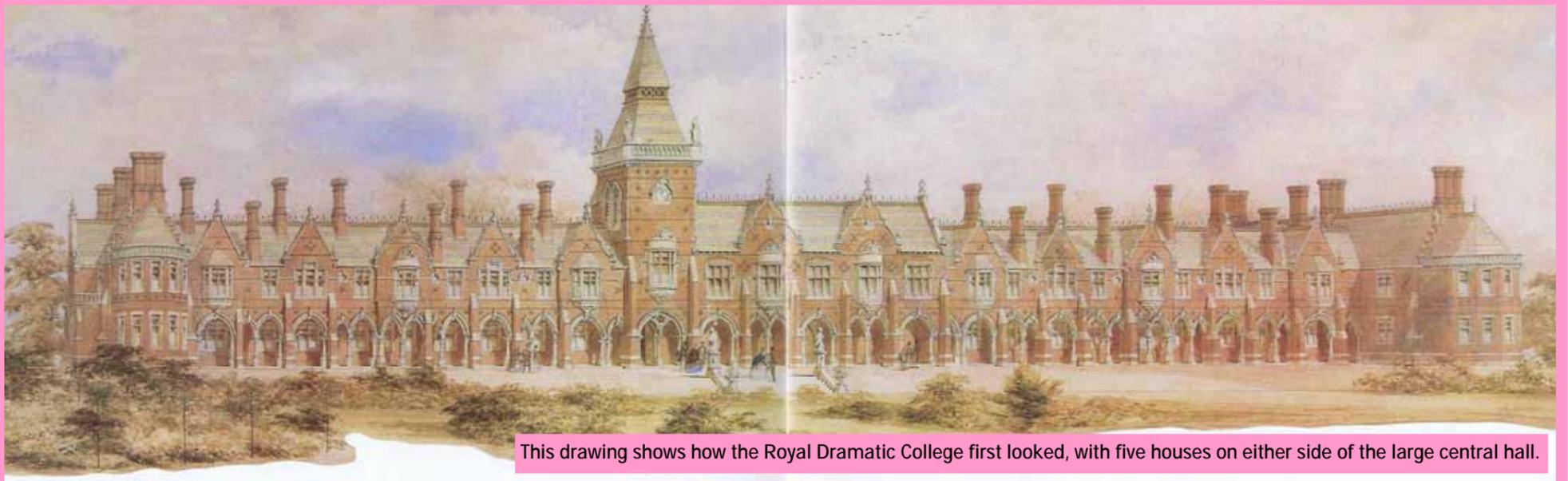


DRAMATIC CHANGES AT MAYBURY

Iain Wakeford 2015



This drawing shows how the Royal Dramatic College first looked, with five houses on either side of the large central hall.

The Necropolis Company's land sales, as we saw last week, brought some change to the area around Woking Station with the opening of the Albion Hotel (where Woking's Building Society – the West Surrey Mutual Benefit Society was formed in 1863), but the main area of sales was to the Home Office for the prison between St Johns and Knaphill.

Sales in 1858-9 raised just over £22,500, from about 210 acres (about a third of which was for the prison) so the Necropolis Company quickly learned that encouraging the establishment of institutions in the area was where the money could be made. In 1860 they sold 150 acres of land at Knaphill (for just £10,500) to the Surrey County Justices for the creation of the second Surrey County Pauper Lunatic Asylum (more of which in a few weeks time), whilst at Maybury they apparently 'gave' five or six acres to the Royal Dramatic College (although ten acres appear in the company's books as being sold to the college in 1864 for £750).

Many people have assumed (myself included) that the 'College' was supposed to be a sort of 'Fame' school – where the next generation of Thespians would be taught by the retired inmates - but apparently that was not necessarily the original intention. Instead the collegiate buildings were designed for what the Times newspaper perhaps unkindly called a home 'for decaying actors and actresses'!

The story really begins in the late 1850's when a meeting was held at the Princess Theatre in Oxford Street on the 21st July 1858 to hear a proposal to establish the college on five acres of land that Mr Henry Dodd generously proposed to give (together with one hundred guineas). Charles Kean presided over the meeting that was attended by the writers William Makepeace Thackeray and Charles Dickens (who with Kean became trustees of the College), but it seems that a disagreement soon emerged between Dodd and the committee with the result that his offer was not accepted.

