

THE STOP-START TOWN CENTRE

Iain Wakeford 2019



Car Parks dominate the land between Commercial Road and Church Street, before work on the new shopping centre commenced in 1971.

The car parks are closed, Cawsey Way is cut through, and work is soon to start on Woking's New Town Centre.

In recent weeks we have looked at the stop-start plans for Woking's Indoor Swimming Pool and the long-delayed building of the Health Centre at St Johns, but the rising costs and lack of progress of both projects pail into insignificance when compared to the construction of Woking's new shopping centre, which had apparently first been muted as far back as the 1930's!

Several properties on the north side of Commercial Road had been purchased by the Council before the Second World War and demolished to make way for a car park, but the ultimate aim was to replace the old houses with more commercial premises, as well as to widen the busy thoroughfare – that is until Hitler put a stop to any more redevelopment with his own campaign of 'demolition'.

By the early 1960's questions were being asked about what the council had planned for the Commercial Road site, and as the decade wore on various ideas came to the fore.

Eventually the Council reached agreement with the Norwich Union Life Insurance Society (NULIS) for the new shopping centre and office development part of the scheme, but with a squeeze on public spending, restrictions on





office development, and eventually a public inquiry, it was some time before work on the site could begin. In the meantime, for many months (if not years), Woking looked like a bomb site.

NULIS had been involved in a number of local shop and office developments around the town in the early 1960's - at Ryde House (Chobham Road), Albion House (opposite the station) and Premier House (on the corner of Percy Street and Commercial Road) - and they had acquired some of the disused Methodist Church in Commercial Road - so they were the ideal allies for Woking Council.

Demolition of the old church was hastened by a dramatic fire in 1965, with the destruction of surrounding buildings taking place in a piecemeal fashion over the coming years.

In April 1970 it was revealed that the purchase of land by the council (excluding that owned already by Norwich Union) 'amounts to £907,550 and although no detailed estimates have been prepared the cost of providing access roads and services is estimated at £100,000'. Those figures did not include the Commercial Road Car Park site (which had cost just £27,000 before the war, but which had an estimated value of £500,000), but did include the £51,800 paid for the old Conservative Club required for the new link road between the High Street and the proposed town centre by-pass.

'In the meantime all ratepayers can see for their money are acres of cleared sites used for car parks, which produce little return in relation to the huge sums spent upon their acquisition'.

Thirty-five objections to the town centre scheme were lodged at the Public Inquiry, but eight

were withdrawn before the hearing could take place and ten were not pursued, allowing the inspector to finally approve the plans in August 1969.

'Redevelopment within the comprehensive development area was to be in two stages' it was announced. 'The first stage, providing for early shopping growth, would take place within about five years, after which there would be a review of shopping potential before further major shopping either for the second stage of the comprehensive development area or elsewhere in the central area was permitted'.

Part of the scheme included a new 'town square' to link the shopping and the later civic parts of the new plan, which at one time included the demolition of the less than century old Christ Church and its replacement with an ultra-modern church fit for the 1970's.

In the mid 1960's NULIS had demolished the old Methodist Church in Commercial Road - leaving the ground open awaiting permission to start work.

