

WOKING - 'THE TOWN EVERYONE LOVES TO HATE'

Iain Wakeford 2019



Woking & District is getting a Face-Lift and a Bright Future – that was the headline for a report in January 1968 on the changes that were taking place (and forecast to take place) in the town over the coming years.

'Woking – the town everyone loves to hate' the report went on 'is getting a new face that points to a boom era of prosperity. It's the face of multi-storey offices; towering flats, and shimmering glass fronted factory buildings'.

It is a story that has been repeated and repeated over and over again in the decades since, as the town continually tries to ever-optimistically re-invent itself.

'Going are the days of Woking only as a home for the retired, bed-and-breakfast stop for commuters and a town of jaded shops and stores' – 'it's upwards that the new Woking will

Woking in the mid-1960's - a town centre no longer fit for purpose.



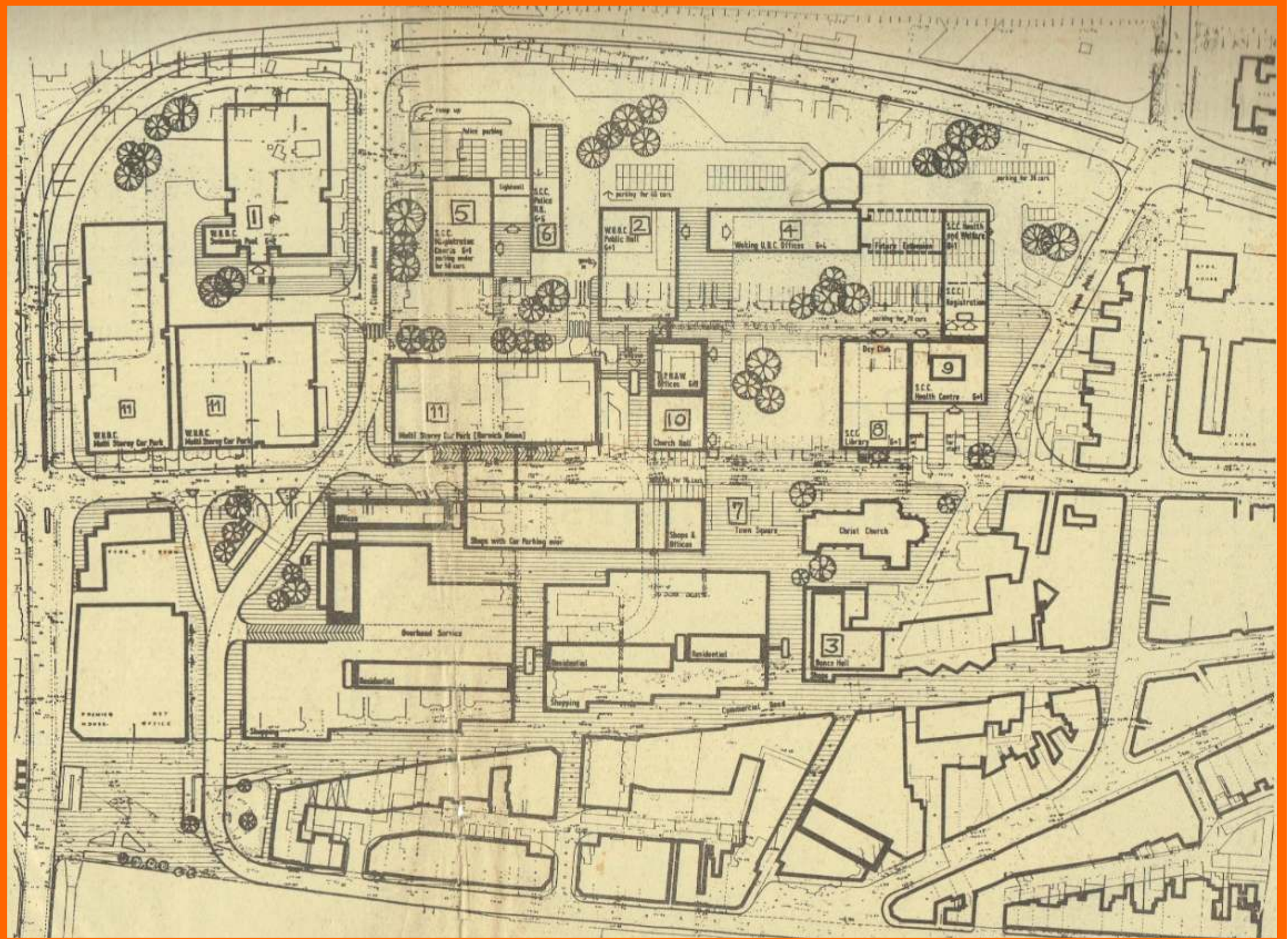
The eight storey Albion House (now Woking One) – the tallest building in Woking town centre at the time.

