

WHEN ONLY 'LOCAL' COMPANIES COULD HAVE OFFICES IN WOKING

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The rather modest offices at 15-25 Goldsworth Road were initially occupied by the local branch of the construction firm Gilbert Ash.

In November 1965 the Woking Chamber of Trade held a dinner-dance, inviting the General Secretary of the National Chamber of Trade, Mr J.W. Stevenson, to attend. He apparently had last been a guest at Woking in 1947 when, he recalled, there had been talk of redeveloping Woking Town Centre. Little had happened in those eighteen years, but as one local member pointed out 'two major changes in the Urban District had taken about 29 years' (the by-pass at Byfleet and the roundabout at the Six Crossroads) – 'so we still have about ten years in hand' to finish the town centre scheme!

Little did he realise just how close he was in his prediction, but to be fair to the council not all the problems associated with the redevelopment of the town centre, were of the council's making.

The Ministry of Housing and Local Government at the time were trying to restrict office development in the South-East outside of London, so that only local firms could occupy new offices. But what exactly constitutes a 'local' firm?

Gilbert Ash, a large, national, construction company, managed to get around the restriction by having 'regional' subsidiaries – the Woking branch having their offices at the newly constructed 15-25 Goldsworth Road (opposite the bus depot). The company were

involved in building the new Albion House in the mid-to-late 1960's – a building they also partially occupied once it was complete.

Gilbert Ash also occupied the offices of Albion House once it was complete – showing just how easy it was for firms to get around the purely 'local' restrictions.





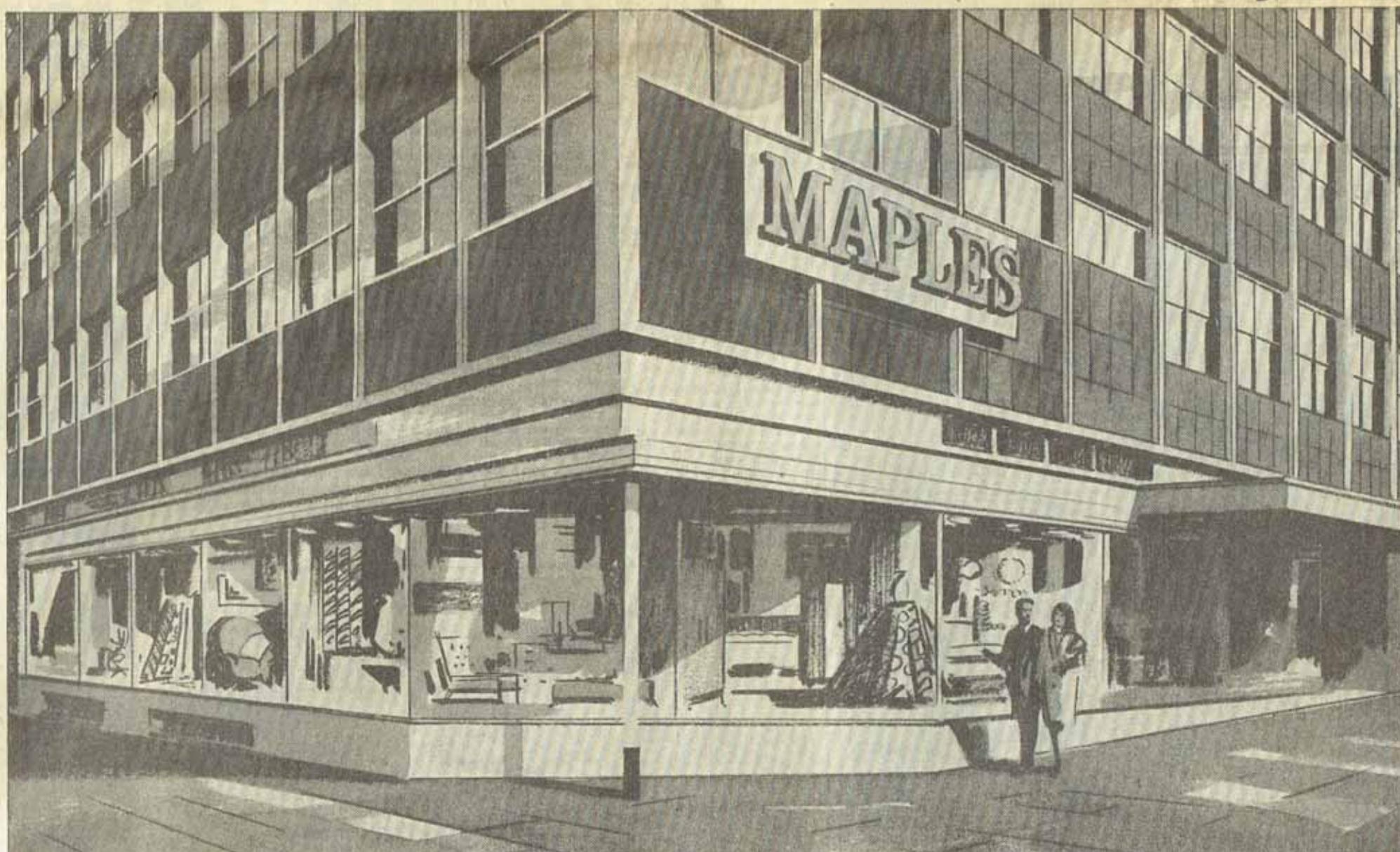
In Chobham Road, NSS Newsagents had at least two floors of Ryde House, whilst in Commercial Road, the consulting engineers, Kennedy & Donkin, had their offices above the new Maples Furnishing Store at Premier House.

