

FIRE FIRE, BUT WHO WAS THE LIAR?

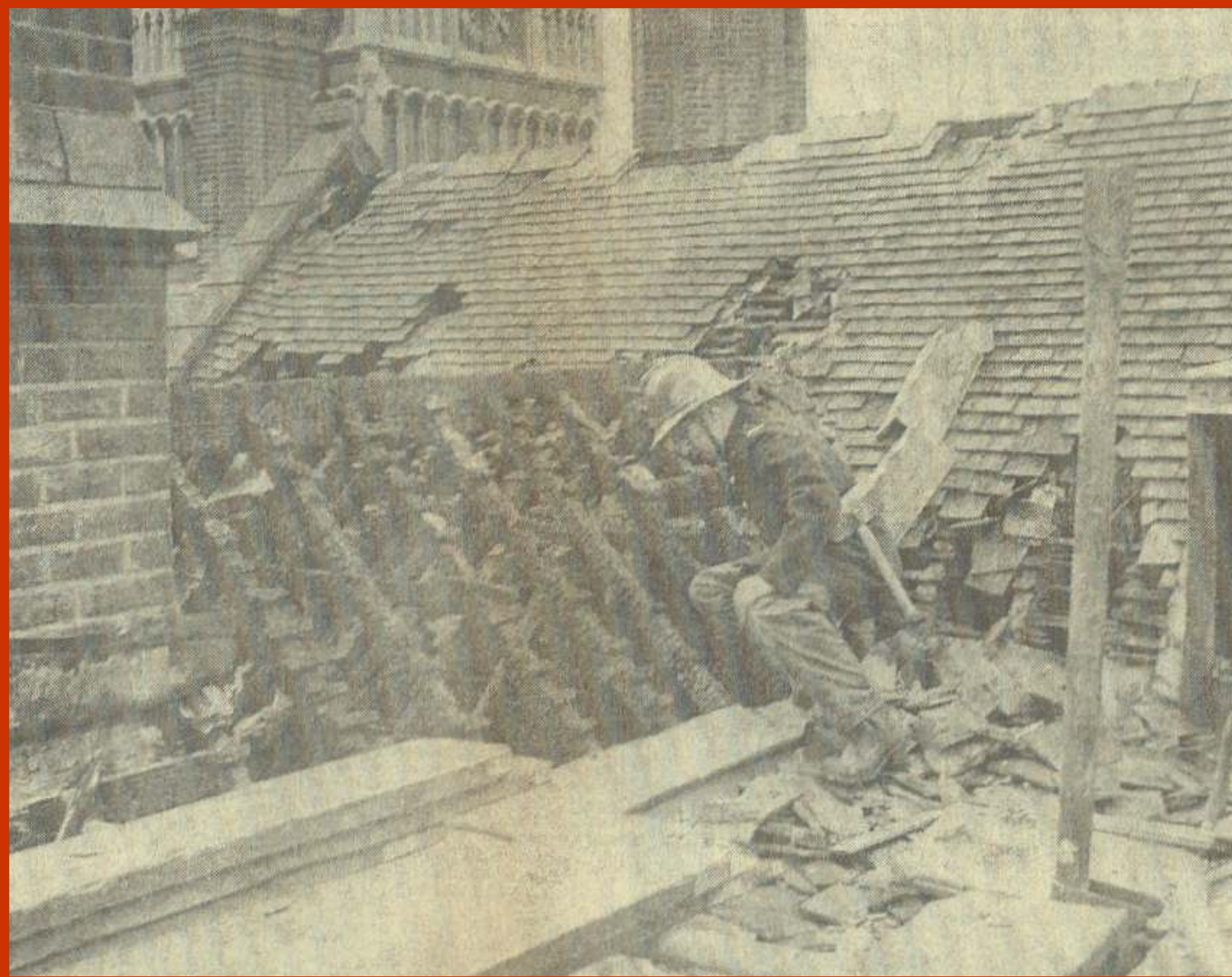
Iain Wakeford 2018

A fire in the roof of the late 19th century convalescent home on Maybury Hill was partially put out by the nuns themselves, before the fire-men arrived from Woking Fire Station.

