

# FIRE & BOMB HOAXES - HOW THE MEMORY CAN PLAY TRICKS

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**T**hey say that if you can remember the 1960's then you weren't really there, and to a certain extent I must agree – although my memory 'loss' of the period is more to do with my age, rather than any actions.

I was only alive for the last two-thirds of the decade, so my earliest memories are confined to the end of the sixties, with one event in particular sticking in my mind.

At the time my family lived in Cherry Street, a little cul-de-sac of homes and industry by the railway at Goldsworth. Most weeks I would walk with my mum into town to do the shopping and occasionally have a treat in the tea-room above Pullinger's the Bakers in Chertsey Road, or (if I had been really good) the smart new restaurant on the top floor of Robinson's department store.

In May 1967 Woking ground to a halt as staff and customers were calmly evacuated from Robinson's once the alarm had been raised.

One of my earliest memories, therefore, is of the fire that occurred there in November 1968. I was only five at the time, so my memory is quite sketchy, but I can vividly remember standing in a small crowd outside the shop wondering what was going on and thinking later how unlucky we were not to have been inside when the drama was taking place.

But the mind has a habit of playing tricks on you, and looking back through my old copies of the local papers from the time, I now know that my 'earliest memory' cannot be of that fire – because the fire took place in the early hours of a Sunday morning when I would have been safely tucked up in bed!

Apparently it started near some cooking equipment in the kitchen 'probably during Saturday evening, and crept gradually through the night to spread around the restaurant'. The fire was not discovered until almost eight the next morning when a passer-by spotted the smoke (I guess they didn't have smoke alarms in those days). Three fire engines were soon in attendance from Woking Fire Station, who quickly put out the blaze, but by then the fire had caused 'thousands of pounds' worth of damage – with the building being 'smoke-logged from the first floor upwards'.

It was estimated that repairs would take up to three months, although the firm vowed that 'the fire would not alter the store's Christmas plans, except in the restaurant', with the thirteen staff employed there temporarily transferred to other departments.



So if the fire was not my earliest memory – what was?

I now believe the ‘crowd scene’ I remember was probably the one pictured here from 1967 (when I would have been an even more impressionable four year-old) when the store was evacuated due to a bomb scare – or possibly a year later in August 1968 when there was another false threat.

The first happened on a busy Tuesday morning in May when a man with a voice in his late twenties telephoned the store and said ‘there’s a bomb in your store, due to go off at 12.30’. The call came in at 11 a.m. and within seconds apparently ‘every available policeman rushed to the area’.

The street was cordoned off by midday with Boots and Pocock’s on either side of Robinson’s also evacuated, and by noon the whole of the street was in lock-down from the station as far as Woolworth’s (now Wetherspoons). The bomb squad was called, but nothing was found, and by 12.45 the whole drama appears to have been over as the all-clear was given.

With other hoax calls being made to other local businesses at that time, the second Robinson’s scare, on a Friday afternoon in August 1968, was even shorter lived. An anonymous call was made to the police at about 2pm, but within an hour the store had been evacuated, checked and customers allowed back in, so used were the police, staff and no doubt the public by

Not everyone seemed concerned about the potential explosion as staff and shoppers congregated outside Burton’s on the corner of Chobham Road and Chertsey Road.

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It just goes to show that memories are not always what you think they are!