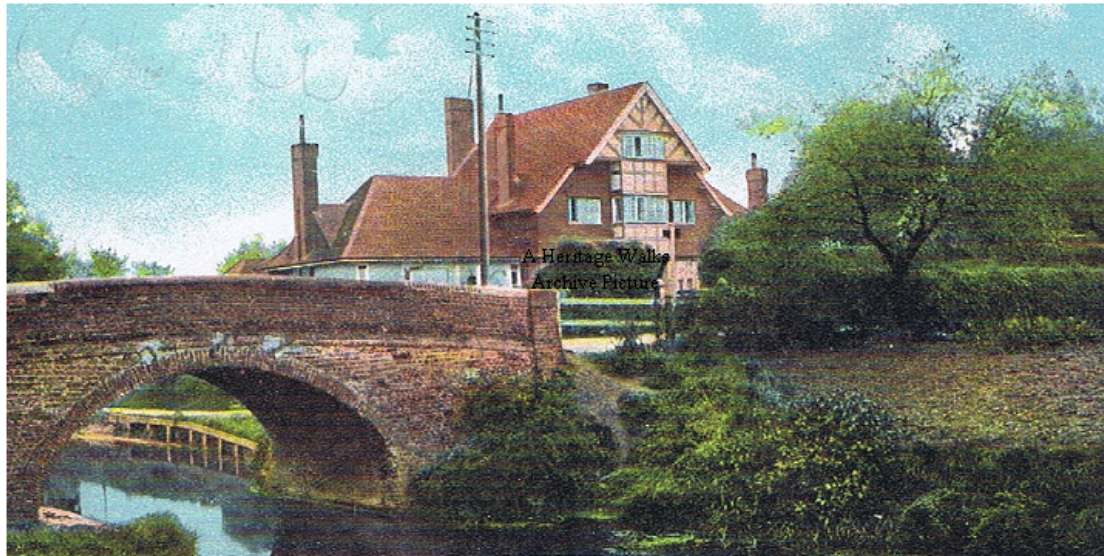


Canal Bridges

(copy sent to the Woking Informer for print w/e 1st October, 2010)



Plans put forward recently for a new pedestrian and cyclists bridge across the Basingstoke Canal at Hermitage Bridge reminded me of the problems the council had with the original canal bridge there.

When the Basingstoke Canal was built in the 1790's there were only a few horses and carts on the roads, but by the turn of the century traction engines and other motorised vehicles were increasingly using the old brick-arch bridge. It couldn't cope and in 1906 it collapsed. A traction engine pulling a cart full of goods for Inkerman Barracks crashed through the arch with the result that the whole bridge had to be replaced. At first the military refused to accept any fault, but as it was a public highway something had to be done. The Basingstoke Canal Co., technically the owners of the bridge, were in liquidation, so Woking Council quickly constructed a 'temporary' wooden structure until responsibility could be sorted out.

The old Wheat Sheaf Bridge in Horsell, with the Victoria Hospital in the background, shows how all the bridges over the Basingstoke Canal would have looked in the late 19th and early 20th century.

In 1910 the council's highways committee went on a tour of the area to inspect the various bridges over the canal. Most were in a poor state of repair and only Kiln Bridge at St Johns, which had been rebuilt in 1899 at the request of the military at Inkerman, was considered completely safe. Stumps Bridge at Brookwood was closed to heavy traffic; Wheat Sheaf Bridge at Horsell was in desperate need of replacement; and in 1907 a temporary wooden bridge had also replaced Chertsey Road Bridge when a motorist crashed through the parapet and landed in the canal. When the councillors got to Hermitage Bridge their nerves got the better of them, and several got off the cart they were travelling on and crossed the bridge on foot. They obviously didn't have much confidence in their temporary bridge. Having said that it lasted about fifteen years, until the new road bridge was built in the early 1920's.



With the canal bank wearing away, it is easy to see from this photograph why the councillors were reluctant to cross Hermitage Bridge on the farm cart. The 'temporary' wooden bridge built by Woking Council in 1906, lasted over fifteen years before the new Hermitage Bridge was constructed.

