

1897 - QUEEN VICTORIA'S DIAMOND JUBILEE

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Over the last few weeks and months we have seen how the town of Woking had gradually developed with new houses, new shops and new businesses opening year by year, but 1897 was the first year that Woking Town Centre experienced something that nowadays seems to happen almost every week – the demolition and re-development of a site!

When the railway station opened in 1838 there was no town of Woking – the station was built in the middle of Woking Common and it would be eighteen years before anywhere was built to the north of the station.

That was the Albion Hotel, built in 1856 by Reuben Percy, who had previously run the Wheatsheaf in Horsell. He quickly realised that the Necropolis Company's land sales around Woking Station would lead to the creation of a new town – with his new hotel right at the forefront of that development!

As well as being the first place to be built to the north of the railway it was also the first to be rebuilt as in 1897 it was decided to knock-down the small, square, three-storey building and replace it with a much grander building – one of Woking's main landmarks (until it too was demolished in the early 1960's to be replaced by the present Albion House office block)

The new Albion was not the only Woking landmark built at this time. The Woking Public Hall (built 1895-6) along with the offices of the Woking Water Company (on the corner of Commercial Road and Percy Street) were joined in 1898 by the construction of the Woking &



District Constitutional Club, designed by a local architect called Henry Whitburn. In the next century the Trinity Methodist Church and Council Offices would be added to the group to make what was arguably Woking's most architecturally pleasing street scene (before they too were all demolished in the 1960's and 70's)!

The original Albion Hotel is on the right, with the shops of the High Street in the background and the town entrance to Woking Station on the left.

The Albion Hotel was the first building to be built in Woking Town Centre and the first to be demolished.

The old hotel (above) was replaced by the one shown here, which in turn was demolished in the mid 1960's and replaced by the Albion House development.



The Public Hall, or Grand Theatre as it was also known (together with the parish hall at Christ Church, which was also constructed in 1898), were the birthplace for many local amateur entertainment groups, including the Woking Musical Society (1896), the Woking Orchestral Society (1897), the Woking Choral Society (1897) and the Woking Drama Club (1898).

1898 was obviously a good year for local entertainment as that year also saw the opening of Byfleet Village Hall – another venue that over the years has seen more than its fair share of local drama!

THE WOKING ORCHESTRAL SOCIETY

The first performance of the Woking Orchestral Society, on the 28th April 1897 at the Woking Public Hall, was apparently in aid of the appeal for money to build the Woking Victoria Hospital – although it was noted that despite being ‘a distinct success’, the hospital fund ‘did not benefit very much’ as the expenses for the performance were quite high.

The conductor was Mr Patrick White, the organist and choir master of Woodham Church Choir.



The Woking Water Company offices and Grand Theatre (below) were joined by the Constitutional Club (right) and later the Trinity Methodist Church & Council Offices to make what was arguably one of Woking's best known street scenes, before demolition in the 1960's & 70's.



In 1897 the people of Byfleet were trying to think of an appropriate way to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria – at that time the only British Monarch to have reigned for sixty years. Someone suggested that a parish hall should be built, but a hall would cost a lot of money and it was not certain that the village could afford to furnish a hall, let alone buy the land and build it.

But Byfleet was fortunate in that it had a number of wealthy philanthropists – including Mr F C Stoop, the Dutch oil tycoon who lived at West Hall in West Byfleet. He apparently offered to pay for the building of the hall, provided the villagers could find a suitable site and pay for the furnishings.

So the villagers went to another prominent local landowner – Mr H F Lock-King – who, perhaps not wishing to be outdone, offered to give them not just a site in the High Road so the Village Hall and Institute could be built, but also gave land for a recreation ground in Workhouse Lane (now Rectory Lane). Byfleet's contribution to the jubilee celebrations was sorted.

WOKING CHORAL SOCIETY

The formation of the Woking Choral Society seems to be a bit confused. Some sources suggest that it was formed along with the Woking Musical Society in 1896, but a report in the Woking News & Mail on the 31st July 1897 notes ‘it is now proposed to form a choral society in connection with the Woking Choral Society’.

The same newspaper, however, also carried a notice from Charles E Tinney, the principal of the Guildford School of Music to ‘form a Choral Society for Woking and District’ with ‘performances of Oratorios, Cantatas, etc.’ in the coming autumn conducted by Mr Chas. E Tinney of St Paul's Cathedral!

The honorary secretary was apparently Mr E H Maxwell, of 6 The Broadway, Woking, were potential choristers should apply.

It appears, however, that support for Mr Tinney was not forthcoming as on the 16th October another report indicated that a choral society in connection with the Orchestral Society would start practicing ‘if sufficient support was forthcoming’ with Mr O O Brooksbank (organist of St Paul's, Addlestone) as conductor. This time just over fifty people turned up to the meeting on the 26th October, with the first official rehearsal of the

new society taking place on the 1st November at the Masonic Hall in Bath Road (one of the new town of Woking's oldest established meeting place, having opened in 1882).

The first performance, at the Woking Public Hall, was on Tuesday 14th December 1897, with sixty singers in the chorus and the orchestra augmented by bandsmen from Inkerman Barracks.

Unfortunately this too appears to have not been a financial success as the ticket price of between one and three shillings probably didn't cover the £20 that had to be paid to extend the stage (and other expenses) – and one reviewer reported that ‘from a musical point of view the concert was not altogether a brilliant success!’

It was perhaps not surprising when you consider that they only had a few weeks to practice and at one stage when the leader of the orchestra, Mr T E Gatehouse, was playing a violin solo, one of his strings broke and he had to continue his piece on a borrowed instrument! But from small beginnings the Choral Society flourished – one of a number of societies set up in Victorian times to entertain the people of Woking.



Village Hall.

Byfleet.

In Woking they decided that the best way to commemorate the Queen's Jubilee was to build a new cottage hospital. By the late 1890's Woking's population had increased considerably, but its hospital was a small converted house in Bath Road (where Middle Walk is today), with an honorary staff of just eight. It was called the Woking, Horsell & Woodham Cottage Hospital so although the new site for the 'Woking Victoria Hospital' was not actually in Woking, it was at least

continuing the tradition of serving not just the town, but its near neighbours to the north.

Work started in 1897 on the site by Wheatsheaf Bridge in Horsell (the boundary between the two parishes being Boundary Lane – more or less where Victoria Way now runs), but it was not until 1899 before the work on the seven bed hospital costing £4,200 was complete. It wouldn't be long before it had to be extended!

The land and building of Byfleet Village Hall was paid for by two local philanthropists, leaving the villagers to just pay for the furnishings.

The Woking Victoria Hospital (actually in Horsell), was the town's contribution to Queen Victoria's Jubilee Celebrations.

Later it was extended to commemorate the Queen's reign and later still as part of the town's memorial to those who died during the Great War.

