

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2024

History of Woodley - Ann Smith

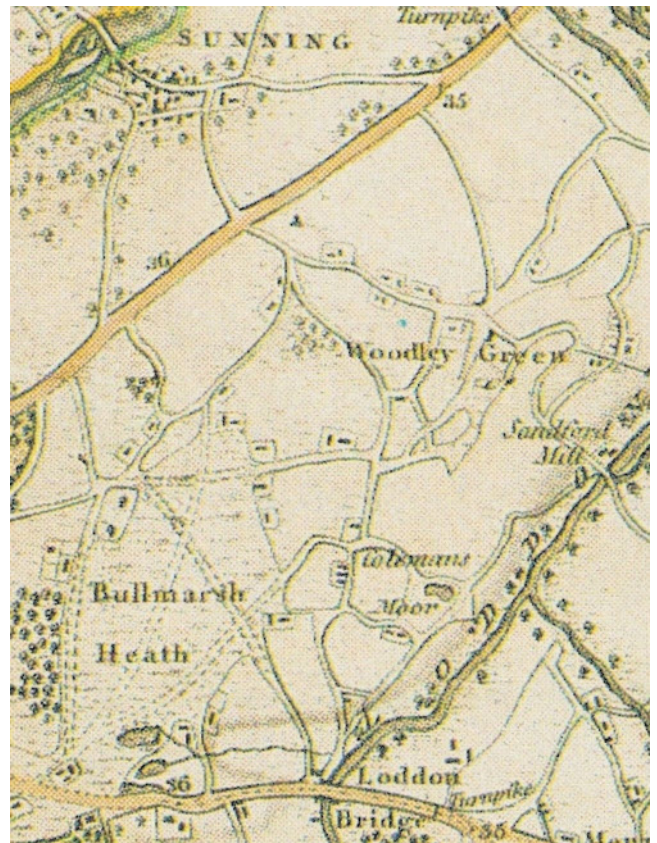
In February the society welcomed Ann Smith, formerly Reading Libraries' local history specialist, who gave an enlightening presentation on *The History of Woodley*.

Ann commented that there were few books that record the history of Woodley - and most of those were published several years ago, so that many people think that the area does not have much history. Members of local U3A groups decided that a more up-to-date history was needed, and so had set about researching Woodley's past. The name Woodley, which means "a clearing in the woods" has had various spellings over time, and the precise boundaries have also changed, but it is basically the area between the old turnpike roads on the north and south (the Bath Road and the Wokingham Road), Church Road / Pitts Lane on the west, and the River Loddon to the east.

For many communities, their local history begins with the entry in the Domesday Survey carried out in 1086, but Woodley is not mentioned as such in that document as it was part of the then more extensive parish of Sonning, although one of 2 mills mentioned might have been Sandford Mill on the River Loddon. The first documented reference to Woodley is in 1220, when the register of a visit by St Osmund to the parish of Sonning records that "Osbertus de Woodleghe" had a dwelling house and yard, and was able to "pasture his pigs on the Lord of the Manor's woods, although in the late 12th century, during the reign of Henry II, Bishop Jocelin and John of Earley exchanged some land at Bulmershe (a pasture where bulls were kept).

The first use of the modern spelling of Woodley was in 1550, when Thomas Fletcher was recorded as owning half an acre in Woodley, whilst a late 18th century survey of Sonning describes a "house with the sign of the chequers with yard and gardens" - the Chequers public house.

The basic unit of administration in earlier times was the manor, and the Bulmershe Manor house dates from the 16th century., although only part of the Elizabethan house still stands. It had been owned by Reading Abbey until its dissolution and was then sold to William Gray, MP, of Reading in 1545. Six years later it passed to the Blagrave family, who also owned Southcote Manor on the west side of Reading, and they owned it until the late 18th century. The Reading Races were held on the heath - horse racing that became an important event in the London social calendar, until the passing of the Enclosure Act in 1820, when the races moved to Kings Meadow in Reading. The Chequers public house was well patronised during the races, being located in the middle of the heath. At the time of the Napoleonic wars the Woodley Yeomanry was also established, with Captain Edward Golding who lived at Maiden Erleigh House. in charge.