Prince Albert was apparently keen on the idea and gave his royal patronage to the scheme in October that year. The association of the acting community with the Necropolis Company also began about this time with the 'actors acre' being established in the cemetery by the Dramatic, Equestrian and Musical Sick Fund

(DEMSF), supported by John William Anson, who was later to go on to be secretary of the Royal Dramatic College.

The Maybury site was ideal. Apart from the fact that the land was relatively cheap, if not free (the College never had much money), it was easily accessible by railway from London. At four o'clock on the afternoon of the 1st June 1860 a special train brought the Prince Consort from London to a temporary platform set up alongside the site, where Albert was received by the 'Master of the College', Benjamin Webster. At a short ceremony the Prince gave his best wishes and those of his wife to the venture and laid the foundation stone. Curiously there was

another 'foundation stone' laid by Mr Webster on the 7th August 1862 (for the Great Hall), by which time poor Prince Albert had died, leaving his son, the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) to perform the official opening ceremony on the 5th June 1863 (although the first seven residents had been admitted on the 29th September 1862). His interest in members of the acting profession is well documented – although not perhaps the 'decaying' ones that were to live at Woking!

The buildings, which cost between £6,000 - £7,000, were apparently designed by William Webbe, with an arcade (or cloister) on either side of the large central hall (designed by T.R.



Prince Albert, the Prince Consort, laid the foundation stone for the college in June 1860.



Although the Princess of Wales public house (in Princess Road) still commemorates the opening of the Royal Dramatic College, the College Arms (in College Road) has been redeveloped.

A contributor to the monthly magazine 'London Society' in September 1862 wrote a flowery account (in every sense of the word) of his visit to the College prior to it being occupied.

'As the train is slackening speed to creep into Woking Station, the eye of the traveller is attracted by a handsome Gothic building standing on the edge of the heath. It is not a blasted heath, like the one in Macbeth, but a lovely expanse of purple heather, such as the Scottish poets sing of with native enthusiasm. As you walk across from the station your every footstep crushes a thousand purple flowers, and the breeze from the woods beyond sweeps upon you laden with perfumes and the hum of busy bees. You walk through the crisp heather in a reverie of pleasing thought, picturing to yourself the future inmates of yonder refuge straying about here in summer days.'

Sitting on a bench and surveying 'the comfort within and the peaceful scene without', the writer concluded with the thought 'would that I were secure of such a haven as this for my declining years' unaware that for many of the future inmates such a future was far from secure.

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Smith) sheltering five 'houses' each side – one set for the retired actors and the other for the actresses. These had been 'sponsored' by various charities and individuals including Charles Kean; Mr J J Stainton; Hon George Coppin (of Australia); the Drury Lane Fund;

Covent Garden; DEMSF; and the Central Theatrical Fund.

