

# WEST BYFLEET'S AWARD WINNING SHEER HOUSE

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Byfleet Corner with the sign for the Sheer House Hotel on the corner with Lavender Park Road

**E**arlier this year we looked at how the Norwich Union Life Insurance Society (NULIS) had started to take over Woking Town Centre with new developments such as Ryde House in Chobham Road (now the site of Victoria Gate) and Premier House in Commercial Road (later re-named Globe House before being demolished recently to make way for the Victoria Square development). But it wasn't just Woking Town Centre that the insurance company were interested in investing in, as in the early 1960's they began negotiations with Woking Council for the redevelopment of a large part of the village centre at West Byfleet.

Until the late 1950's the junction of Byfleet Corner with Station Approach and Lavender Park Road was occupied by just two large properties – a house called John O'Gaunt on the corner with Station Approach and the Sheer House Hotel, on the corner with Lavender Park Road. There were a couple of other houses behind on Madeira Road and with The Tiled House opposite John O'Gaunt (where Waitrose is now), the shopping centre of the village was effectively split in two.



The demolition of the Sheer House Hotel in the early 1960's.



Another view of the demolition of Sheer House taken from Lavender Park Road

By the early 1960's Woking Council had taken over part of the four acre site for a temporary car park, with a temporary library too, but it was clear that the whole area was in need of redevelopment, and the £286,000 scheme by NULIS seemed the ideal solution.

The Victorian and Edwardian shops of Byfleet Corner and Rosemount Parade were separated from the shops of Station Approach (below) by a wedge of large properties, including the Sheer House Hotel, John O'Gaunt (above) and The Tiled House (right)





Views from the top whilst construction was still taking place, looking south towards the Old Woking Road junction (above) and north, towards the station (left)



With a mixture of shops and offices, car parking and a new library, the new Sheer House was to revitalise the village – connecting the disparate parts of the shopping centre and putting a vibrant new heart into the village. There were to be seventeen single shop units and two multiple stores, with a central five-storey office block set well back from the junction of Byfleet Corner so that the new development did not over-power the nearby church or impose itself too much on the Victorian and Edwardian shops of Byfleet Corner and Rosemount Parade.





Indeed at the time much was made of the fact that the 'shops are to be set well back from the road to afford ample car parking space', and with more parking on the roof of the single storey shops, there was to be accommodation of over two-hundred vehicles.

One local newspaper noted that 'it is anticipated that the new shopping area will attract motoring shoppers from neighbouring areas where traffic congestion had made short-term parking almost impossible' and the 29,000 sq.ft. of office space 'is attracting firms

wishing to decentralise to West Byfleet from London' adding to the local employment of the area.

The new circular public library was also a feature, designed by local architects Scott Brownrigg and Turner (who actually won an



The parking was an important part of the scheme, designed to attract 'motoring shoppers' away from neighbouring areas.



architectural award for the whole scheme)! It was later praised by Bridget Cherry in her 1971 update edition of Nairn & Pevsner's Penguin Guide to *'The Buildings of England - Surrey'*, when she noted its 'dark brick panels between tall windows, nicely poised on a recessed base'.

She was not quite so complimentary of the rest of the development, however, which she described as a 'dull five-storey office block on top of the shops' - but then I hate to think what she and her esteemed predecessors would have made of the recently proposed

replacement – surely Nairn and Pevsner (if not Messrs Scott, Brownrigg and Turner) are turning in their graves!

Recent proposals would see the 'dull office block' of Sheer House replaced by this