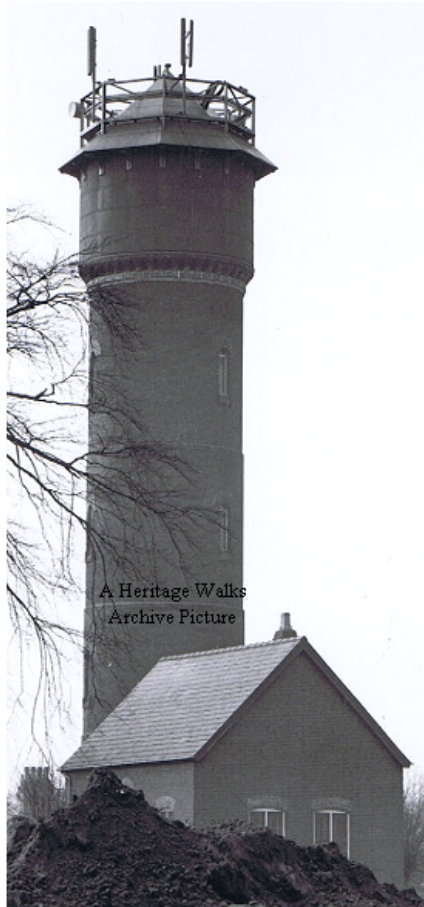
Woking Water Supply

(copy sent to the Woking Informer for print w/e 8th October, 2010)

The burst water main in Martyrs Lane that caused so much disruption last week, made me realise how much we take fresh water from our taps for granted. In the past most houses had a well in their garden – indeed most of us probably still do, buried somewhere beneath the lawn – but I'm not certain I would trust how clean it would be today, let alone want the work of having to lift my water in a bucket each day.

In this area the water table is apparently quite high. Indeed at the Hermitage in St. Johns it was so high that instead of having to dig a well down into the ground they simply stored their water in an underground tunnel or 'level well'.

Unfortunately when the Hermitage Estate was built in the 1930's they didn't know about the tunnel with the result that some of the houses later suffered from subsidence when the ground above the well gave way.



A Heritage Walks
Archive Picture

Unfortunately the water tower for the second Surrey County Pauper Lunatic Asylum at Knaphill (later called Brookwood Hospital) did not survive the developers attentions.



A Heritage Walks
Archive Picture

The Offices of the Woking Water Company used to be on the corner of Commercial Road and Percy Street (next to the Grand Theatre), but were demolished in the 1960's to make way for 'Premier House'.

Not far from The Hermitage, when the Surrey County Justices built their new 'Surrey County Pauper Lunatic Asylum' at Knaphill, they ensured they always had a good water supply by building a tower to store the water taken from a number of wells on the site. Unfortunately when the hospital closed the tower (which had been listed by Woking Council as a building of local importance), was allowed to be demolished.

In the 1870's there were a number of outbreaks of cholera and typhoid caused, we know now, by polluted wells and water supplies. In 1881 the Woking Gas & Water Co. was formed to supply the area with fresh water from springs in the North Downs at Clandon. They never did build their gas works. That was left to another company in 1892 (and another article), but by 1883 most of central Woking had access to fresh piped water, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Woking Fire Service

(copy sent to the Woking Informer for print w/e 15th October, 2010)



A Heritage Walks
Archive Picture

The small gabled building to the right of the offices in this photograph, was the original fire station.

When the council moved their offices to Guildford Road the Commercial Road site was redeveloped (in 1960) for Woking's Post Office.

Unfortunately before it could arrive there was a disastrous fire in the town – when the council offices burnt down!

As it happens the council were looking to build new council offices anyway (hence the lack of money for the fire engine perhaps), and in order to ensure that 'lightening doesn't strike twice' they built a new fire station as well – in the back yard of the new offices. There would be no excuse for the disgruntled firemen if the council offices caught fire again.

The new offices were built on a plot of land in Commercial Road that the council bought (at great expense) from the Town Clerk, and when the fire brigade outgrew their little back-yard fire station the council extended the site by buying the land behind (in Church Street) from the local Catholic Church. The fire station has remained there ever since.

In those days the 'central' fire station was not the only one in the district. There were fire stations at Old Woking, Knaphill, St Johns and Brookwood, and at Byfleet (which was not then part of Woking Urban District) a separate volunteer brigade supported by Byfleet Parish Council. The old Byfleet Station has survived (just) despite the best efforts of Surrey County Council to redevelop the site.

There has been talk recently of moving Woking Fire Station. Apparently Woking Council would like to move it out of town to allow the redevelopment of what is now a prime town centre site. I wonder if they are aware of the story behind why the fire station is where it is.