Woking Fire Brigade appear to have had a busy time in the spring of 1966. On the 24th March there was a blaze in the roof of the St Peter's Convalescent Home and Convent on Maybury Hill, less than a week after a much larger (and more costly) incident at the Creators Plastics factory on Sheerwater.

The convent blaze was spotted by Sister Beryl at about 10am, who with help from a maintenance man, immediately tried to put out the flames and then called the fire brigade. Meanwhile, according to the local paper 'some of the thirty Sisters began a quick evacuation of wards on the third floor, while other hosed the fire alongside Sister Beryl'.

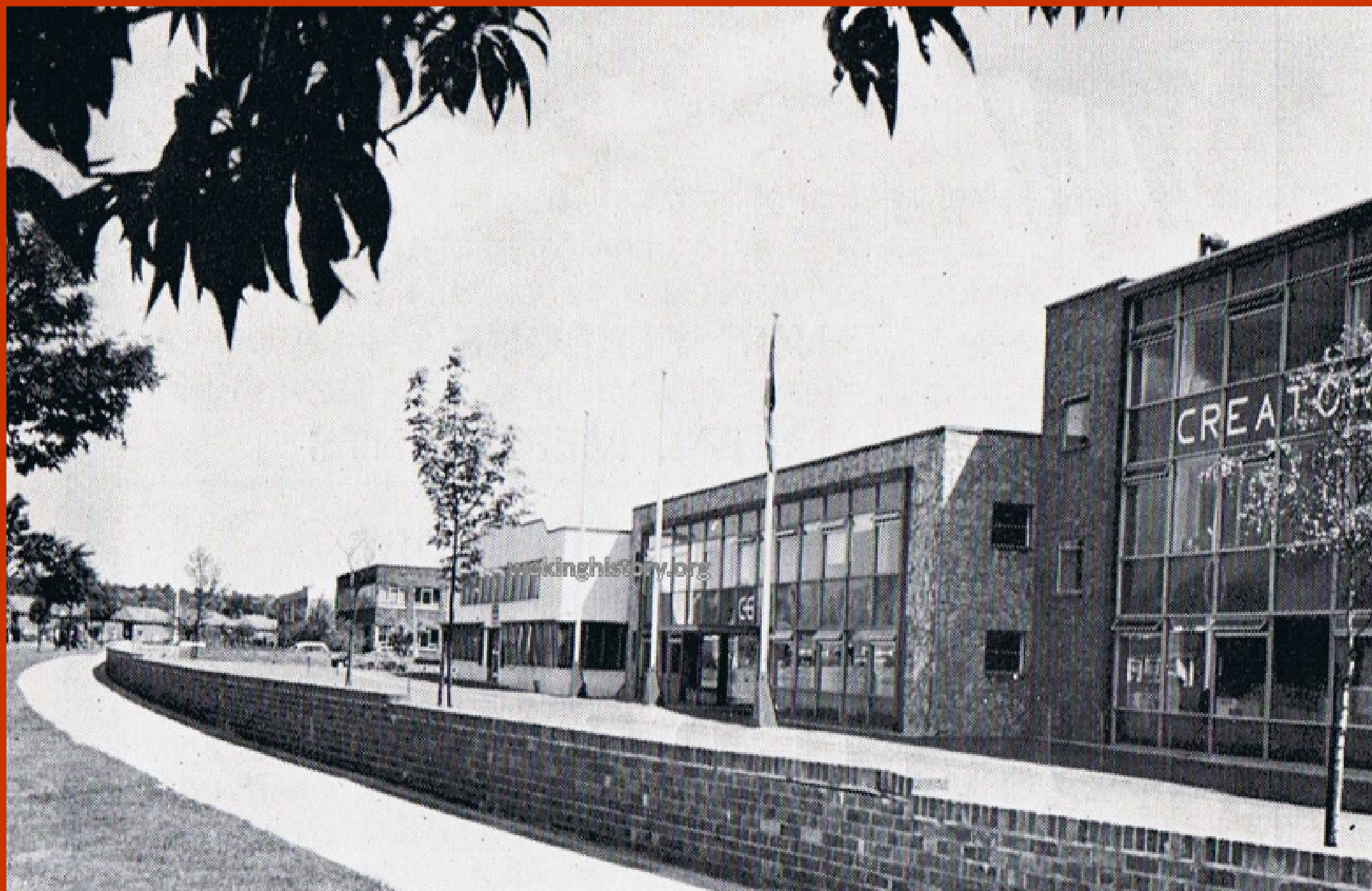
One patient, who had been at the home for a number of years, later commented 'it was one of the most exciting things that's happened. I don't often get out of the ward'.



