

# A LITTLE BIT OF LOCAL CO-OPERATION

Iain Wakeford 2017



The first Woking & District Co-operative Society shop in Chertsey Road in 1899.

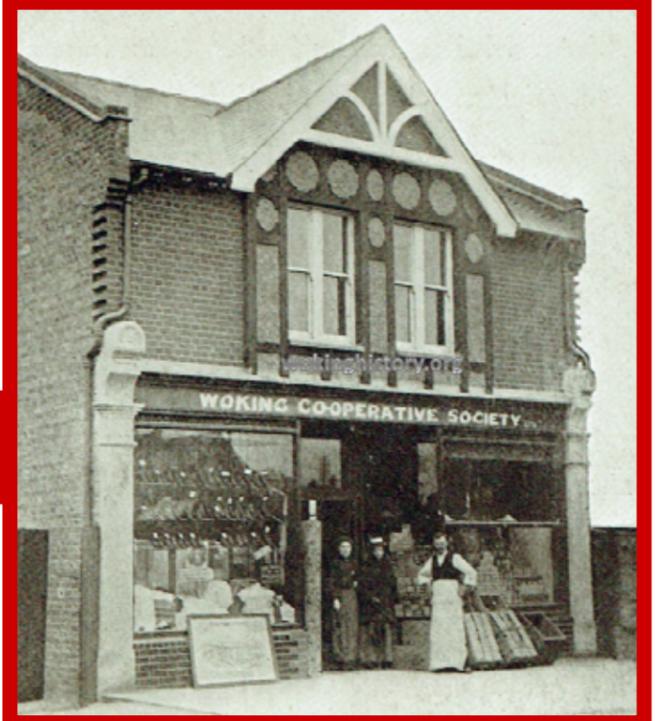
A couple of weeks ago I featured the purchase of Gammon's Department Store, on the corner of Commercial Road and Chobham Road, by the Debenhams Group. Debenhams, of course, are the only such store in Woking today, but back in the early 1960's they were one of just three, with Robinson's in Chertsey Road and the Co-op on the corner of Church Street and Percy Street (Victoria Way).

The Woking Co-operative Society was formed early in 1899 by a group of local Trade Unionists, who set up a committee and called a public meeting in March that year under the guidance of the Guildford Co-operative Society. The meeting was also addressed by a member

of the Reading Co-operative Society, showing that co-operation in those days between organisations was very much the key to their success.

Initially they rented a small shop in Chertsey Road in which to carry out their business selling groceries and provisions, with drapery, boots and other departments gradually added as the opportunity arose (bread initially being supplied by the Guildford Society until 1901 when a bakery was obtained in Walton Road).

The First Church Street shop (right), and the extension that soon followed (below).



Coal and meat were supplied to customer's doors by local tradesmen on behalf of the society and in 1902 land was purchased in Church Street from a Mr Whetman where plans were prepared for Ingram & Sons (at that stage builders as well as undertakers) to erect their new store.

At that time there were few commercial premises in Church Street, with Chertsey Road being the main shopping street of the town, but the society continued to prosper, despite a price war initiated by some of their competitors. In



The staff of the Society in 1910.

fact the 'war' only strengthened the resolve of the co-op's members to succeed. In 1905 extra land was purchased next door and new drapery, crockery and ironmongery departments were opened, with a basement cellar, warehouse, committee room and secretary's office also included in the new complex. By then they had also built a new bakery and stables for the delivery horses just around the corner – the bakery producing over 570,000 loaves a year by 1920.

In 1910 they set up a Building Society for their members and opened their first village branch next to the Kingfield Arms, with branches then opening in Knaphill and Horsell in 1913 - where the Woking Garden Suburb was also established.

