they also rented the fire station in the High Road staffed by eleven men. The contrast with Woking could not have been starker, where the twenty men spread between four small fire-stations, was obviously totally inadequate for a town of its size.

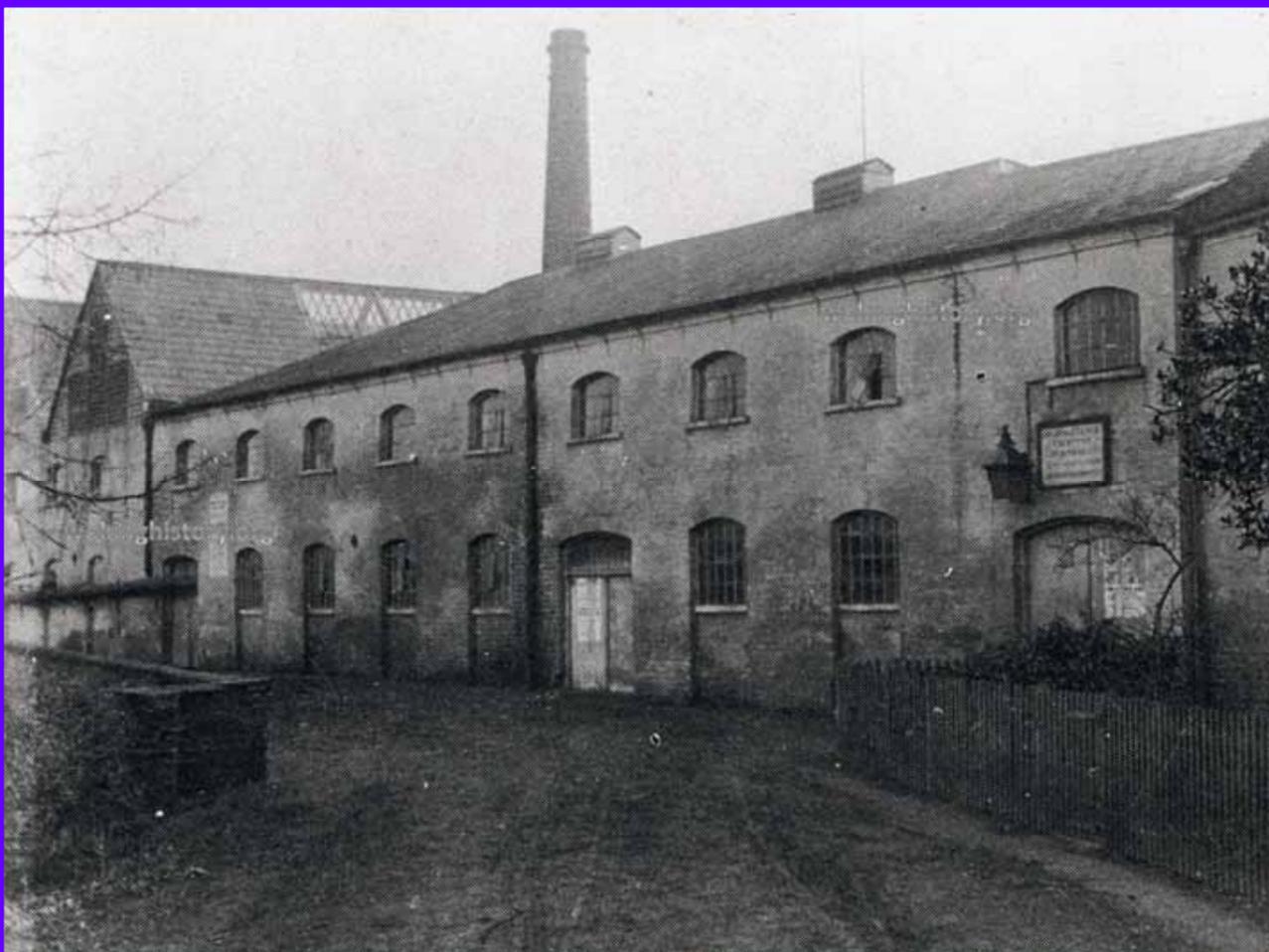
THE END OF WOKING PAPER MILL IN 1894

In 1894 the Woking Paper Co Ltd, finally closed their paper-mill in Old Woking. The business had been going for over half a century, after Alderman Venables of Guildford had bought the old disused corn and leather mill at Woking in 1838 and converted it into a paper-mill.

By 1851 there were fifty-four paper-makers listed in the census at Woking and in 1861 it was noted that 'the increase of population in Send parish since 1851 is attributed to the erection of houses for the workmen of a large paper-mill situate in the parish of Woking'.

A J Munby recorded in 1863 meeting the 'paper-mill girls on their way home from work', and the 1871 census records whole families employed at the mill, which at that stage was run by Henry Virtue Bayley & Co.

There were apparently 136 employees at the mill at that time which in April 1870 had been put on a fortnight's notice of closure, before the Woking Paper Co Ltd stepped in and bought the site. They had installed new machinery (seen here), but it probably proved to be too little too late and the works struggled on until the end.



THE ST MARTHA PRINTING WORKS - 1895/6



About 10 o'clock on the evening of Saturday 24th November 1895, the printing works of Messrs Unwin Brothers (in the valley below St Martha's Church at Chilworth), burnt down. Chilworth at that time was a hive of industry with the nearby Gunpowder Works providing employment for a large number of local people. If a spark from the Unwin's fire had landed in the wrong place, it could have been a disaster on a massive scale, but for the printers, of course, it was still bad enough.

The company needed to find somewhere fast to re-establish their works and fortunately for

them the now empty paper-mill at Old Woking was ideal.

The following year they rebuilt the front of the old mill, adding a new front entrance, with Dutch gables along the roofline facing the village – and added other buildings to the back of the site.

Sadly virtually nothing remains of the old buildings, most having been destroyed by Linden Homes when they built their 'Gresham Mill' development on the site – surely one of the worse examples of vandalism this area has ever seen!

