

WOKING'S AIR RAID PRECAUTIONS

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Some preparations for the war started long before it was officially declared and in March 1939 Woking Council discussed the provision of air-raid shelters in the district. W.G. Tarrant (then a councillor representing Byfleet) submitted a letter to the Clerk suggesting that a shelter be provided underneath the proposed new cinema at Byfleet, but the council instructed the Clerk to 'reply that the Committee appreciated the offer of assistance, but had already made adequate provision for such a shelter underneath the proposed Byfleet Fire Station.' Of course in the end neither the new Fire Station in Oyster Lane nor the Cinema opposite Hopfield Avenue were ever built!

The following month the council set out their plans for public safety with a proposal to dig trenches as temporary shelter for up to 450 persons at six points in the area; Knaphill Recreation Ground (20 people); Goldsworth Road allotments (50 people); Goldsworth Road Car Park (50 people); opposite the Victoria Hospital (250 people); at John O'Gaunt Car Park in West Byfleet (30 people); and at Oyster Lane, Byfleet (presumably the Fire Station site - 50 people).

They also proposed shoring up cellars in both Woking town centre and West Byfleet to provide shelter for 380 and 518 people respectively - the cost of 'safe shoring' being estimated at almost £2,000 in Woking and £3,000 at West Byfleet (although temporary shoring would only cost £361 for the five sites in town and £544 for the seven cellars in Rosemount Parade).

This post-war picture of Rosemount Parade shows both Sainsbury's and MacFisheries stores. The cellars of several properties in Rosemount Parade (and in Woking) were to be used as air-raid shelters before proper ones could be constructed.

In Woking the Red House Hotel cellar was estimated to be able to hold 130 people (presumably once the beer barrels had been removed), whilst at West Byfleet the cellar of Elton's would accommodate 100, with 110 at MacFisheries and 166 at Sainsbury's (amongst others).

The construction of public shelters in the outlying parts of Woking appears to have been in stark contrast to the efforts of Bagshot Council who according to Sharon Cross in her book 'Our Home Front - Memories of life in Surrey Heath during World War II', noted 'the council's decision not to install a shelter in the Square (at Bagshot) caused concern, while the nearest public shelter to Chobham was at Knaphill'.

In June 1940, Woking Council had approved the construction of a 100 person air-raid shelter in Commercial Road, and in October another was provided on the nearby Wheatsheaf Recreation Ground. In Byfleet Councillor Tarrant (whose building firm had constructed numerous high-class houses in the area) was awarded the contract of almost £375 to provide three public shelters for twenty-five people in Oyster Lane and the High Road, with a fifty person shelter at Plough Corner (including £8.11s for seating). He also received the contract for a fifty-person shelter at West Byfleet, but his work was

nothing compared to the £9,817.10s.10d paid to Messrs C Firbank & Son Ltd for 172 shelters in Old Woking or the £16,118.13s.8d contracts awarded to E & L Berg for domestic shelters in both Woking and Byfleet!

It is uncertain, however, how cost effective these measures were, as in November 1940 a survey in London showed that only 40% of people used the shelters, and at night only 9% entered the public shelters. We do not know what proportion of Woking people used the local shelters, although perhaps the low usage at night was significant locally as the council soon voted to remove the benches for people to sleep on - thus creating more space for people to use them during the day.

Even so, more shelters had to be provided, and in January 1941 the council agreed to provide a public shelter in Victoria Gardens - designed so that it could be converted into an open-fronted shelter after the war. Similar structures were erected in Woking Park. Hopefully these were stronger than some that had been erected in 1939-40, as in 1944 it was found that the specification used for the mortar was faulty, resulting in the roofs liable to collapse. Curtain walls were added to help alleviate the problem.

The council were not the only ones looking ahead, and in May that year Mr Broderick of 41 Mount Hermon Road asked for permission to erect his own shelter, to be converted into a garage in peace time.

