

WOKING'S PLANNERS ENVY OF OTHERS

Iain Wakeford 2018



Too often Woking's plans for the Civic Office site at Mount Hermon were viewed as too outdated.

Looking into the local history of anywhere, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of becoming too parochial – of not seeing the bigger picture and how decisions locally can be influenced by regional or even national events.

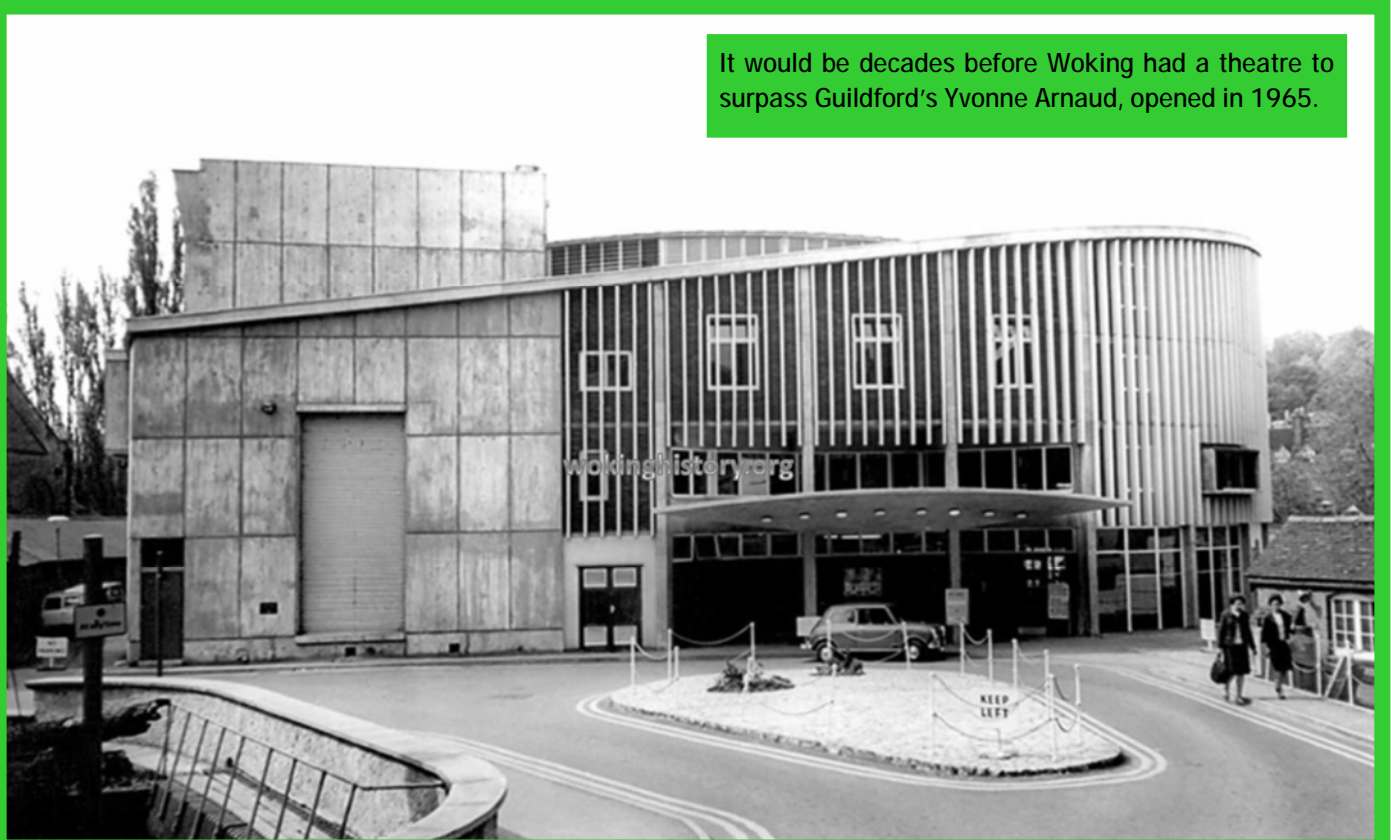
I have mentioned in recent months how national reports and policies have helped shape the history of the town, from the 1962 Buchanan report on 'Traffic in Towns' to the Government policy in the mid 1960's to restrict office development in the South-East – but sometimes the controlling events are much more subtle.

For years Woking Council wanted to build better civic offices in the centre of Woking – why? They had a perfectly workable site in the Mount Hermon area (where in the late 1950's and early 60's they came up with numerous plans to redevelop the site), but they wanted something bigger and better in the heart of the town (like the award winning offices Chertsey Council were building in Addlestone, with a theatre (like Guildford), a public hall (like Croydon) and an indoor pool (like Walton).

Envy is probably the worst of the sins (certainly the least fun and probably the most destructive), and yet it seems that Woking's Planners has always been envious of our neighbours (with little built here provoking reciprocation).