In the mid 1890's, when Woking Council was first formed, the local volunteer fire brigade asked the councillors for money to buy equipment and a new steam-powered fire engine. The council refused on the grounds of cost. The fire brigade asked again (and even went on strike over the matter), and eventually, after an election whereby some of the councillors opposed to the idea were not re-elected, the new fire engine was ordered.



A Heritage Walks
Archive Picture

Can anybody identify where this photograph of Woking Fire Brigade from the mid 1920's was taken?

Inkerman Barracks

(copy sent to the Woking Informer for print w/e 22nd October, 2010)



The other week I mentioned the old Hermitage Bridge that was demolished in 1906 when a traction engine pulling a cart-load of potatoes to Inkerman Barracks fell through the old arch. It prompted some people's memories of the old barracks that used to stand on the hill between Knaphill and St Johns – behind the Winston Church School.

The Barrack buildings began life in the 1860's as the Woking Invalid Convict Prison (more of which in another article), but by the late 1880's plans were drawn up to move the prisoners out and transfer the site to the control of the War Department.

Inkerman Barracks (named after the 1854 battle in the Crimean War) was opened in 1892 when two battalions of the Royal Artillery moved in. Other regiments to be stationed at Inkerman in the

The Barracks were originally built as the Woking Invalid Convict Prison.

early years included the Queens Royal West Surrey and the Royal Sussex Regiment (hence Queens Road and Sussex Road in Knaphill).

By 1895 the Woking Female Prison had also been converted into extra barrack accommodation, with the women (including the infamous Mrs Maybrick) being moved to places such as Aylesbury and Holloway Prisons.

In 1914 King George V and Queen Mary visited 'Lord Kitchener's Army' at Inkerman together with Queen Alexandra and Princess Mary. Between 4,000 and 5,000 troops lined up on St Johns Lye to parade in front of them.

Another royal visit occurred in 1916 when Princess Victoria of Schleswig-Holstein (daughter of Princess Christian and granddaughter of Queen Victoria) came to open the YMCA hut on the site. The hut later became the St Johns Memorial Hall after being used by Canadian soldiers during the Second World War.

The inter-war years saw several regiments encamped there including the Royal West Kent, Royal Warwickshire, Royal Welsh and the Durham Light Infantry, but after the Second World War the Royal Military Police took over the site and continued to be stationed at Inkerman until its closure in 1965.

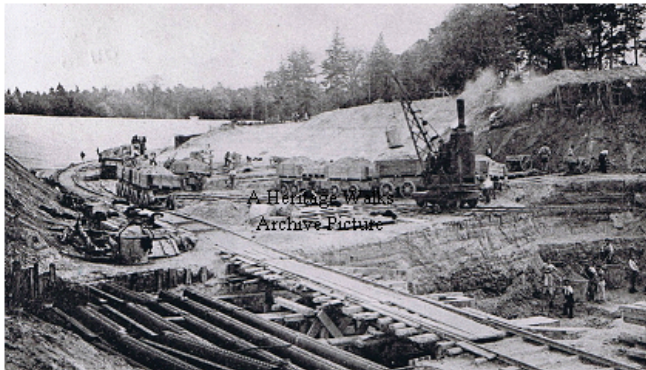
Most of the barrack buildings were demolished soon after, but some of the staff accommodation (originally built for prison officers) has survived in Raglan Road and Wellington Terrace.



Most of the buildings were demolished in the late 1960's, just over one hundred years after they were first built.

Brookland's Ghosts

(copy sent to the Woking Informer for print w/e 29th October, 2010)



Brooklands Motor Racing Track under construction in 1906. Brooklands was the first purpose built motor racing circuit in the world and was built on the land of Brooklands & Wintersells Farms by Hugh Fortesque Locke-King who owned the land on the Byfleet/Weybridge border.

Before I start, I would like to say that I do NOT believe in ghosts, but at this time of year everyone loves a good ghost story, so hopefully my scepticism won't be too evident in my next story.

1913 was supposed to be a good year for Percy Lambert. He had two great loves in his life, the first of which (or was it really the second) was his fiancée to whom he was due to marry early in November that year. His other love was his cars!

