

DEBENHAMS DEPARTMENT STORE CLOSURE

Iain Wakeford 2018

‘On the 18th February the Debenhams owned department store in Guildford will close with some of the staff transferring to Woking’.

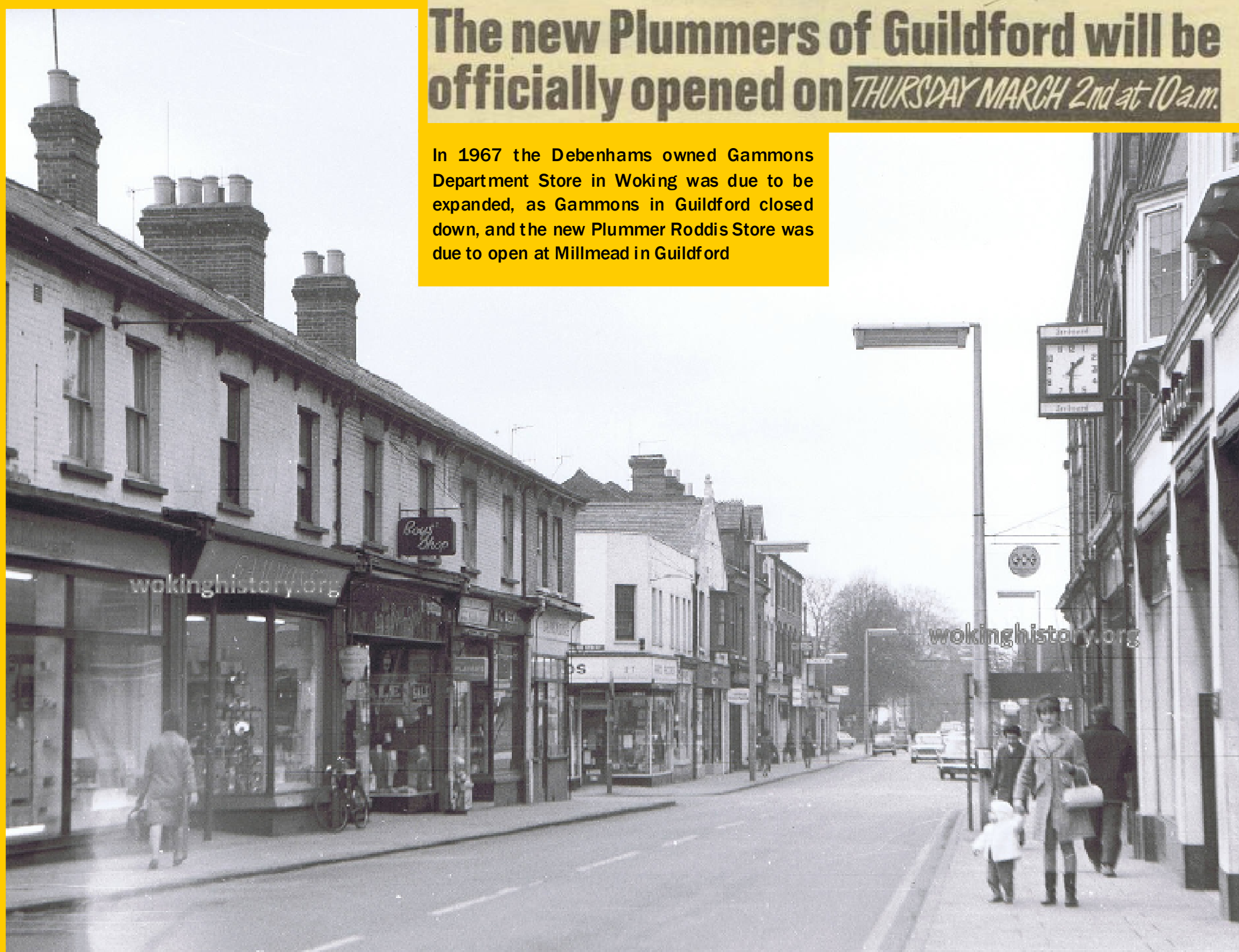
That is not news, it is history – 1967 to be precise.

In January 1967 it was announced by the Debenhams Group that their ‘Gammons Department Store’ in Guildford (on the corner of North Street and Market Street) would close with some staff being transferred to the Gammons shops in Woking, where according to the chairman of the group ‘we have a site nearly three times the size of that at Guildford and where plans for the building of a major store are in an advanced stage’.

But it wasn’t all bad news for Guildford (or for Debenhams) as at the time another Debenhams owned shop was due to open in the town – Plummer-Roddis at Millbrook - which apparently was designed to cater ‘for all classes of trade, but with particular emphasis on the quality trade’.



In 1967 the Debenhams owned Gammons Department Store in Woking was due to be expanded, as Gammons in Guildford closed down, and the new Plummer Roddis Store was due to open at Millmead in Guildford





But whilst Guildford equalled 'quality' in the minds of the department store owners, the Woking shop was apparently aimed at 'the mass media' – much to the disgust of at least one Woking resident, who thought that 'if Woking is going to develop into a town with character, it is worthy of quality goods in quality stores'.

That sentiment was also expressed in 'letters' to the press, with Mrs M.P. Talbot of Westfield writing 'it is an insult to the shoppers of Woking' before adding 'but one can scarcely be surprised' as she also went on to note that she often shopped at West Byfleet 'because parking is convenient there, or we go to Guildford or Kingston for most clothes, furniture, etc. We now rarely go into Woking at all'.

And that, in 1967 (if not fifty years later), seems to have been Woking's problem. The numerous empty shops and building sites were putting people off visiting the town, and road restrictions in the High Street, and road-works elsewhere, were making it hard for shop and restaurants to attract new custom.

'Many shoppers are not coming to Woking because the town centre looks like a "blitzed area", Woking and District Chamber of Trade has claimed'.

Again that was a headline from 1967, not today, with the president of that organisation, Mr L.J. Oxlade accusing the planners of 'dilly-dallying' over redevelopment proposals (today they don't seem to delay redevelopment at all).

Of course in the late 1960's it was not all Woking Council's fault (it never is), as developers such as Debenhams illustrated. Their new plans for Woking may well have been

'advanced' in 1967, but as they were quick to point out, due to 'the Government ban on new building costing more than £100,000' they had no idea when work on the scheme would start.

All they could say was that their new 'third-class' department store in Woking would be between 60,000 and 70,000 sq.ft., three storeys high, with probably a basement, occupying the site of the current shops between Commercial Road, Chobham Road and Church Street.

In the end the Woking plans appear to have been quietly dropped as it was not until the 1980's that the site (currently occupied by the British Heart Foundation shop) was redeveloped for British Home Stores. In the interim the Debenhams owned department store struggled on in the town - as the town struggled on around it – until eventually, in the 1970's, it closed (but that is another story).

The new Gammons store was never built, their rival British Home Stores eventually taking over the site.