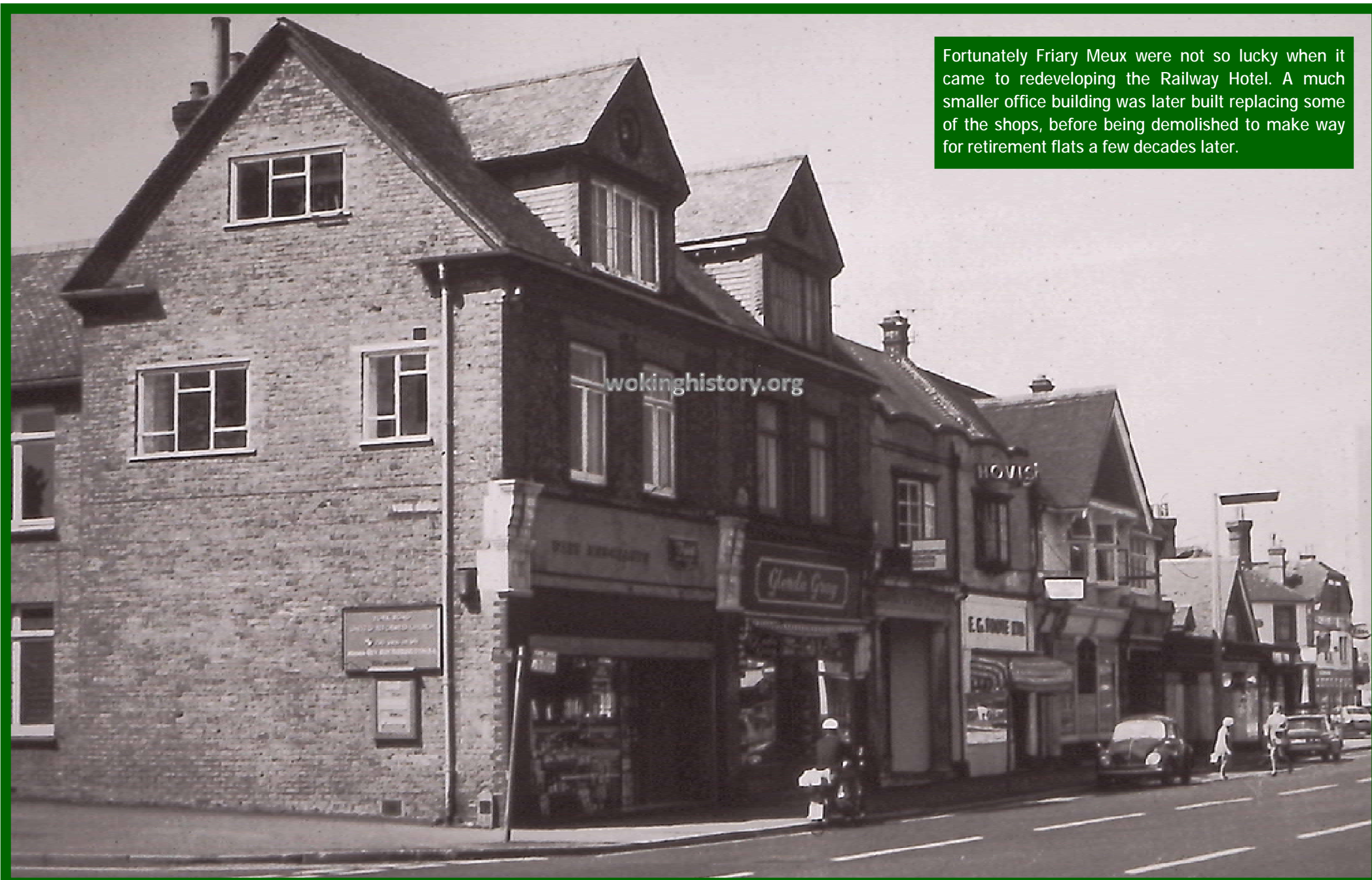
Bell & Howell Ltd, an American maker of scientific instruments, had their local office in Stewart House, Commercial Road, and of course numerous national insurance companies (such as Commercial Union – who

moved into 30 Commercial Road on the 18th July 1966) had offices dotted about the town.

Consulting Engineer, Kennedy & Donkin occupied the offices above Maples Furniture Store (which opened to the public on the 23rd April 1966).

Corner of Commercial Rd., and Percy St.





Fortunately Friary Meux were not so lucky when it came to redeveloping the Railway Hotel. A much smaller office building was later built replacing some of the shops, before being demolished to make way for retirement flats a few decades later.



The rule on no new non-local offices, however, was probably responsible for the preservation of what we now call The Sovereigns (then still known as The Railway Hotel). Early in 1965, its owner, Friary Meux Ltd, had put in a plan to redevelop the building and the shops at 29-34 Guildford Road (to the corner with York Road)

with a new public house, ten shops, and an eleven storey office block. They argued that 'there is a strong demand for accommodation in Woking by certain firms from central London' and as it was near the railway station 'the development should be approved'.

The council, however, were evidently not convinced and at a public inquiry in 1964 noted the proposal 'represented the intensification and perpetuation of tentacular development of the town centre type along a major classified road leading from the town centre'!

The inspector found in favour of the council, partially on the grounds that the '12 storey block would result in some loss of privacy in the

new residential development almost opposite the site and in other residential development in York Road' (an argument that the council had conveniently forgotten about four decades later when the apartments of the 'New Central' development were approved on the other side of the old public house).

Later a more modest office building for Tyler's Wine Merchants (later Victoria Wine) was built between the old hotel and the shops (eventually occupied by System Industries), whilst just a few years later offices were allowed to be constructed on the corner of Guildford Road and Station Approach – but that, as they say, is another story.