Shortly after Mr Broderick built his shelter there was a lull in attacks, until the spring of 1942 when there was apparently sporadic raids for



the next twelve months. The return of these raids worried the Clerk of the Council who was concerned about the shelter at the rear of the new Council Offices in Guildford Road. In February 1943 he reported that 'in view of the large number of children and parents attending the Dental and Diphtheria Immunisation Clinics at certain times the shelter - would be inadequate'.

The return of raids late in 1943 also highlighted the inadequacy of some basement shelters and in December the council called for the shelter

at the Rendezvous Restaurant in Commercial Road, and Mr Lutley's shop in Chertsey Road (at the junction with Church Street) to be closed. The following February they asked for more 'Morrison shelters' to be provided for the town—presumably concluding that most people felt safer sheltering in their own homes rather than the 'Anderson' shelters that some people had in their gardens, or the equally dark and dank public shelters in town.

In Send and Ripley the locals apparently had another alternative 'Norcon' shelter, made by a

In 1941 the council built air-raid shelters in Victoria Gardens and Woking Park designed to be turned into open-fronted shelters after the war.

local company of concrete pipe-makers who realised at the beginning of the war that demand for their normal products might dry up, and so came up with an ingenious contemporary use! An example can still be seen in the grounds of the Send & Ripley History Society's little museum beside Ripley Village Hall.

Before the war Norcon made concrete pipe at their works in Papercourt Lane.



WOKING'S AUXILIARY FIRE SERVICE

War was obviously a costly matter – in lives, of course, but also financially as Woking Council soon discovered.

In April 1939 it was reported that for the local Auxiliary Fire Service a 'Report Centre was completely equipped and ready for immediate use' and there was a recommendation to install a 'shelter for 30 men and telephone facilities' at the Headquarters of the Transport Officer (at a cost of £75).

Apparently 463 Wardens had been allotted to Woking, but approximately 950 had been appointed, so consequently the council approved the purchase of almost a thousand 'Air Raid Warden signs' whilst also approving supplies for 110 Wardens' Posts. Each was to have whistles (7s.6d per dozen), hand-bells (3s.3d each), notebooks (6d each) and later first-aid boxes (3s.8d each – subsequently increased to 3s.9¼d each as ones with 'brass hinges' had been purchased instead of tinned iron ones)! Forty Stirrup pumps were also purchased at thirteen shillings each, with a further ninety purchased later 'to complete the quota for the Wardens' posts'.



Local members of the Auxiliary Fire Service can be seen here practicing in Chobham Road.

With a mobile pump (and water from the canal) the members of the AFS could put out any fires.

The Broadway Fire -- Watchers

9, THE BROADWAY
WOKING

President : W. H. ROBINSON
Hon. Secretary : A. L. LEVY
Hon. Treasurer : Miss L. DUGGAN

All Communications to
ROBINSONS (WOKING) LTD.
CHERTSEY ROAD
WOKING

13th June, 1941.