Since 1910, Lambert had been a popular driver at the world-famous motor-racing track at Brooklands. He loved speed, but also endurance, so it was no surprise perhaps, when on the 15th February 1913, he set a new record by becoming the first person to cover over 100 miles in one hour*. He actually travelled 103 miles and 1470 yards in the sixty minutes he drove his Talbot around the Byfleet track. Unfortunately it wasn't



H.F. Locke King can be seen at the front of the procession opening the race track on 17th June 1907.

long before his record was broken, so when his fiancée asked him to promise to give up his dangerous sport, he did so on condition that she would let him have 'one last attempt' to regain his title.

In a sense he kept his word, because on the 21st October 1913 (just two weeks before they were due to be married), Lambert Percy was killed when travelling at over 110 miles an hour OFF the Brooklands banking!

There are some people who swear that late at night at Brooklands they can hear a car revving its engine, driving off at high speed and then suddenly breaking – that part of their story I can believe, it's called 24 hour shopping at Tesco – what I cannot explain, however, are the numerous sightings of men dressed in white overalls that disappear into the night and perhaps most disturbing of all, the hazy figure of an Edwardian Racing Driver walking slowly down the embankment - with his head half hanging off!



Percy Talbot died when his car rolled on top of him, nearly severing his head, as he travelled at 110mph around the Brooklands track. He is buried in Brompton Cemetery where his gravestone describes him as "a modest friend, a fine gentleman and a thorough sportsman."

*Others had travelled at over 100mph for a short time, but Percy was the first to travel at that speed over a whole hour.

Bonfire Night

(copy sent to the Woking Informer for print w/e 5th November, 2010)



Close on the heels of Halloween comes Bonfire Night - so close in fact that this year in some places 'November 5th' came before 'October 31st'. It is almost as if the two events are slowly merging into one - 'fancy dress fireworks' - the religious (or anti-religious) celebration of the eve of All Saints Day, and the secular celebration of the capturing of a criminals intent on destroying democracy (no I don't mean the Lib-Cons).

I think some youngsters today don't even know who Guy Fawkes was. The face on the 'Guy' nowadays (if there is a Guy at all), is often the mask from some joke shop of a minor celebrity or politicians (now there's irony for you). In the past, however, there was no doubt, and around Woking 'Guy Fawkes's Night' was one of the highlights of the local calendar.

The other week I wrote about the original Woking Volunteer Fire Brigade. What I didn't mention was that the volunteers were all members of a well-known (and extremely well-run) organisation known as the 'Woking Torchlight Society'. Every year the society organised a massive bonfire on November 5th (no matter what

It is not known when these photographs of the bonfire at Westfield Common were taken, but the construction of the bonfire was obviously a massive communal effort.



day of the week that happened to fall upon), with people coming from miles around to witness the torchlight procession through the streets and the lighting of the massive bonfire. The procession caused concern amongst some local officials even then (who knows what they would make of it now), so in response the society purchased buckets, hoses and ladders, and a handcart to wheel the equipment around on. And so the Woking Volunteer Fire Brigade was formed.

Unfortunately the society's members spent so much time and effort campaigning for their new venture that the torchlight processions and bonfire gradually died out, but at least Woking Round Table have managed to resurrect part of the celebrations, with their annual firework display taking place at Woking Park (on Saturday night at 6pm - fireworks at 8pm).

Hopefully the Round Table wont have to start thinking of providing their own fire fighting equipment, if (or should I say when) the 'powers-that-be' manage to move the Fire Station out of the town!



The handcart bought by the Woking Torchlight Society for the Woking Volunteer Fire Brigade can be seen on the right of this photograph of the brigade, standing outside Woking Council Offices in Commercial Road.

Woking Ex-Servicemen's Club

(copy sent to the Woking Informer for print w/e 12th November, 2010)



The Woking Ex-Servicemen's Club in Maybury Road before it was demolished and replaced by Jarman Court.

Almost every town and village has its War Memorial, but what most people don't realise is that there are often more than one. In Woking Town Centre, of course, there is the main memorial in Town Square, but there are other memorials in the town - especially to those who died during the First World War.

There is a memorial in Christ Church to those from the parish who died in 'The Great War, 1914-1919', but there is also a memorial (moved there from what is now Woking Police Station), for the 'Old Boys' of the Woking Grammar School who 'gave their lives' in the Second World War.

