

OLD WOKING DEFINED

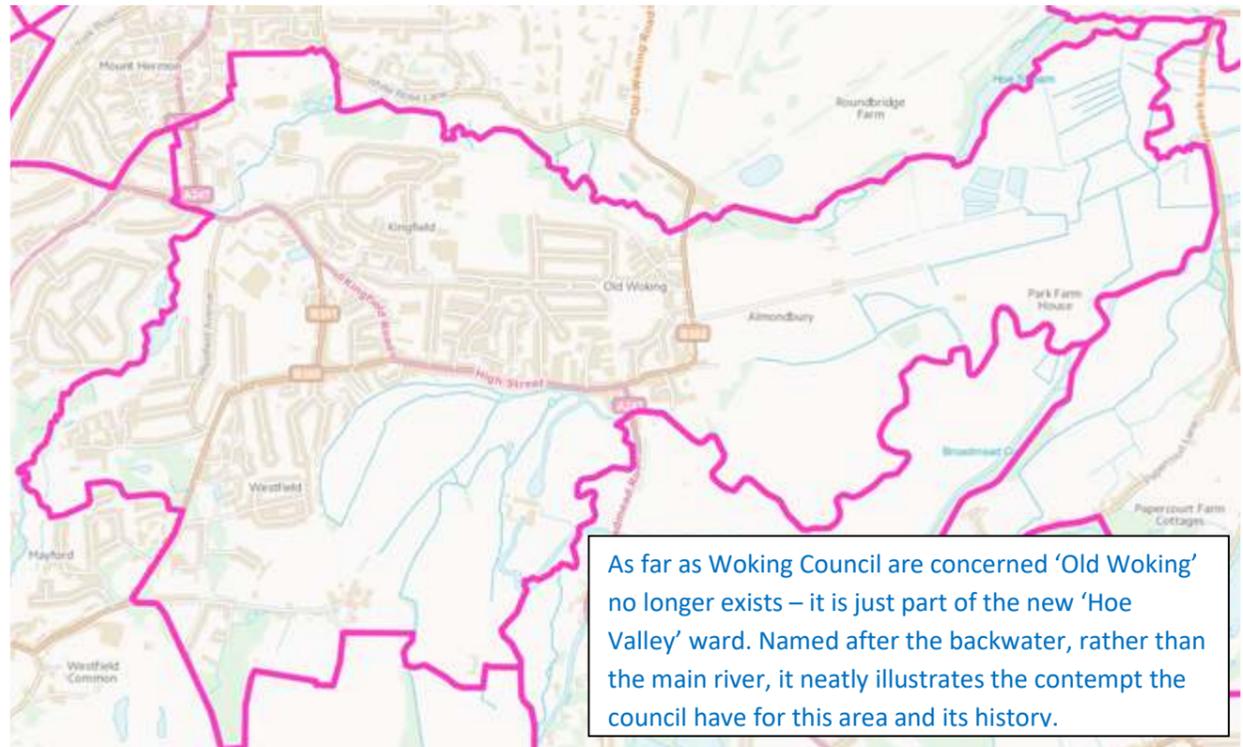
Until the coming of the railway in 1838, and the eventual growth of a new town around the station in the second half of the 19th century, what we now call 'Old Woking' was 'Woking'.

Even in the late 19th century some referred to the new town around the railway as 'Woking Station'¹ and the original town as 'Woking'², but gradually the terms 'Woking Village' or 'Old Woking' came to be used.