look', they declared in January 1968 – at a time when the tallest point 'upwards' in the town centre was the eight-storey Albion House (now dwarfed by modern developments all around it).

Today we are told that when our new Victoria Square development is complete, Woking's retail outlook will again be renewed, with a large Marks & Spencer's (who are continually having to re-assure everyone that they will definitely be opening here, despite closing numerous stores across the country), a new hotel, health facilities and apartments, that will all help to revitalise the town centre – or at least that is what we are promised.

Back in 1968 it was 'new civic buildings, a lush indoor swimming pool, a multi-storey car park and new shopping developments' that were getting everyone excited.

'It will be a shoppers' paradise, no traffic worries and the brightest, most modern shops for miles', as new roads were planned 'clearing the main shopping streets of through traffic'.



But the shoppers' paradise, pool and parking were not all that was promised at that time, as this plan from April 1968 shows. A new Dance Hall (3) and Health Centre (9) were also planned but never provided, and many of the new features envisaged in 1968 took years to complete – most not materializing in quite the same way as planned.

There were objections, of course, from some traders who would be displaced by the new schemes, but other objected that the project was not forward thinking enough. One such individual wrote to the local papers in April 1968 with his vision of Woking in the future.

'The little women setting out on her shopping expedition, will, of course, take the car. She will drive with the baby (and no traffic hold-ups) into one of the multi-storey car parks that adjoin the shopping arcade area. She will pay her 6d in the car park that will allow her the use of a trolley which will hold a seat for the baby, and a large covered basket at the bottom for all her purchases: the trolley would also be equipped with hooks to carry self-service store baskets. From arrival at the car park she would expect to be completely protected against the weather and would cross into the shopping arcade at first-floor level, where the shops and multiple stores would be at four floor levels accessible by travellers. The pedestrian streets inside would be completely covered with transparent materials to allow daylight and sunshine through into the arcades and in the centre of

the streets would be bench seats enabling both her and the older people the opportunity to rest, check the shopping list or merely to meditate the shop window opposite. Over in the corner is a cafe gay with its tables outside and umbrellas, while all over the arcade are potted palms, giving the place an air of excitement, efficiency and, most important from a trader's point of view, a place which both she and her husband (who, in the main, hates shopping) would be happy to spend an hour or so'.

They finished off their letter by saying 'I cannot honestly say I feel very much confidence in the development programme, and I am sure there are many people of the same mind, who shop

A Swimming Pool (1), Public Hall (2), Dance Hall (3), Civic Centre (4), Magistrates Court (5), Police HQ (6), Town Square (7), Library (8), Health Centre (9), new Christ Church Hall (10) and plenty of multi-storey car parks (11), were to transform Woking in the coming decade.

elsewhere, only a startling and futuristic development will bring these people back into Woking'.

They were right, of course, on almost all counts – it is just a shame that it took Woking Council over twenty years to agree and in the 1990's finally build his four-floor covered arcade of shops.

Woking before work began on the new town centre.