'Old Boys' of Maybury School, who died during the First World War are recorded on a tablet in The Maybury Centre, whilst at St Mary of Bethany Church at Mount Hermon and St Paul's Church at Maybury 'those connected' with their parishes who 'fell in the Great War' are also recorded.

One of the most interesting memorials in the town, however, is the one in the entrance to the sorting office in White Rose Lane to ten 'officers of the Woking Post Office' who died in the Great War. It records not just their names, but their regiments as well.

But the most unique local monument, however, are the tablets on the wall of Jarman Court in Maybury Road, built on the site of the former Woking British Legion Club.

They don't actually 'name names', like all the other memorials do, but simply record 'In memory of our Comrades who Fell' and 'In Honour of Those who Returned' from the Great War. The second tablet is, I believe, unique as the only local 'memorial' to those that SURVIVED, rather than died, during that horrendous conflict.

We should remember all those who fought for our freedom, whether they died in battle or not! Those that came back might not have given their lives for 'King and Country', but that shouldn't mean they should be forgotten.



The memorials from the Ex-Servicemen's Club to the 'comrades that fell' and to 'those that returned' are now displayed on the wall of Jarman Court

Woking Icons

(copy sent to the Woking Informer for print w/e 19th November, 2010)



In the late 1960's there was great hope that the proposed new town centre, between what was then Commercial Road and Church Street, would transform the town.

In the 1960's I think people were ashamed to say they came from Woking – they came from Horsell, or St Johns or Old Woking or any of the villages that surround the town, but not from the town itself.

In the 1970's the town tried to shrug off its old image with a bright new shopping centre, but somehow managed to miss the mark and even into the '80's there was a feeling of 'disappointment' in the town. There was definitely an 'inferiority complex' when compared to some of our neighbours.

The construction of what would eventually become 'Wolsey Place' did improve the town's shopping experience, but it didn't necessarily enhance the town's architectural reputation.

county archives, and as far as I am concerned was a real coup for the area.

Then there is the council's 'energy policy', displayed throughout the borough in the form of photovoltaic cells stuck onto any council-owned feature that doesn't move, and the combined heat and power stations in Victoria Way and Woking Park. All controversial in one way or another, but all adding something to the town's new image.

Type 'Woking' into the search bar of any news website and nine times out of ten it will bring up something to do with McLaren's and their 'state-of-the-art' building north of Horsell Common (the other one time out of ten will mention the football club – well you can't win them all).

And now it seems that Woking might also become the new 'iconic and sustainable' home for the UK branch of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), with their 'Living Planet Centre' in Brewery Road.

Woking, all of a sudden, is THE place to be. If we're not careful we will not be able to move for all the 'visitors' flocking to the town.



The 1990's saw a major change in attitude as The Peacocks (or more specifically the New Victoria Theatre), seemed to give Woking something to be proud of. For once there was a reason for people from outside the town to actually venture into it.

The same could be said about the Surrey History Centre in Goldsworth Road. It is probably second to none in the country in its facilities for storing

This photograph shows the construction of The Peacocks in the late 1980's with the proposed site for the WWF site on Brewery Road Car Park in the background.



The Mad

(copy sent to the Woking Informer for print w/e 3rd December, 2010)



Surrey County Justices purchased the 150 acres of land between the canal and Knaphill in 1863 for £10,500.

A couple of weeks ago I wrote about some modern 'iconic' buildings or institutions of Woking – McLarens, the Surrey History Centre and the New Victoria Theatre – places that in one way or another help to put Woking on the map.



The tower that once supplied the hospital with fresh water, once dominated the local landscape, as can be seen here from this old photograph of Sussex Road, in Knaphill.

Back in Victorian times some of our forefathers might not have been quite so proud of Woking's main claim to fame as the home of 'the mad, the bad and the sad', but the history of the institutions behind that nickname should make us proud today, as I hope to show over the next few weeks.

The 'mad' came from the patients of the second Surrey County Pauper Lunatic Asylum at Knaphill; the 'bad' was from the inmates of the Woking Invalid Convict Prison and Female Prison at St. Johns, and the 'sad' represented the mourners at the Crematorium and Brookwood Cemetery!

