

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - November 2002

Wokingham Old and New - (part 1)

In November, the Wargrave Local History Society had a special presentation on *Wokingham Old and New*, given by Ken Goatley, assisted by his wife Edna. Both had been born and grown up in the town, and their affection for it was quite apparent.

Like many towns, Wokingham was 'vandalised' by the developments of the 1960s, and Ken was able to show us - side by side - views of Wokingham as it was and the same area as it is now. We started our 'photographic tour' on the Bracknell road out of the town centre, where interesting turn of the century cottages - that maybe should have been 'listed' - had been replaced by modern characterless housing. Surprisingly, the nearby St Crispin's School has been listed - as it was the first of its type in the country.

We then travelled towards the town centre, past All Saints Church and the almshouses - built in 1830 to replace even earlier almshouses. Entering Peach Street (a name derived, as many in the town, from an earlier French name) was a site that had been a fairground before WW2, and later 'pre-fabs' were erected there. These lasted for many years, but were replaced by a brick office block. Further along the street are the cottages known locally as 'the overhangs'. Part 15th century, and part 17th century, it had been intended to demolish these in 1971, but fortunately a builder bought and refurbished them. Rows of cottages further along were not so lucky, and were replaced by modern shops. Wokingham's first supermarket (Fine Fare) was built nearby in 1961, and was 'the beginning of the end' for the little grocers etc in the town. Even Fine Fare has been replaced - first by Halfords, and now a Blockbuster video store. Not far away was the Ritz Cinema - built in 1937. The foyer was fitted with many mirrors. Subsidence affected the site and so the mirrors all cracked soon after the opening, and were replaced by plain walls. Just off Peach Street, in South Place, had been Wokingham's last working silk mill. After it closed in 1831, it was converted to houses, but has now been replaced by another modern office block. Other shops in this part of town included Woolworths, a fish and chip shop, a wireless and electrical shop a butchers, and Evans, one of several leather workers in Wokingham (which became Primrose Dale, a ladies outfitters in the 1930s) and Harold Lee, printers since 1884, who still occupy the area to the rear. A Mrs Butcher kept a bakers shop, whilst further along was another food store - greengrocery on one side of the doorway, and pies and meat on the other. A cat would often sit in the window, and a dish of 'scraps' was left out for it -- whatever the cat did not eat was, apparently, used for the next day's rissoles !!!

The Market Place and Town Hall came next. The latter was built - at a cost of £3503/5/6d - mainly as a police station, with the cells at the rear. Along the front, now shops, had been the fire station, whilst a cattle market was held in the area behind until the 1930s. Nowadays a popular 'farmer's market' is held there on the first Thursday each month. Many public houses surround the market area -- some with long histories, even if the modern names bear no relation to the age-old ones. The Thames Valley buses would stop by the Bush Hotel -- until it was realised the

upper deck passengers were at the same height as the first floor bedroom windows. Heelas had a store in this part of town for 180 years, until it closed in 1965. Run by a brother of the Heelas who owned the Reading shop, the two firms were always quite separate. Outside, Ted Frith would sell ice cream in the summer from his hand-cart. In the winter he sold fish -- from the same hand-cart!

Moving down Denmark Street, Gotelee had been printers in the town from the 1700s for 225 years, and had a book shop here. Although now a building society, the Gotelee name is still displayed on the walls. Also along here had been Martin the baker - renowned for his currant buns - it was said that he put the currants in from the other side of the road - and most of them missed! Another of Wokingham's industries, a wire rope works (which supplied the infant Halfords) existed until the 1950s in Denmark Street.

Bicycles were a common form of transport then - and cyclists could travel more or less wherever they chose in the road -- or leave their bike propped against the kerb, without having to worry if it would still be there it when they had finished their shopping.

Ken showed us many many more interesting old shops and other interesting buildings, and will return in January for the second half of his 'tour'.