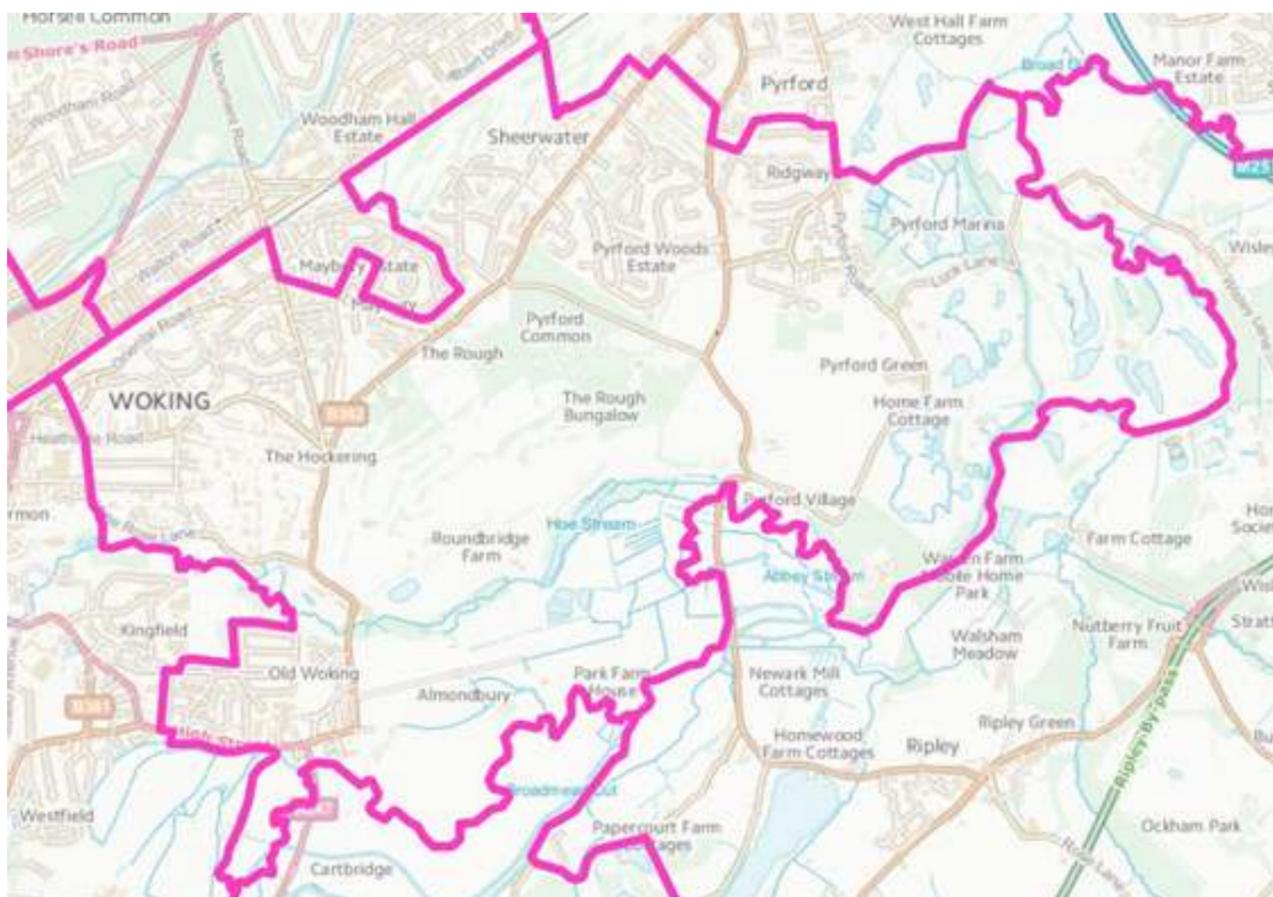
In 1893, when the Woking Local Board was formed, this area was part of the 'Woking Village and Mayford' ward, but in the early 20th century the name 'Old Woking' seems to have been settled upon³, even if the council didn't entirely catch up with the change until the middle of the century (when the Old Woking, Mayford and Sutton Ward was formed⁴).

With the creation of the Borough of Woking in 1976, Old Woking was split away from the others to become a ward of its own, until 2015 when it was once more lumped together with parts of Kingfield and Westfield to become the 'Hoe Valley' ward. If we really must be a 'valley' ward, shouldn't it be called the 'Wey Valley Ward' after the main river that has always proudly defined the districts southern limits, rather than the 'back-water' that only partially defines the new wards northern boundary?