Woodley as seen in Pride's map 1790

Henry Addington, the Prime Minister from 1801 to 1804, lived at Woodley Lodge, a new house built by James Wheble, who subsequently occupied it, renaming it Bulmershe Court. It lasted until the 1960s when, despite a campaign to save it - especially its orangery, it was demolished to make way for a teacher training college. The college was later incorporated into Reading University, but the site was sold to be used for housing in 2011.

During the 19th century, Woodley saw little development, the principal landowners being Robert Palmer of Holme Park (who owned most of the east side of Woodley, and James Wheble. The Kellys Directory of 1847 described Woodley as a “scattered village consisting mainly of farms”, and it remained like that for the rest of the century, with Woodley Green Farm continuing to be run by the Pither family into the 1970s. Naturally, an agricultural area provided work for a mill, and Sandford Mill, on the River Loddon, is now a listed building. There has been a mill on the site for a long time, as the records show that the bridge there was destroyed in the 1640s during the Civil War. The nearby Sandford Manor is much later, having been built for a rich family from London, the Godsells, in 1910.



Sonning Cutting

A major change came, however, in the late 1830s, when Isambard Kingdom Brunel created the Great Western Railway. He wanted to make the line have as level as possible, and so Sonning Cutting was created near the northern edge of Woodley. It was the largest civil engineering project in the country at the time, employing 1200 men. Unfortunately, a landslip in 1841 caused a train to derail on Christmas Eve. Brunel came to Woodley to attend the inquest, which took place on Christmas Day at the Shepherds House Inn (then part way down the hill), as it was the only available public space.

Another railway line was built soon after this - the Reading, Guildford and Reigate Railway, close to Woodley’s southern boundary. James Wheble was an astute businessman, and a director of the railway company. Some of his land was used for gravel extraction, so he persuaded the railway (who thought goods were more important than passengers) that rather than build its station near Loddon Bridge, it should be somewhere convenient for his gravel pits, and Earley station was the result - still looking much like the country station it was when built. As the railway line crossed his land, however, James Wheble also was able to get compensation for that!



Earley station



Woodley Congregational chapel

The parish of Sonning stretched from Dunsden in the north to the southern edge of Woodley, so many lived some distance away from St Andrews in Sonning. Robert Palmer therefore provided the land and money so that St John’s church could be erected in Woodley, and consecrated in 1873 - Robert Palmer also providing some cottages for local workers at the same time. This was not the first church for Woodley people, however, as a small chapel had been provided in the 1830s by the congregation of St Mary’s in Reading’s Castle Street. The building in Loddon Bridge Road survives, although it is no longer a place of worship. Robert Palmer also provided a school for Woodley children. Built in 1855, it continued in use for over 100 years, being replaced by a larger school in Hurricane Way needed as a result of the rapid housing developments of the late 20th century.

A school photograph dated 1910 included one of the Petty family - as there were 12 of them, the family always got the blame if something went wrong - just because there were so many of them!