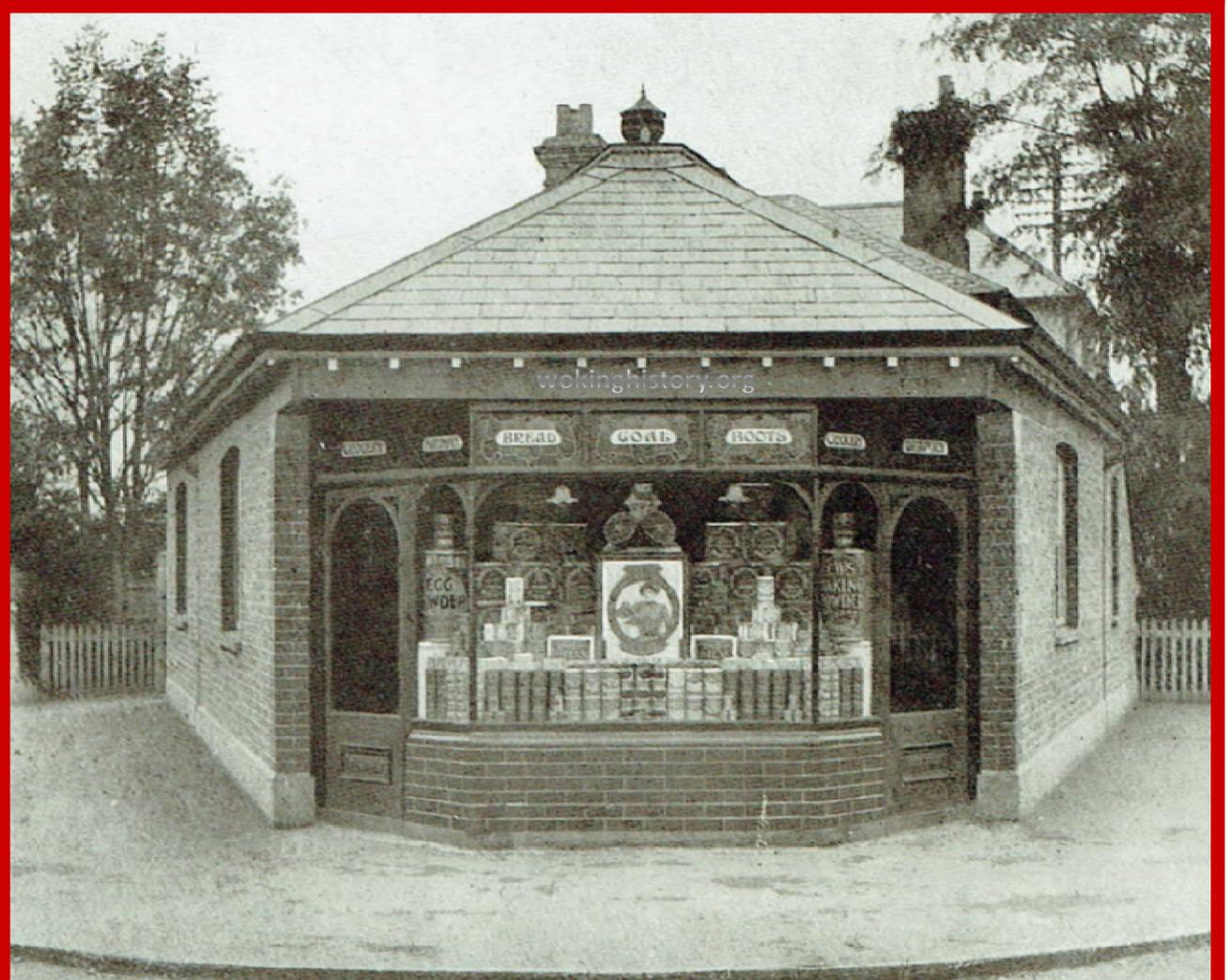
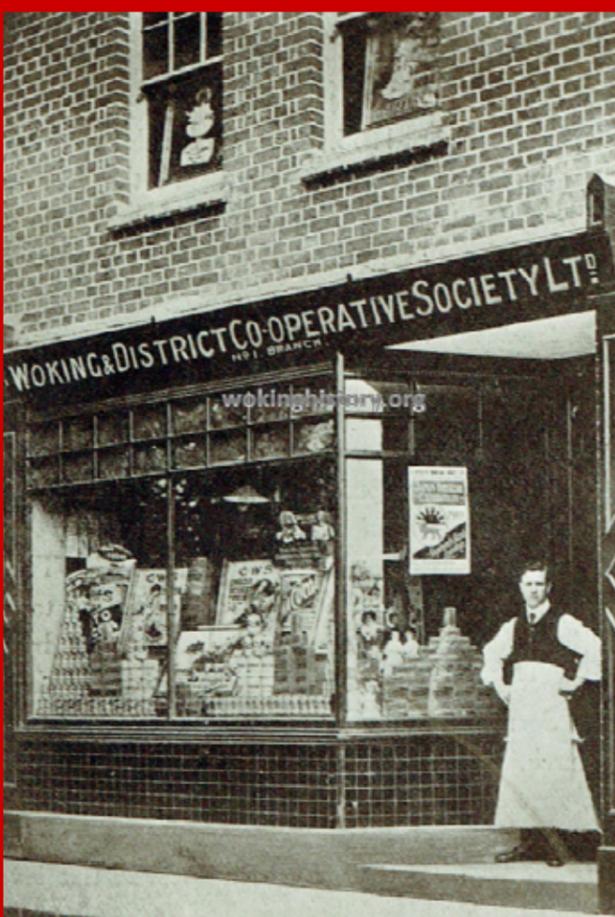
By 1913 the Woking, Horsell & District Co-operative Society were so well established that they were invited to take over the running of the Surbiton Co-operative Society, which had ceased operations the previous year.

Even during the First World War, with shortage of labour, they still managed to expand, opening a new drapery and hosiery department next to their original Church Street shops (on the corner with Percy Street), where Toys-R-Us are today.

By the early 1920's they had purchased the plot of land on the opposite corner (using it initially

The Knaphill Branch was initially on the corner of The Broadway and the High Street.

The first village branch in Kingfield was in a shop next to the Kingfield Arms (where the pub car park is today).





as a coal wharf and vehicle yard) before plans were drawn up for a new three-storey department store to be built on the site.

In the meantime more and more branches were opened at Maybury Arch, Pirbright, Send,

Lightwater, Sunningdale and Camberley (to name just a few), with other departments added such as furniture, household electricals, funeral services and even travel (with week long trips to Paris advertised in March 1928 for £7, or 15 days in Switzerland for £17)!

By the early 1960's, however, there was pressure from the movement nationally for Societies to amalgamate, and when a merger between Woking and the Societies at Guildford, Farnham, Haslemere and Godalming fell

through, the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society (RACS) stepped in.

1962 was a year of change for our department stores, with Gammons being taken over by Debenhams, and the Woking Co-op merging with RACS to become a major force in local retailing. Still, Robinson's managed to remain unscathed – the 'Grace Brother's' of Woking.

The original Church Street stores (above) - where Toys R Us is today, with the 1930's three-storey department store on the opposite corner with Percy Street.