But despite the name, the boundary of the new council ward does at least have some historical logic - although why Woking Park and Claremont Avenue (across the Hoe Stream), are included is a mystery to me.



When it comes to the County Council ward boundaries, all logic disappears. The residents of Kingfield, Westfield, Mayford & Sutton Green all vote for the 'Woking South' County Councillor⁵, but 'Old Woking' (east of the Shackelford Road area), is within the 'Woking South-East' ward, along with Pyrford and much of Maybury⁶. Old Woking's inclusion with its more affluent neighbours to the north and east is already illogical from a political point of view, before you realise that its boundary south of the High Street follows the old mill stream - right through the centre of the new 'Gresham Mill' development. Those to the west of the stream are in 'Woking South', those to the east in 'Woking South-East' – how those who live above the stream know who represents them is anybody's guess!



The council's abolition of the name 'Old Woking' from its lexicon, is just the latest manifestation of a policy to present the borough as a town of the future, rather than one that should be proud of its past. Since the creation of Woking Council in the late 19th century they have gradually been chipping away at our history – demolishing countless historic buildings in the heart of the old village, and sanctioning the building of ugly modern housing estates within its midst.

In the County Council's 'Woking South East' ward, the political allegiance of the voters of Old Woking are swamped by the more affluent districts to the north and east.

¹ 'The designation of the Post Office at Woking Station will, on and from Monday next, be changed to "Woking" and the Sub-office at Woking, will be called "Woking Village"' p5 (West Surrey Times 1883)

² p26 (Bevan 1887), p309 (Jerrold 1901) 'Woking Station – Quite a large modern village has sprung up around Woking Junction, on the L&SWR (24¼), nearly 2m N of the old village'.

³ Even as late as 1905 it was still referred to as 'Woking' (Hope Moncreieff 1905) p42, 'Woking lies stranded 1½ mile south of the Junction, round which a considerable new town has sprung up'.

⁴ After the local elections in May 1955.

⁵ Along with the voters from the 'Mount Hermon' area of town.

⁶ Excluding the Maybury Estate – an odd outlier of 'Woking North' to the south of the railway.

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Heathside (and indeed parts of the ancient Kingfield and Goldsworth tithings) was largely covered by my 2003 book on *Woking Town Centre, An Illustrated History* – which used as its bounds the Victorian & Edwardian ‘Christ Church, St Paul’s and St Mary of Bethany parishes’¹⁹, but the rest of the tithings of Goldsworth (sometimes recorded as ‘Goldings’) and Kingfield (Kenvil), with have to wait for separate reviews, as will Shackleford, Hale End, Mayford, Sutton and Crastock (Bridley) tithings.

In my ‘Woking Town Centre’ book I gave a brief outline of the formation of the soils of the Woking area, mainly concentrating on the Bagshot Sands that contributed to the unique history of that part of our district, but ‘Old Woking’ is different, lying as it does in the valleys of the River Wey and Hoe Bourne. In fact, when you come to look at it, it is probably the geology that best defines the area currently under review.

Between the alluvium of the River Wey and the Hoe Bourne is a low terrace of sand and gravel. On this sits the old town of Woking and its neighbouring districts of Kingfield, Westfield and Shackleford. To the south of the ancient course of the River Wey is Send; to the north and west of the narrow valley of the Hoe Bourne is Hook Heath and Heathside (and the ancient common land where the town centre now lies); whilst to the east the two river valleys merge in a wide belt of alluvial soil around Newark Priory and Pyrford. Only upstream is it harder to fix a geological boundary to our area, as the meadows merge with those of Sutton and Mayford.

It is just above the flood waters of the Wey and Bourne, on this low river terrace, that our story really begins.

F.H. Dines and H.G. Edmunds²⁰ noted that this river terrace, which reaches from Guildford through Send, Woking, Pyrford and Wisley to Byfleet, ‘is about three-quarters of a mile wide on the London Clay outcrop, but rapidly widens to almost double that distance over the outcrop of Bagshot Beds, the loose sand of those beds being more easily eroded, and lending itself to the formation of a wider valley, than the more coherent London Clay.’