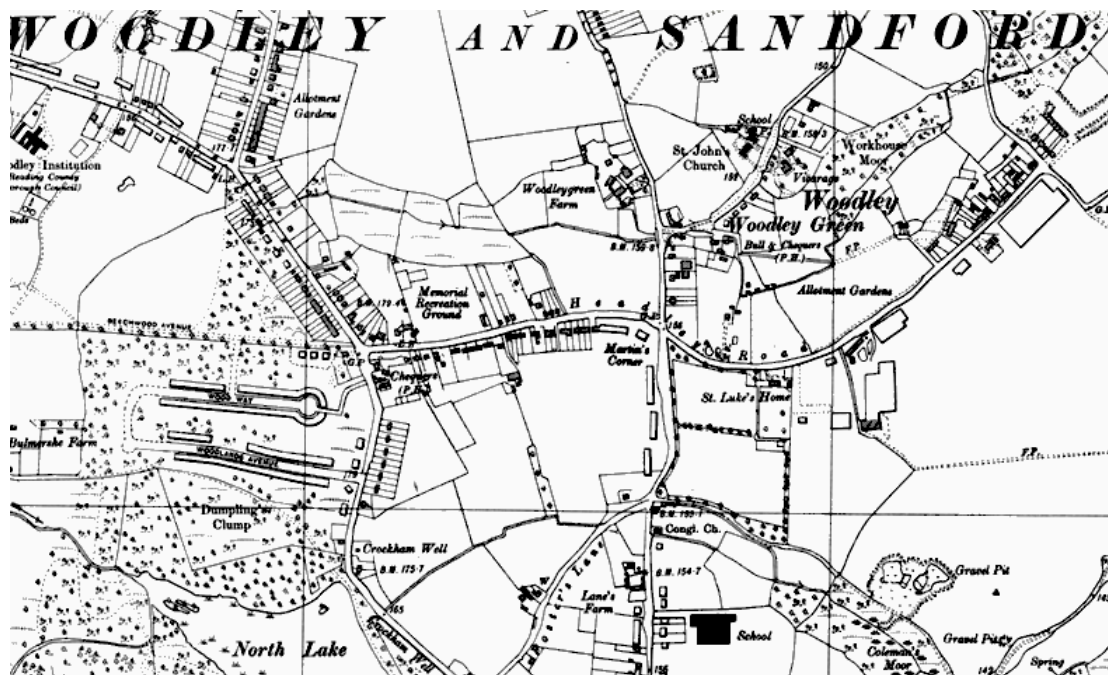
There had been 5 vicars who lived at the vicarage up to World War 2, but the building then became a day nursery for the children of women who worked at the nearby Miles aircraft factory. After the war, it was not returned to the church, but became Woodley's library

Slightly further to the east along Headley Road is the area that was known known as Cobbler's City. They were not shoemakers, but craftspeople such as wheelwrights, carpenters etc. It was along here that the St Lukes Home for children was set up. This was not to provide for local children, but those recovering from London who would benefit from the country air whilst recovering from tuberculosis etc. In due course, the home moved to a larger site further west on Headley Road, but once aircraft manufacture started close by, it was no longer a quiet place so the home moved to Bexhill, the building then being used by the Lebus furniture company.

The earliest shops for Woodley people were in Cobblers City, including a post office, and a grocery and baker's shop run by the Aldrige family, the bakery using flour with a special ingredient, patented as Zilvo, which they also sold through other grocery shops in the Reading area. The Aldridge family also owned the George public house by Loddon Bridge, which was a pleasant place to visit for a Sunday afternoon tea - a horse and trap being available to meet those arriving at Earley station

In 1910 the Palmer family sold Holme Park, whilst in the 1920s Bulmershe Court property was also sold. The most valuable plots were those alongside the main roads through the district, and resulted in a lot of ribbon development for housing. Despite this, Woodley's roads still lacked any pavements or street lighting, there was no mains water supply, residents relying on wells, and there was no sewerage system. As much of the subsoil is clay, the sewerage pits were liable to overflow in wet weather, causing terrible smells in the area.

