

# BAN BUILDING ON OLD WOKING'S FLOOD PLAIN

Iain Wakeford 2019



In the flood plain and the proposed Green Belt the council (quite rightly) turned down Unwin's plans of the 1960's for houses, flats and maisonettes.

**E**arly in 1967 a public inquiry was held into a proposed housing development in Old Woking, by the printing firm of Unwin Brothers Ltd.

Since the mid 1890's they had been a major local employer at their 'St Martha Printing

Works' on the site of the ancient watermill in the village. Originally the company was at Chilworth (overlooked by St Martha's Chapel), but in 1894 their works there had been destroyed by fire, and as the mill at Old Woking had just been vacated by a paper-making

company, they quickly moved to the Mill Moor site in the meadows between Old Woking and Send.

Even by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century employees still living in Chilworth made the trek to Old Woking each day, although the company were actively trying to find local accommodation – with apparently Rosebank Cottages in Westfield and the first houses in Hipley Street originally being constructed for their workers.

By the late 1960's it appears that the high cost of housing in this area was again forcing the company to consider building new homes for their skilled staff, 'to meet a national call for higher productivity and increased national exports'.

The problem was that they wanted to build the new homes at the mill – fifteen terraced houses, fifteen flats and thirty maisonettes (with sixty garages) – with land that they also owned nearer to Old Woking High Street being offered (as a sweetener) to Woking Council for a new primary school.

The scheme was turned down by Woking Council on the grounds that the site was in the proposed Metropolitan Green Belt, and within the flood plain - but whilst the architect of the



The entrance to the Mill, via Mill Moor Bridge and the High Street, was flooded in September 1968.





Many properties in the High Street were flooded, including the Crown & Anchor – shown in these two views.







The floodwaters almost reached as far as Gloster Road along the High Street, flooding the back gardens of the houses facing onto the fields and Mill Moor.

scheme, Mr H.F. Hoar, acknowledged that 'there had been some flooding pre-war' he went on to claim that 'a flood relief plan put in by the Surrey County Council in 1936 had eliminated this' – conveniently forgetting the major floods of 1947 (and a few minor ones in between)!

Fortunately the planned homes were turned down not just by the Council but also by the Ministry of Housing & Local Government Inspector, as only eighteen months later (probably as the first houses would have been due to be occupied), the site was surrounded by

the floods of September 1968 –just as the chief engineer of the Metropolitan Water Board had predicted when he opposed the scheme as far back as June 1966.

The floods, which started on the 15<sup>th</sup> September 1968, were one of the worst in this area on record. Much of the High Street, from Gloster Road to Manor Way, was under water, with many homes and businesses being affected (as shown in the photographs here).

According to some reports 'something like 6¼ million tons of water fell on Woking during the weekend downpour', which meant that 'a quarter-acre garden would have received 100 tons of water'. Rainfall was 189% above average for the month, on top of the fact that the previous summer was the wettest for 44 years.

Of course greedy developers (and planners) seldom learn from history, with the result that eventually (some forty years later) new homes were allowed to be built on the old mill site – despite it still being in the flood plain and the confirmed Green Belt.

Next week we shall look at the impact of the 1968 floods on Byfleet, and the clear-up operation and long-running inquiry that took place – an inquiry that the people of North West Surrey were assured, would mean that never again would the waters of the Wey cause such chaos. Promises, promises.

