

ON THE WAY UP AT LAST

Iain Wakeford 2019

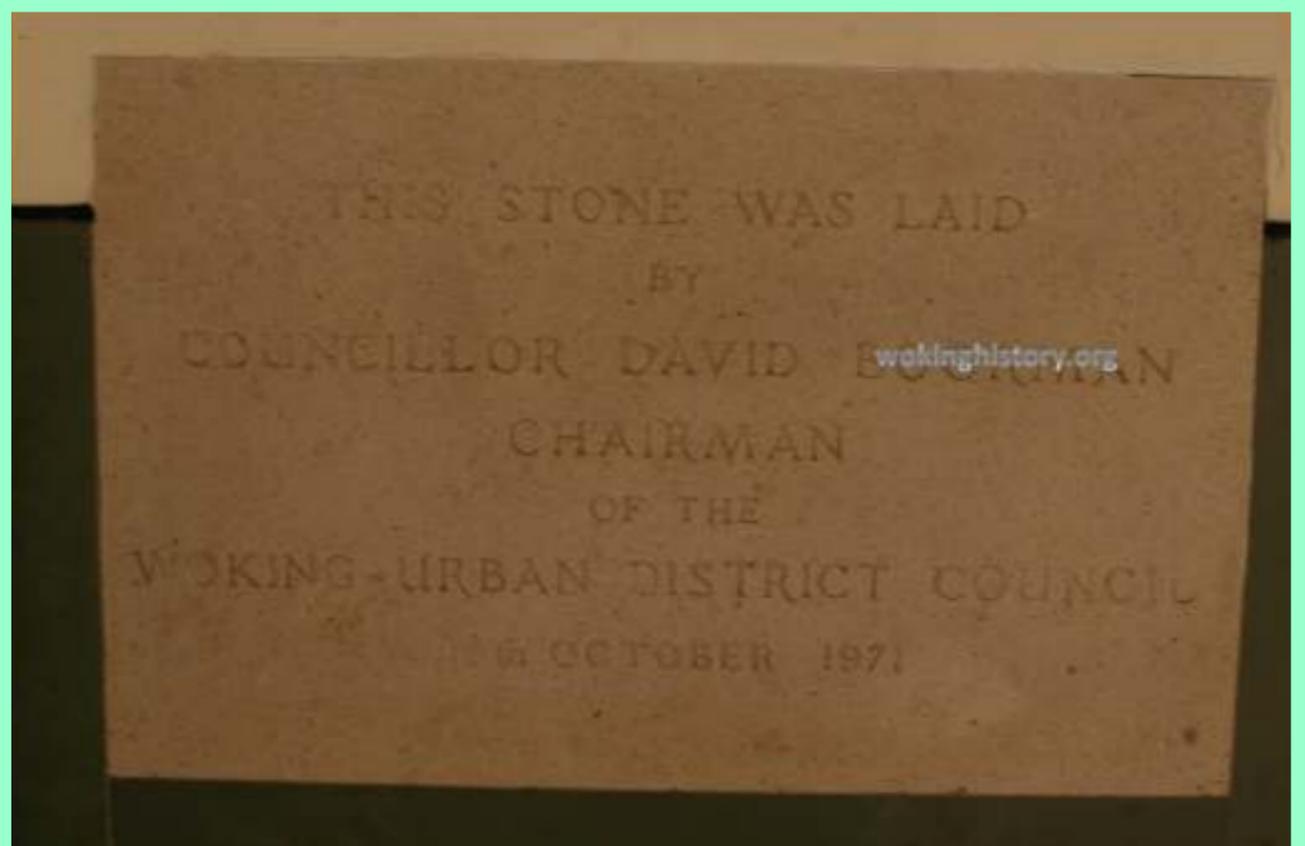
Last week we looked at the 'ground zero' of Woking's new town centre, but this week I want to move on to view the plans for the scheme whose foundation stone was laid on the 18th October 1971.

As indicated before, there had been many different ideas of how the area between Commercial Road and the canal should look (some of which have been published in these articles over the years), but it was not until 1969 that approval was given following a public inquiry, and architects appointed to design the 'final' scheme.

In August 1969 Norwich Union announced that the development would include 235,650 sq. ft. of shopping space, 17,600 sq. ft. residential, 7,200 for a garage and petrol station, 10,000 for a dance hall, 117,200 for car parking and 2,400 sq. ft. for public conveniences', with the formal planning application lodged with the County Council's North-West Division Planning Sub-Committee noting 'a scheme of comprehensive development comprising shops, offices, flats, petrol station, dance hall, multi-storey car park, public conveniences and private accessways'.

During the debate at the County Council to rubber-stamp the development one councillor

Local architects, Scott, Brownrigg & Turner, were employed to design the new centre.



apparently pleaded 'that when the shops in the development were allocated, some thought should be given to the little sweet shop, newsagents, cobblers, ironmongers and jewellers, who cannot afford fantastic rents'- but whether that plea was heeded is a matter of debate.

Some feared that 'many of the fifty-nine smaller units in the new shopping centre may

Work began early in 1971 on the construction of the new shopping centre, although it was not until October that the foundations were 'officially' laid.

remain empty' and the new development would not prove financially viable.

'Experience has proved that the public like to shop in congested conditions in established streets, and are generally reluctant to patronise





Plans and artists' impressions produced to show the shoppers of Woking what to expect when the new town centre was complete

new developments', claimed one local news-magazine. 'Even with stores like Marks and Spencer and Sainsburys' they suggested, the new shopping centre 'will not attract the majority of shoppers who will continue to patronise the Chertsey Road area where Woolworths, Boots and Tescos are situated'.

With hindsight, of course, it is easy to see that they were wrong – even without M&S taking over one of the five 'anchor' stores and Boots jumping ship from Chertsey Road.

Indeed it was probably the 'Boots' unit that was originally earmarked for M&S as one of the architects, Mr John Holmes of Scott, Brownrigg and Tumer noted in November 1969 when he revealed that negotiations with the firm 'to take the tenancy of the largest unit' had fallen through.

The 'shock' news came after a meeting arranged by the Horsell W.I. attended by Mr Holmes and the Clerk of Woking Council. Apparently they 'had got to the stage of designing the layout of the unit to meet Marks and Spencer's requirements, when it was announced that the company would not be taking the unit because it was understood that

Woking did not come within their development programme of the next four years'.

Members of the W.I. and others quickly set up a petition to try to persuade the store to change its mind, but to no avail.

I wouldn't be surprised if my mother was one of the signatories, as every week we would drive over to Guildford so that she could return the item she had purchased the week before – my father happy to maintain his wife's 'retail therapy habit' at virtually no cost, as week after week items were simply exchanged! I am sure my hatred of Guildford (and dislike of M&S) stems from those days.