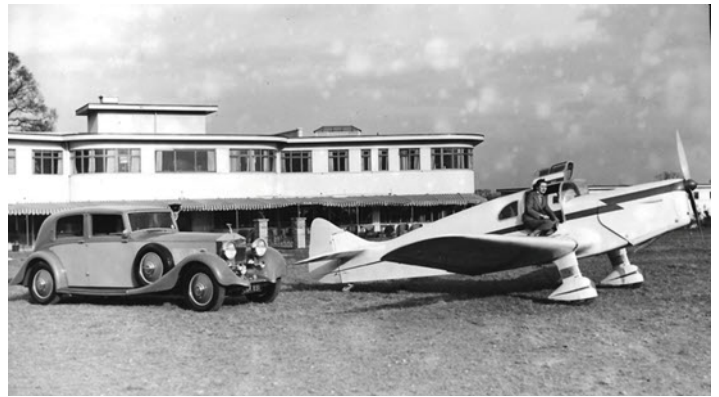
By the late 1930s, the population had increased, so a new school was built to provide for the older pupils, known as Woodley Senior, or Secondary Modern, School It was opened shortly before war was declared, and was considered to be so sturdy that no air raid shelters would be needed, and fortunately no bombs fell nearby,



The new Woodley Senior School is just to the right of centre at the bottom of the late 1930s map extract, whilst the large field on the right hand edge was Woodley Aerodrome.

In 1928 a 100-acre field on the eastern side of Woodley was bought to create Reading Aerodrome, and the following year Messrs Phillips and Powis, who ran a motor car garage in Reading, set up a flying club there. They also built a factory there, to build aircraft designed by Frederick George Miles. In due course the latter, with his wife known as Blossom, took over the factory, the firm becoming Miles Aircraft Ltd. At the time,

private flying was becoming more popular, and Miles became successful in this market, as his aircraft costing £395 were cheaper than others available. Many were named after birds, whilst the Miles Magister found extensive use as a training aircraft for the RAF in World War 2. To cater for the wealthy clients who used the airfield, the company built the Falcon Hotel alongside. Amongst those who flew from Woodley were Amy Johnson, Charles Lindberg and Douglas Bader, who famously crashed whilst performing aerobatics, and had to be taken to the Royal Berkshire Hospital. He remembered his Woodley connection, and came back in the 1950s to open the new Coronation Hall.



The Falcon Hotel, in the 1930s with a Miles aircraft in the foreground

It might be thought that an aircraft factory would be a prime target for enemy bombers during the war, but the buildings were well camouflaged with netting, and there were no concrete runways that might make it stand out from the air. At that time, about 5,000 people worked at the factory, and there were so many vehicle movements that the cross roads at “Martins Corner” were replaced by a roundabout. (later commonly known as the Just Tiles roundabout from a shop on its southwestern side). The demand for Miles’ products decreased after the war, but

the Miles family did not want to make their loyal staff redundant. This led to the firm going bankrupt in 1947, and Handley Page took over the factory. A new product was then manufactured close-by by the Miles Martin company - the Biro ball-point pen, intended to be more reliable than other forms of pen - until manufacturing moved 7 years later to London. After Handley Page the main factory was occupied by Adwest Ltd. When a developer bought the premises in more recent times, there was a campaign to save the iconic design main building, but that was unsuccessful. Other manufacturing in the area included Lebus Furniture, who stayed until the 1980s, Huntley, Boorne and Stevens, who made tin plate boxes, and Parslow’s Bakery, who created a characteristic smell over Woodley for 30 years, until taken over by Allied Bakeries who remained for about 20 years more.

Post-war, Woodley has seen a lot of housing development, with associated shopping parades etc. The North Lake was filled in, for example, and the old Chequers pub demolished to make way for the Crockhamwell Road Shopping Precinct, whilst more recently the airfield has also been used for housing, the roads having aircraft related names. The only building that survives from its earlier use being the Berkshire Aviation Museum.

Ann’s presentation also covered the local public houses, some of the specialist shops (notably Maxwell’s hardware store), the listed buildings of Woodley, the coming of the motorway link road - and the lady who looked after over 200 donkeys in the middle of Woodley! --- and certainly proved that Woodley does have a long history.



Crockhamwell Road shopping precinct, with the modern Chequers pub on the left

For more information about the society, visit the website at www.wargravehistory.org.uk