They also noted that near Fishers Farm, ‘blue silt was exposed to a depth of 14ft’ (‘which resembles the pyritous sand at the base of the Claygate Beds in Essex’²¹), and ‘everywhere the alluvium appears to consist of sand and loam, gravelly material being absent’²². At Woking Mill four foot of black-sand to clay was found, below sixteen foot of brown sand and gravel, which itself was six foot below the surface of peat-moss²³.

The alluvial soil, particularly to the east of the Old Woking Road (on either side of Carters Lane), is good agricultural land (and should thus **NEVER** be built on²⁴), contrasting with the poor sandy soils of the Bagshot Beds to the north and west of the Hoe Stream. It is the Bagshot Sands that forms the poorer spurs of land – in Old English ‘Ho’ – where the Hoe Bridge Golf Course and the high ground of Hook Heath are today (in ancient times Hook Heath was one of the poorest parts of the area).

Much of the area between the rivers is low-lying, especially around ‘Hipley Bridge’, with the High Street to the west (almost as far as Gloster Road) in places just under 23m above sea-level, and at times subject to flooding from the River Wey via Mill Moor to the south. Further east, along the High Street (from the houses of Moor Hatch), the ground rises gently to almost 2m higher, so that none of the properties in this part of Old Woking are within the flood plain. The same applies in the other direction around Kingfield and Westfield, with only the fringes of the Bourne valley succumbing to floods in recent times.

Even in the low alluvium valley of the Wey there are pockets of slightly higher ground at Woking Palace, the Furzes (known by some as the ‘Hovels’) and Woking Mill – all ancient settlement sites - showing that our forebears knew where the best places to build were (dare I say better than many modern developers or town planners)!

In 2002 the Surrey County Archaeological Unit published a report on Old Woking²⁵ as part of their ‘extensive urban survey of Surrey’ (part of an English Heritage initiative). They noted that ‘Old Woking is now a village, with some of the attributes of a small town, for which there is a small body of archaeological and historical information’, although they went on to note that ‘there is not a great deal of documentary evidence to the village of Old Woking’, and to almost reinforce this then went on to quote just four main sources. They concluded the introductory paragraph on ‘documents’ by noting ‘there is little else of substance published’.

In 2014 the Woking History Society published its long awaited ‘Old Woking – A History Through Documents’, the results of a Surrey Archaeological Society ‘Millennium Project’ first proposed as far back as 1995. They noted that ‘there is certainly no mapping of Woking, and little documentation before the Tudor period’, but praised the work of John Blair on his studies into Early Medieval Surrey, Phillip Arnold for his work on the local parish registers and the ‘magisterial History of Woking’ by Alan Crosby!

There is even a whole website dedicated to the history of Old Woking (www.oldwoking.org²⁶), although as the author of the site acknowledges ‘you will mainly find here details of building built prior to 1700’ – so that a large part of the more recent (and indeed ancient) history of the village is absent from that site.

This series of essays, born out of my research into the history of my house, will (I hope) add to the research mentioned above, with my next article taking a look at the prehistory of this area – concentrating on the ‘core’ of Old Woking to try to understand how, when and why it emerged as the main settlement area.

¹⁹ Roughly the original ‘Goldsworth’, ‘Chertsey Road’ and ‘Maybury and Mount Hermon’ wards of the Woking Local Board (1893) and later Urban District Council.

²⁰ p140 (Dines and Edmunds 1929).

²¹ p88 (Dines and Edmunds 1929)

²² p146 (Dines and Edmunds 1929)

²³ pP257 (Whittaker 1912)

²⁴ It is also firmly in the Green Belt – although sadly such a definition is no longer a guarantee against development. The fields between the Egley Road and the Railway is Green-Belt, but that didn’t stop the council from allowing the building of the Hoe Valley School (education and recreation apparently being allowed), and at Byfleet the council are intent on removing Green Belt status from perfectly good agricultural land.

²⁵ (Robertson March 2002 (revised June 2003))

²⁶ Although that site now appears to have been discontinued.

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