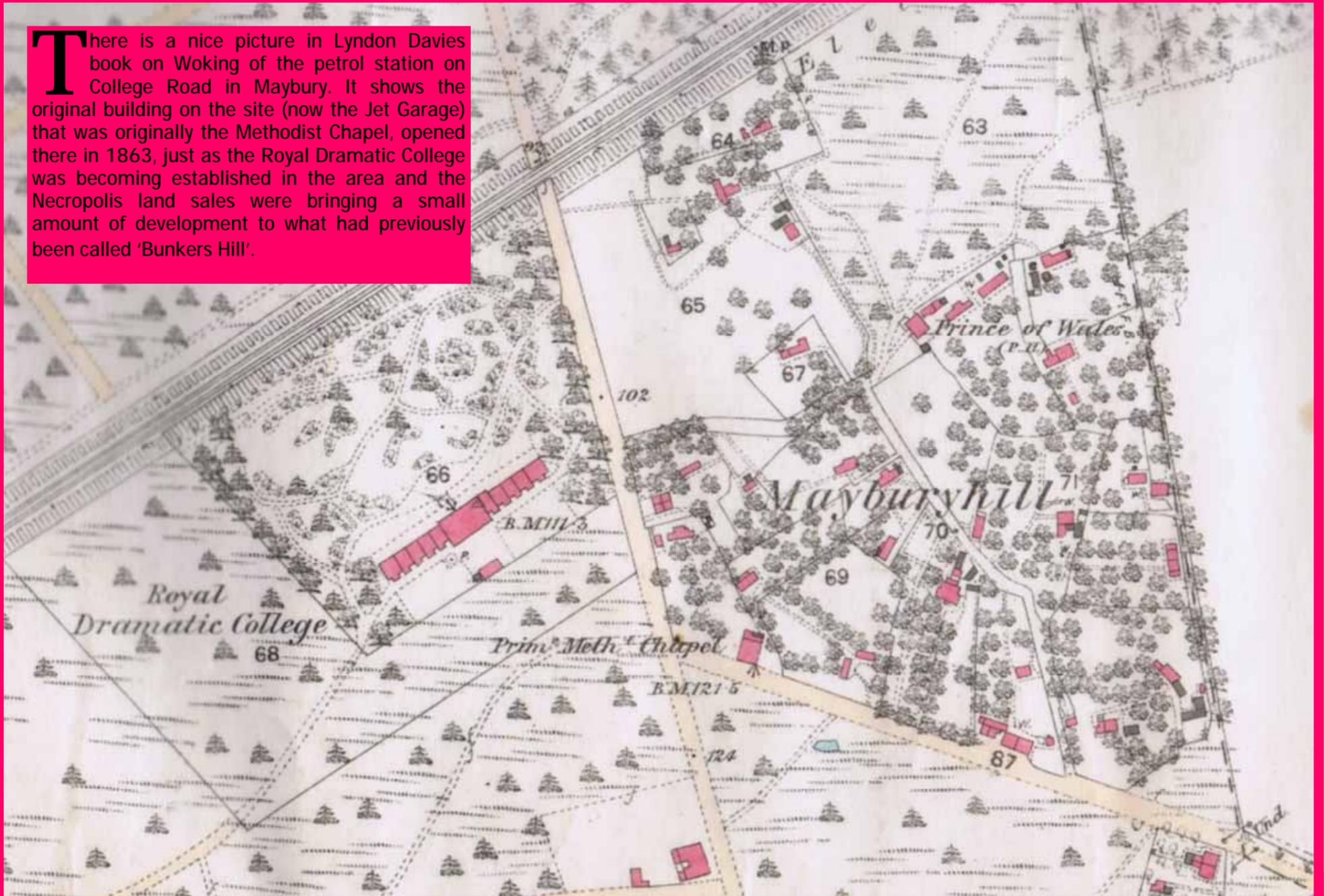
As I say the venture was never a financial success and by the end of the following decade had closed, but that is another story that we will investigate in a few weeks time.



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FROM METHODISTS TO MOTORS

There is a nice picture in Lyndon Davies book on Woking of the petrol station on College Road in Maybury. It shows the original building on the site (now the Jet Garage) that was originally the Methodist Chapel, opened there in 1863, just as the Royal Dramatic College was becoming established in the area and the Necropolis land sales were bringing a small amount of development to what had previously been called 'Bunkers Hill'.

