

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - November 1998

### The Changing Face of Reading

Doug Noyes showed another instalment of his audio-visual on the *Changing Face of Reading*. By careful photography, he showed us how various sites, have changed from the 1960s to the 1990s. The Southampton Street/ London Street/ Friar Street area was the original 'triangle of Reading', and Friar Street remains a busy thoroughfare - at times for one-way traffic, and others two-way.

Doug began at the west end of Friar Street, where one well-remembered building on the corner was Langstons. This had begun as John Palmer's boot and shoe warehouse, and had expanded to include an adjoining butcher's, the whole being rebuilt by Langston's. One feature of the shop was a system of overhead wires along which a small wooden pot would be 'fired' to take the customer's payment to the cashier. Nearby had been the Royal Theatre, destroyed by fire in 1937. This area later became the rear of Woolworth's (and later a public house). Opposite, by the mid 90's, stood Rumbelow's and Brentford Nylons. Until the early 1970s a parade of shops here included Drews (ironmongers), Ye Olde Friar (pub), Alders (bakers) and Renshaw (optician). This had been little changed since the turn of the century - the pub having been there for a long time.

Along Friar Street, in 1972 C & G Ayres depository still stood. In the town since the early 19th century, they had moved to Friar Street in 1880, but have now made way for Friars Walk. This site, in 1842, Doug noted was called Friars Court. From here to Merchants Place the shops included Two Three Four Motors (motorcycles), Lovegrove (undertaker), Gardner (umbrellas), Thimbleby and Shorland (auctioneers) and the YMCA (later replaced by ICL's offices). In Merchants Place, Tibbett Son and White still had their blacksmith's shop, whilst nearby, much of Garrard Street was occupied by Ayres sales and store rooms.

In Friar Street, HMV occupied the site previously Rumbelows, and before that Barnes & Avis, where records (and electrical appliances and pianos) could be bought. The modern building has a similar skyline to the old, but windows of a different scale. The Boars Head, opposite, used to have stables alongside to provide for the many coach services to outlying villages from there.

The area in front of the old Town Hall - itself damaged by a wartime bomb - was pedestrianized in 1991. Three years later the post office moved from Friar Street to Market Place, to occupy a site where Gilbert Adams, the royal photographer had been. Nearby, the Elephant Hotel and Cooksey & Walker (auctioneers) overlooked the market stalls, until they were removed to Hosier Street in 1973.

Around the corner, the library occupies the site of the Abbey stables, latterly a row of small shops, alongside an old pickle factory and Julians car showroom. Opposite were Sleeps (crafts and models), Williams (furniture) and a china shop. The Abbey National have been on the corner since 1960, although the building is relatively new. Jackson's had occupied this site from 1899 - 1927, when they moved to the opposite corner of Kings Road.

Moving to Broad Street, the building on the corner of Minster Street had been the 17th century Walsingham House, at one time used by Speedwell (car makers). Many of the Broad Street premises have changed over the years. Doug noted several in particular. The Abbey National had previously been Fosters (outfitters) and Knights (newsagent), but was best remembered as the Cadena Cafe. In the 1920s, Vincents had a car showroom there, whilst even earlier it had been the Grand Cinema. W H Smith, opposite, had previously been Hills (toys, prams and leathersgoods). The old shops were demolished and rebuilt with a facade in the same style as the earlier building. Woolworths had moved to their present position in 1939, having earlier been nearer Union Street, although for a period in the late 80's it was a shopping mall, then becoming Woolworths again. Across on the corner of St Mary's Butts, Laura Ashley now occupies the shop where the Baylis foodstore had been for a long time. Doug also reminded us of the dust, noise, and little room to walk as the pedestrianization was implemented.

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