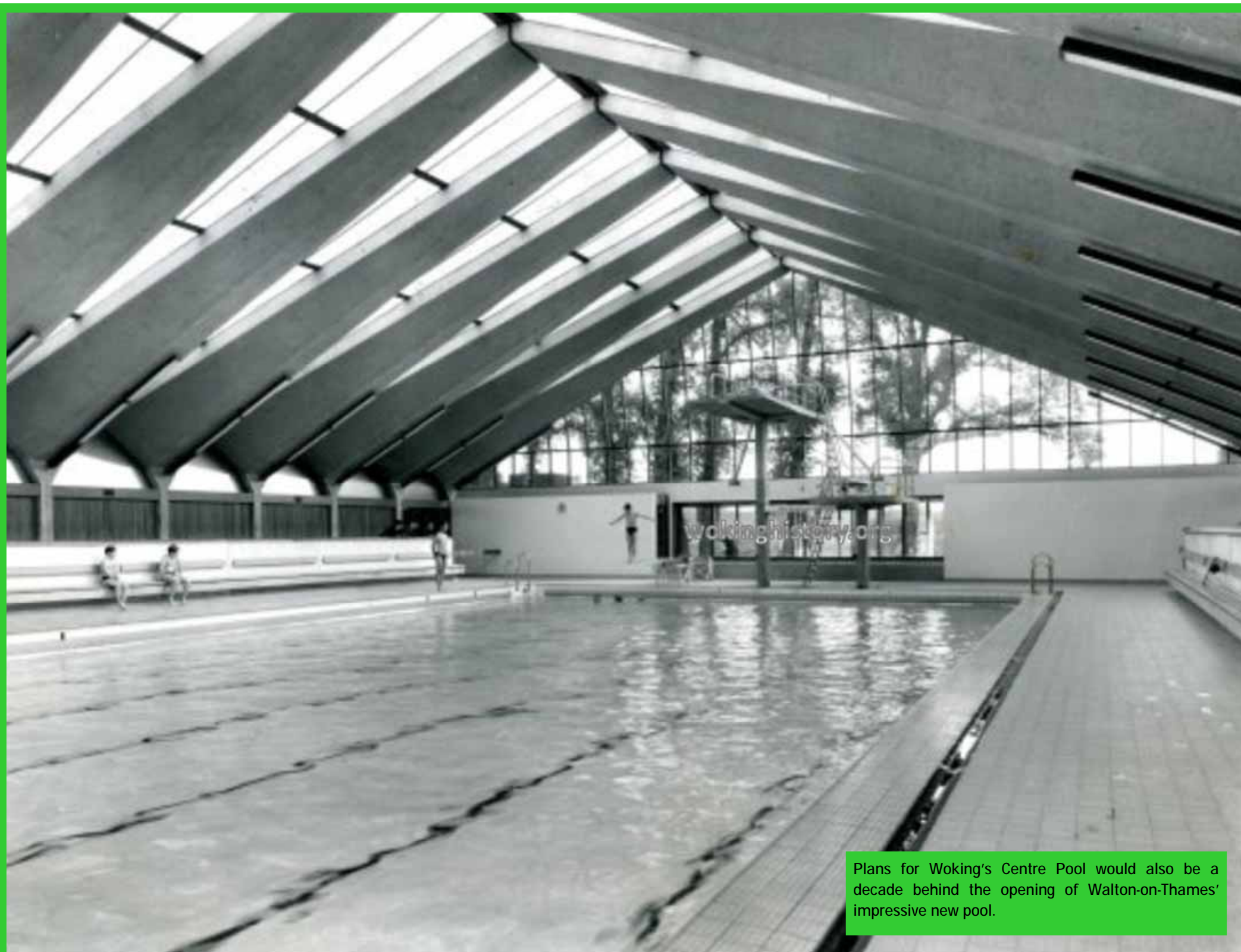
Guildford's Civic Hall was built 1957-62, their new library in 1959-62, a multi-storey car park in 1962-63, and a theatre 1963-65 – so

Woking's Centre Halls would not open for more than a decade after Croydon's Fairfield Hall in 1962.



It would be decades before Woking had a theatre to surpass Guildford's Yvonne Arnaud, opened in 1965.





Plans for Woking's Centre Pool would also be a decade behind the opening of Walton-on-Thames' impressive new pool.