The first Surrey asylum was at Springfield Park in Wandsworth, but by the late 1850's it was clear that not only was a second asylum needed, it needed to be built in the clean air of the country. The London Necropolis & National Mausoleum Company were selling off their 'surplus' cemetery land and for just £10,500 the Surrey

County Justices bought 150 acres of land between Knaphill and the Basingstoke Canal for their second asylum. The site was almost self-sufficient with a farm providing food and therapy for the patients, a water tower and reservoir providing fresh drinking water and even its own gas works (and later electricity generator) providing the lighting and heating long before Woking had such provision.

The development of the hospital helped the development of Knaphill, with the vast amount of staff needed to run the new institution. Ironically the close proximity of the village might have had some influence on the decision in the early 1990's to close the hospital and redevelop the site with housing – turning the former asylum buildings into luxury apartments, and allowing Sainsbury's and Homebase to build on part of the former farmland and gas works.

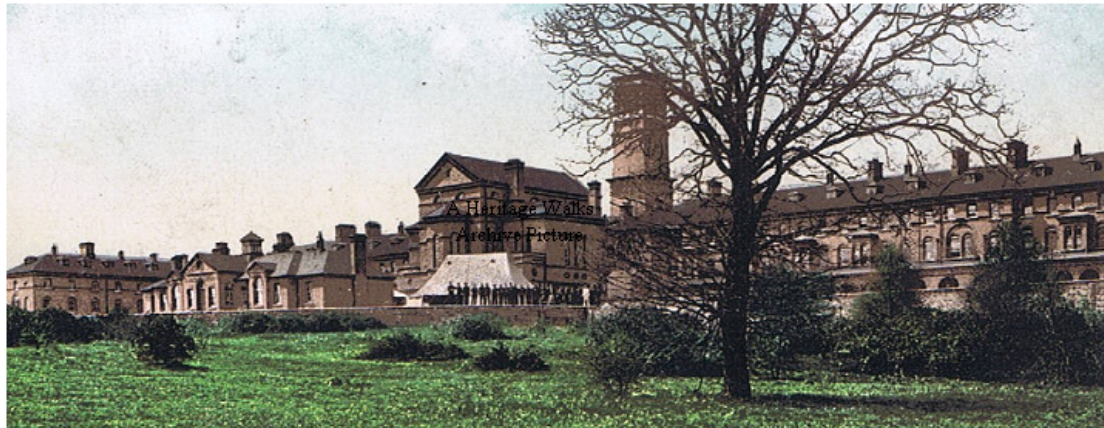
The full history of Brookwood Hospital still has to be written, but at least most of its records have survived for future historians to piece together its past, as its wonderful archive has been saved and preserved at the Surrey History Centre in Goldsworth Road. The records of one of Woking's first 'iconic' institutions, kept in one of its most modern.



The Hospital opened in 1867, but closed in 1994 with the main buildings then being converted into luxury apartments and other houses being built in the grounds.

The Bad

(copy sent to the Woking Informer for print w/e 10th December, 2010)



The prison buildings dominated the hillside where the Inkerman housing estate now stands, and could be seen from miles around. When this picture was taken the buildings had already been converted into barracks

Last week I looked at the history of Brookwood Hospital – the first of the institutions that gave Woking its Victorian nickname of ‘the home for the mad, the bad, and the sad’. This week it is the ‘bad’ that I want to concentrate on, the two Woking Prisons that used to stand on the hill between Knaphill and St. Johns (and later converted into Inkerman Barracks).



On either side of the central clock tower were two wings, one for the physically handicapped, with the other for the more chronically sick and insane.

The first to be built on the site was the Woking Invalid Convict Prison – the first prison to be built specifically for disabled and chronically sick criminals. Like the asylum last week, the prison was built on former common land purchased from the Necropolis Company and also like the asylum it had its own gas works (off Robin Hood Road) and wells supplying fresh water. The first stage of the prison was opened in April 1859 using inmates from other prisons as cheap labour, but it was to be another couple of years before the whole site was complete and the bulk of disabled prisoners could be moved here from Lewes.

Some of the mosaic work of the women from Woking Female Prison can be found in St Johns Church.