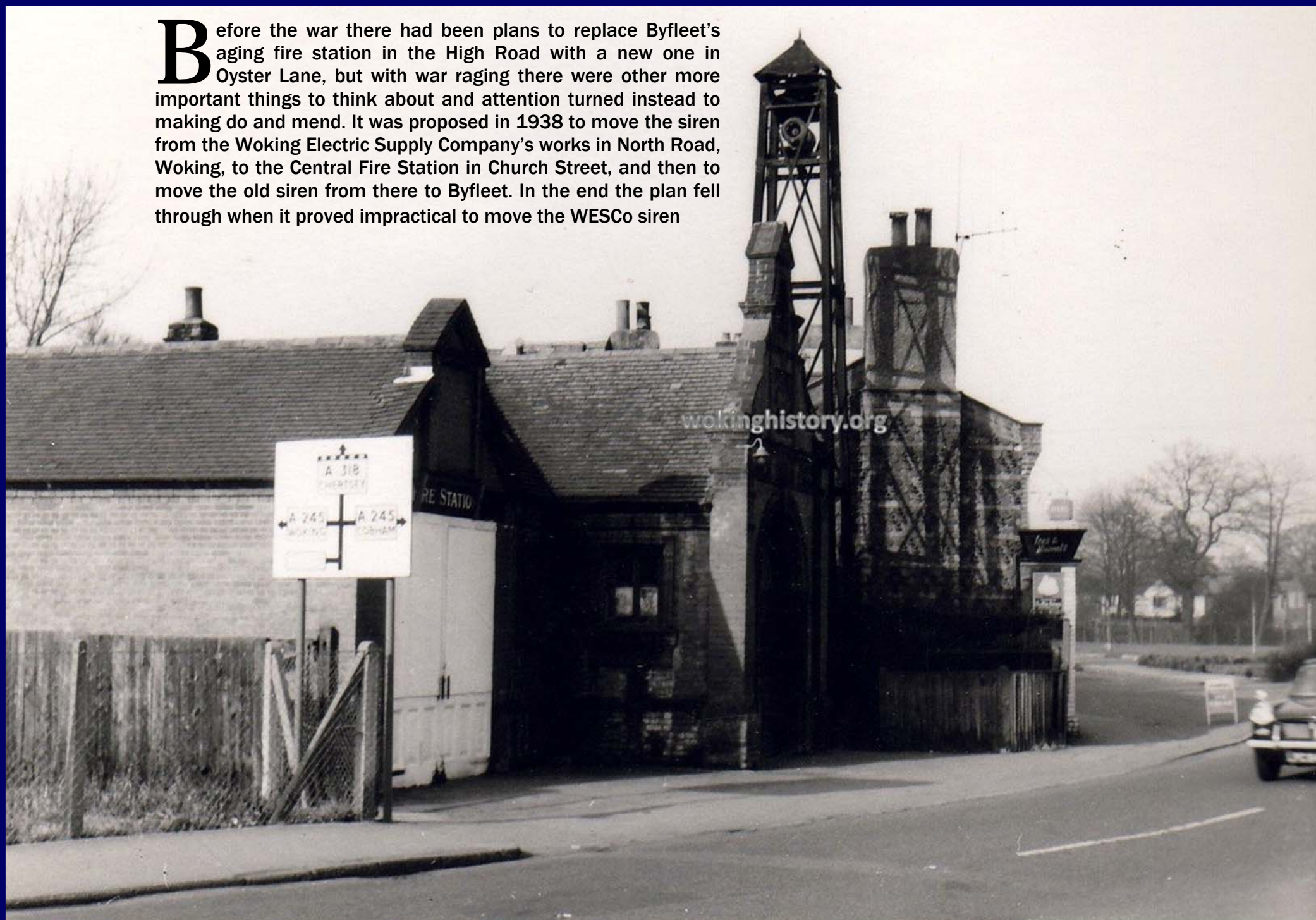
In October (following a circular from the Home Office) the council authorised the purchase of folding beds at a cost of 9s.6d each 'plus a mattress a 8s.9d.' for fire personnel and in November the Air Raid Precaution Officer was authorised to purchase batteries 'at 17s.6d per six dozen and bulbs at 9s.6d per hundred for electric hand lamps'.

Back in April 1939 the committee considered the provision of a 'Cleansing Station' at the Goldsworth Road and Camphill Road Council Depots at a cost of £1,400. With the money expended on air raid shelters and other war-related items, the ratepayers of Woking were already paying the price for the conflict.



BYFLEET'S AIR RAID SIREN

Before the war there had been plans to replace Byfleet's aging fire station in the High Road with a new one in Oyster Lane, but with war raging there were other more important things to think about and attention turned instead to making do and mend. It was proposed in 1938 to move the siren from the Woking Electric Supply Company's works in North Road, Woking, to the Central Fire Station in Church Street, and then to move the old siren from there to Byfleet. In the end the plan fell through when it proved impractical to move the WESCO siren



The Air-Raid Precautions Sub-Committee of the council then looked at using the siren at the Sanway Laundry behind the Plough public house to warn villagers of air-raids, but with the laundry closed at weekends they had to in the end purchase a new siren for erection at the fire station.