At Creators in Sheerwater attempts by staff to extinguish the blaze were ultimately unsuccessful, with a much larger fire having to be tackled by crews from Woking and elsewhere as a result.

But whilst the nuns at the convent were full of praise for the fire brigade, a war of words was breaking out over the outbreak of fire the week before at Creators.

According to some there had been a number of incidents at the Sheerwater site since the firm had moved there in 1953, a claim that Mr Anslem (the Managing Director) refuted.





On this occasion independent witnesses said they had spotted smoke emitting from the semi-enclosed area at 4.20pm, but according to the Fire Brigades records they were not called until 4.35pm, and soon after arrival called fire brigade headquarters for additional help to put out the blaze at 4.41pm. Mr Anslem claimed 'the fireman had taken a vital five minutes - "at least" - to get water from a main hose', and that the brigade had been called at the approximate time the fire was discovered. He

also claimed that the fire brigade had blocked the entrance to the factory's car park 'where parked cars and equipment could have come out'.

Fortunately nobody was harmed by the fire, but by the time it could be extinguished it had managed to spread to an almost new building on the site, causing an estimated £1,500,000 worth of damage to raw materials, part finished items and stock.

Ironically a couple of weeks later it was reported that a 6,500 sq.ft. inflatable tent, that was quickly erected to act as a temporary store, was severely damaged in a storm, 'scattering stock and raw materials 'over a wide area'.

As a temporary measure the company stored some of the raw materials and stock from the fire damaged building in a large 'tent', whilst rebuilding took place, but unfortunately it was damaged in a storm just a couple of weeks later.

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Pictures from the local newspaper a week after the fire show the effect of the intense heat on the building being extinguished by the Woking fireman, whilst below some of the employees of the plastics firm salvaged as much as they could before the fire took hold.



The following month there was no dispute over the time it took the fire brigade to attend a blaze at the disused Trinity Methodist Church in Commercial Road. The site was right behind the fire station and one of the fire-men had spotted the sparks coming from the abandoned building minutes before the emergency calls started to come in from concerned members of the Conservative Club next door. Workmen had been on the site earlier in the day burning old timber, but they insisted their fires were out before they left at 7.30pm, and thought the blaze at 11pm may have been caused by vandals.

The fire in the steeple of the derelict Methodist Church in Commercial Road was spotted by the fire-men before the alarm was raised by members of the Conservative Club next door.

The caretaker of the club and his family were evacuated whilst the blaze was tackled, as at one time it was feared the small tower would collapse and fall onto the building.

Again, fortunately nobody was hurt in the fire, which completely destroyed the old church.



Vandals were certainly to blame later that year when in December 1966, for the second time in a few weeks, the brigade were called to the Woking Boys Grammar School - this time with a fire started in a bucket with some chairs stacked on top.

December also saw a second blaze at George Jepson's Fish & Chip shop in Old Woking, the earlier fire in a frying vat causing an unseen hole at the back of the apparatus, from where the second fire emanated.

As I say the poor firemen of Woking were busy that spring, but that was nothing compared to the December 1966 as the small blazes at the Grammar School and Old Woking were soon to be eclipsed by a much greater fire - more of which next week!

Vandals were almost certainly to blame for the second fire in as many weeks at the Boys Grammar School in December 1966.

The building (which later went on to be the town's police station), was not badly damaged.