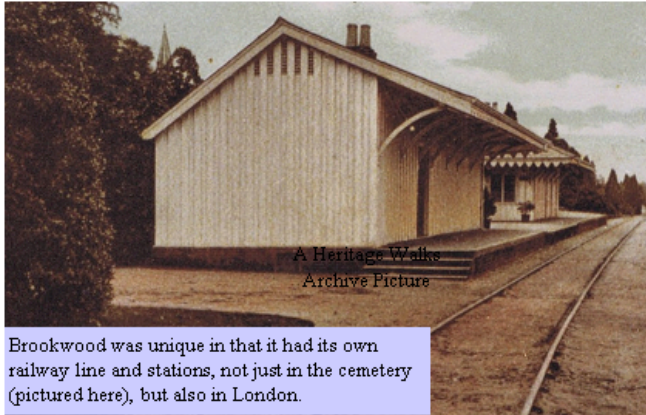
The second prison on the site was the Female Prison, begun in 1867 using some of the more able-bodied prisoners from the male prison next door to once again keep costs down. It opened in May 1869, but within twenty years plans were already being drawn up to close both prisons. The expansion of barracks at nearby Aldershot encouraged the government to transfer ownership of the site from the Home Office to the War Department and in March 1889 the Invalid Prison closed, followed in October 1895 by the Female one.

In their time Woking’s prisons were noted for the progressive manner in which they were run. Discipline at the Invalid Prison was harsh but fair, and the work of some of the female prisoners, particularly in the ‘Mosaic Department’, was said to be particularly fine. Part of the floor of St Paul’s Cathedral and the ‘South Kensington Museums’ (Natural History Museum, V&A, and Science Museum), have floors made by the inmates from Woking. More locally their work can be found in St. Johns Church, so that although nothing now remains of the prison (except some of the wardens housing), there is still a visible reminder of one of Woking’s more notorious institutions.



The 'Sad'

(copy sent to the Woking Informer for print w/e 17th December, 2010)

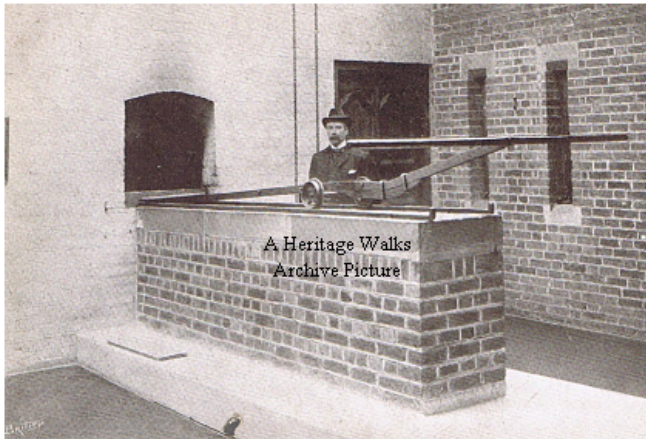


Brookwood was unique in that it had its own railway line and stations, not just in the cemetery (pictured here), but also in London.

This week we look at the final of the 'mad, bad and sad' institutions that helped give Woking its dubious reputation in Victorian times – the Crematorium, and, of course, Brookwood Cemetery.

Without the cemetery, or more specifically the creators of the cemetery – the London Necropolis & National Mausoleum Company – there would be no 'Woking' as we know it. Their land-sales of the late 1850's onwards brought about the development of the new town around the station (more of which in a later article) and as we have seen, provided the land for the asylum and prisons, but things could have been quite different if earlier plans for the cemetery had come to fruition.

The Necropolis Company bought almost the whole of Woking Common in 1854 for their cemetery when there were apparently serious proposals to close every churchyard, graveyard



The Crematorium at St Johns was something of a 'tourist attraction' in Victorian times as these postcards show. Postcards were even produced showing the entrance to the furnace. Imagine sending one of these - 'Having a lovely time...'

The Brookwood Cemetery Society conduct guided tours every month looking at different aspects of the cemetery.



and cemetery in the country and have everybody – every body – buried in this one 'national' cemetery. In the end, of course, that never happened, but when the cemetery opened in 1854 it was still the largest in the world, and remains probably the largest private cemetery in Europe.

A lot of people think that the Crematorium is linked to the cemetery, but it is not. It was built by the Cremation Society of England in 1878, but because the law regarding cremation was uncertain, it was not until 1884 before the first legal cremation could take place there.

It was also the site of the only legal 'open-air' cremations to take place in this country (in the 1930's), but they deserve to be the subject of an article all on their own!

I said there was no link with the cemetery, but of course it was no coincidence that the Society chose Woking – the site of the country's largest cemetery – as the site for the country's first Crematorium. Those two facts alone make Woking unique and should, I believe, make anyone proud of Woking's history and heritage.