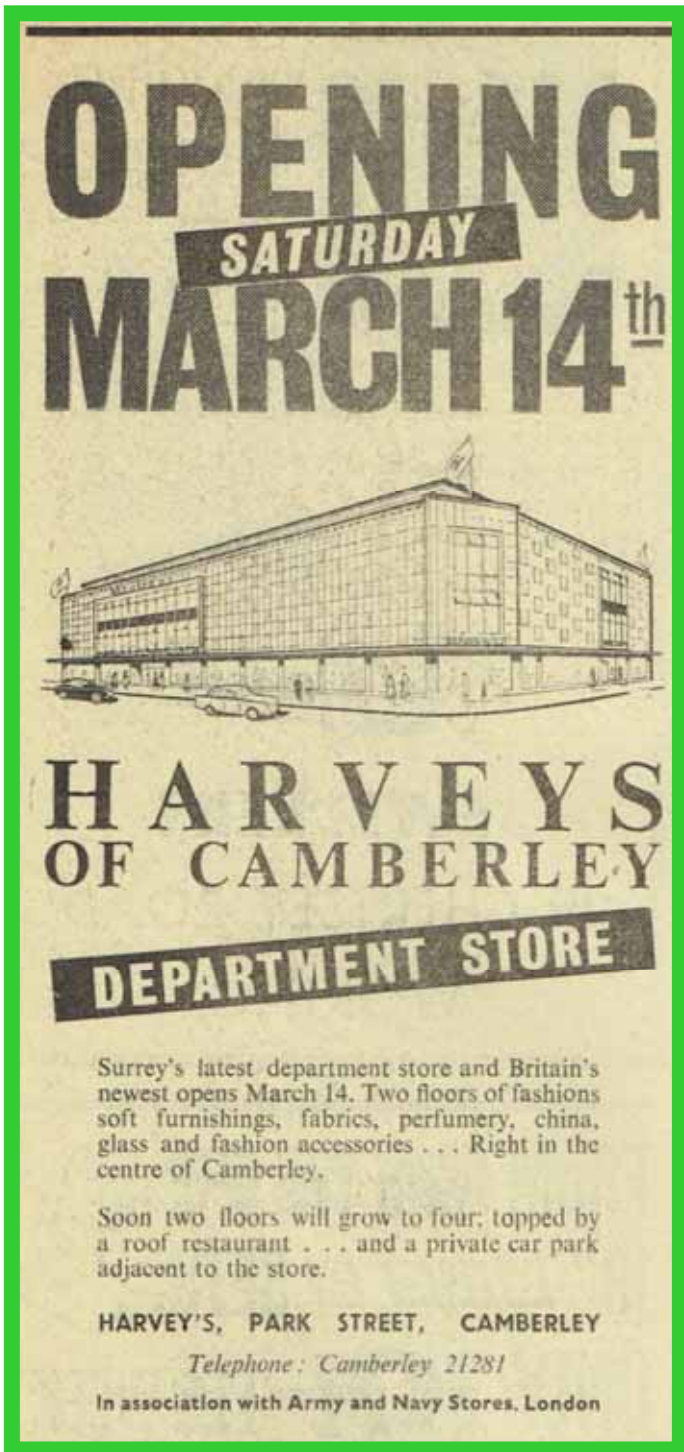
Woking drew up plans for their own. The indoor pool at Walton-on-Thames came along in 1962-65, their new pedestrian town centre 1963-65 and a new town hall 1963-66 – so we had to have them too. Even Farnham had a new police station built in 1963, so why shouldn't the new civic area planned for Woking go one better and have a new court house too. Subconsciously perhaps, it seems at times that Woking's planners and politicians were seduced by the new and shiny public buildings of their neighbours, and like a spoilt child wanted some of their own.

The problem with this area was (and always will be) that there is too much competition nearby. When I was small my mother used to walk into Woking for the small daily shop, but when it came to the weekend my father would drive us to Guildford or Kingston for a more memorable Saturday day-out (although I must admit my memories are mainly of the inside of Marks & Spencer's where my mother used to spend hours buying new clothes, only to return them the following week using the refund to 'buy' some more).

Unlike some parts of the country where the local 'county-town' has a large captive

In the 1960's, whilst Woking's planners and politicians dithered, most of our neighbours (like Walton) went ahead with their bold new plans - although whether they would all pass the test of time is another matter!





audience, here we could travel just a few miles to exotic places like Camberley, Farnborough, Aldershot ... or if we were really adventurous to places only slightly further afield like Basingstoke, Bracknell or even Croydon.

The utopian idyll of Croydon - the goal of Woking planners it seems for well over a century!



Throughout the 1960's Woking's planners were constantly coming up with plans to improve Woking Town Centre – whilst other nearby towns like Farnborough (above) and Camberley (left) - were already well on the way to modernising theirs!

In 1914 a local official was quoted as saying that within a few years Woking could become a 'second Croydon'. Whether that was an aspiration or a warning is not clear, but the shiny ivory towers of that town obviously influenced some in the past – if not the present (although now it seems the sights are set at little further to the east, with Singapore

apparently the latest target of Woking's envy).

The problem is that it has often been said that 'envy is ignorance, imitation is suicide' – will the ignorance of Woking's leaders to enviously imitate others, condemn the town to ultimately die of its own volition?

I hope not, but I fear it might.