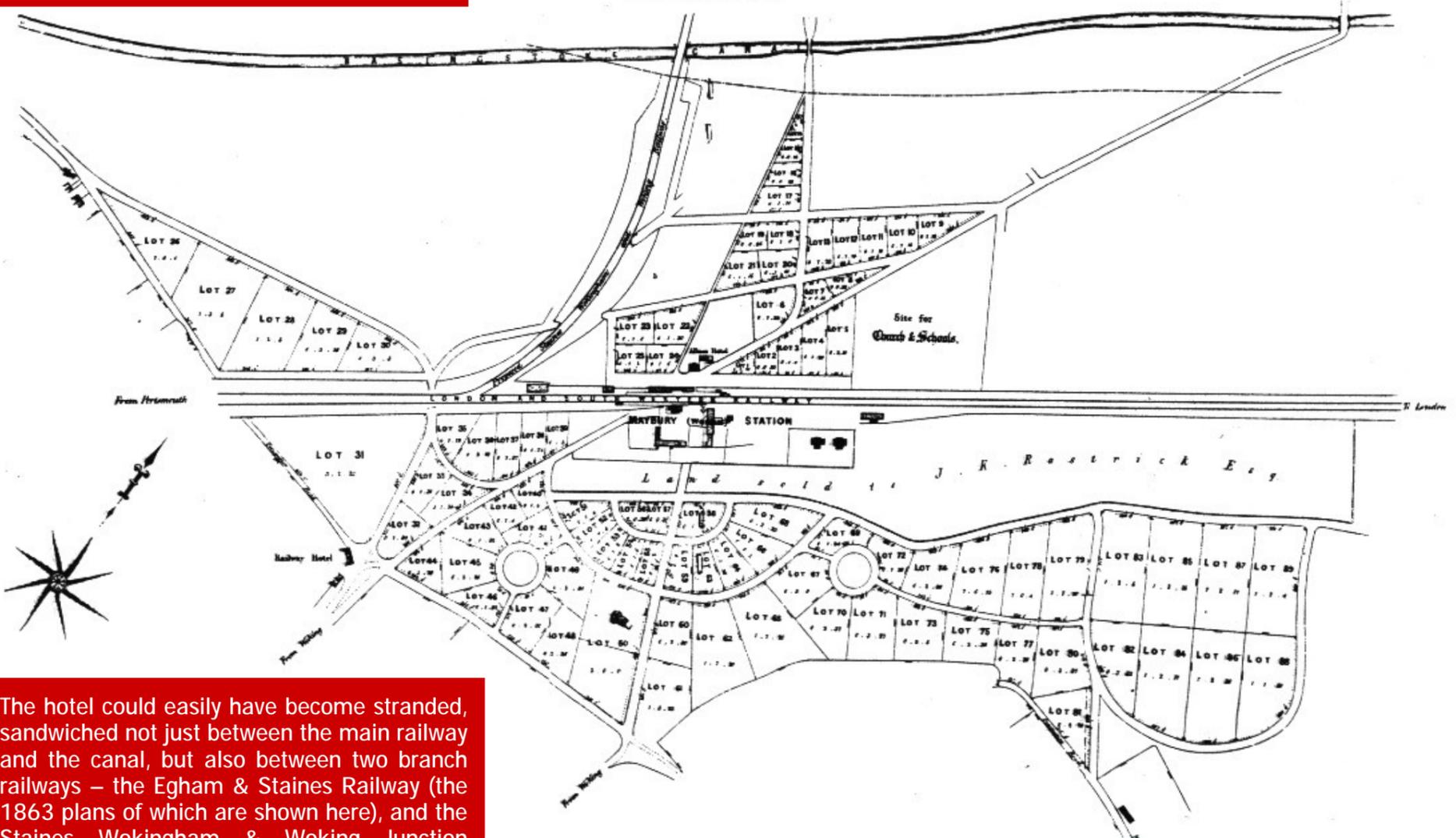


It seems that turning former chapels into petrol stations was a common practice in the early 20th century (I don't know why), as at St John's the Methodist Chapel there, on the corner of St Johns Hill Road and St Johns Road, was also turned into a garage – now the site of Phipps Motors.

This photograph shows a group of children setting off on the annual summer outing from the St Johns chapel – either to The Pantiles (further down St Johns Road), or up the hill to The Hermitage.

RAILWAY MANIA THAT COULD HAVE HAMPERED RATHER THAN HELPED WOKING DEVELOP

In last weeks paper I mentioned Reuben Percy and the building of the Albion Hotel – the first place to be built to the north of the station in what became Woking Town Centre. It seems obvious now that it would be a tremendous success, but things were not so certain almost 160 years ago.



The hotel could easily have become stranded, sandwiched not just between the main railway and the canal, but also between two branch railways – the Egham & Staines Railway (the 1863 plans of which are shown here), and the Staines Wokingham & Woking Junction Railway that had earlier been proposed leaving Woking Junction to the west of the hotel.

The Staines to Wokingham bit of the latter was actually built in 1856, but the Woking Junction section (that would have provided the station for Chobham's hastily renamed Station Road) fortunately never came about. It would have cut through what is now Middle Walk of the Wolsey Place Shopping Centre, split the Peacocks in two, and crossed the canal where the pedestrian bridge by the WWF building is today.

These were not the only railway proposals at that time either, as in 1862 the Great Western Railway had suggested a line from West Drayton to either Chertsey or Woking, with the L&SWR promoting the extension of the Chertsey branch line on to Longcross junction in opposition.

Railway Mania could have ruined rather than help make the new town of Woking.

