

WOKING YESTERDAY, TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW

A CHAT WITH MR P MACDONALD

Transition from Mud Tracks to Well-ordered Streets

Few people are better acquainted with Woking of to-day and Woking of the pre-urban period than Mr. Peter Macdonald. He is not a native of Woking, but he has resided in the parish for thirty-two years, having been in business for the first part of the time in Goldsworth Road, for which district he was sub-postmaster, and for the last twenty years – ever since the old Local Board was appointed – having carried out the duties of collector of the general district rate. He holds other public appointments, including that of collector of the King's taxes for Woking, Worplesdon, Pirbright, Horsell, Bisley and Chobham, and is registrar of births and deaths, having succeeded to that office on the death of the late Mr. W Ross.



He has thus been brought into contact with more people probably than any other person in the parish, and a more painstaking courteous and obliging official one would not expect to find in a day's march.

With his customary courtesy he readily submitted himself to be interviewed, when our representative called upon him the other day to tap his store of local knowledge. He began with the following interesting comparison:

1893-1913

'When I came to Woking at the beginning of 1882, the place was then really in embryo. The centre of attraction was the old village, but owing to the railway service being gradually improved houses were slowly creeping up in the vicinity of the station, and the necessity for local government became more apparent as years went by, and as the outcome of agitation the Local Board was formed in 1893. At that time the ratable value of the parish was £62,100, and the ratable value upon which the present half-year's rates are based is £175,750. In 1893, there were 2,370 ratable hereditaments in the parish, whilst when the last rate was made, there were over 5,000. At first the district was divided for rating purposes into Woking Station and Maybury Ward, and the whole of the rest of the parish described generally as "the rest of the district." In those days a penny rate produced £270, whereas now it produces £690. The population of the parish at the 1891 census, which was the last census before the advent of the Local Board, was

- I quote from the published records - 9,776, of which 1,770 persons occupied the existing public institutions, so that the net population of the parish was 8,006. Nothing can more strikingly illustrate the growth of the parish than the figures of the succeeding census of 1901, when the population had leapt to 16,222, which is a growth of about 80 per cent. During the following ten years the growth was not quite so marked, but the population of Woking parish was returned at 21,782 at the census of 1911, and as Horsell had in the interim been included in the Woking urban district, and additional population of 3,026 has to be reckoned, so that the total population of the urban district was 24,808.

Quagmires and the 'Christian Horse.'

'When the Local Board was first formed, with Mr. W. H. Corrie at its head, few persons living in Woking to-day, whose residence has been more or less recent, could have any idea of the utter absence of everything that makes for sanitary comfort which existed at that time. There were only the main roads from Guildford to Chertsey through Guildford Road and Commercial Road, through Woking Village to Chertsey, and through Goldsworth to Knaphill. The rest of the roads were simply tracks or partly formed roads where the mud was the most conspicuous element. A strong hand was necessary to deal with such a situation, and the Council quickly set to work by making up streets and roads, under the Private Street Works Act, the Walton Road footpath which made up in the autumn of 1894, being one of the first to receive attention. Walton Road, Church Street and the adjacent streets were quagmires pure and simple. There was a tremendous dip in the centre of Church Street (between Percy Street and Bath Road), in which water collected and children in going to Maybury School had to cling to the wire fence at the side in order to get from one end of the street to the other. It is now possible, thanks to the energy and perseverance of the authority, to walk upon a paved pathway from Woking Station, through St. John's and Knaphill and Brookwood to the boundary of the parish at Pirbright. There remain only two or three roads to be completed, when Woking will be in the position of having all its roads made up in first class order.'

Speaking of the former shocking state of the roads, Mr. Macdonald laughingly recalled his 'Christian horse.' He said he remembered driving down Walton Road where an old inhabitant remarked that 'the horse trod in and out of the mud like a Christian.' He put his feet down as far as they would go, and then carefully lifted them up again and thus cautiously proceeded on his journey.

Ratepayers and Rates.

'What effect has the transition to modern civilisation had upon the rates?' asked the interviewer.

'The half-yearly rates in 1894 started at a modest figure of 1s. in the £ for Station Ward and 7d. in the £ for the rest of the district, with a highway rate of 5d. in the £ over the whole district. As the necessity for sewers and lighting arose the rates increased, and considerable opposition was experienced in those early days, especially when in the course of a few years the urban rate rose to 2s. 6d. and the highway rate to 1s. 1d. in the £ for the half-year. Notwithstanding the greater claims arising out of the great increase of population, the Council's rate has been gradually diminishing from 2s. 6d. in the £ per half-year to its present level of 1s. 10d., which has been maintained for the past six half-years, and is considered to be the low water mark, comparing most favourably with the rates of the surrounding urban districts. Among the ratepayers, too, a new feeling has been created by the improvements which are noticeable on every hand. Whereas people were formerly in the dark as to the intentions of the authority, and viewed with suspicion every attempt to levy rates for new expenses, there is now a different feeling, and although there is a natural reluctance to pay rates, which I suppose, everywhere exists, the sense of efficiency in public health matters, and the knowledge that the authority works as a body for the general welfare of the ratepayers has engendered a feeling of confidence, and people are more willing to pay the price for civilised comforts such as are enjoyed in roads, lighting, sewers and sanitary cleanliness.'

'As a rate collector, I suppose you could tell a few good stories?'

'Well yes, I probably could if I were to search my memory. It was comical, for example, to hear the objections in the remoter parts of the district in former days. One ratepayer strongly objected to pay a lighting rate because he said, if people wanted to go out in the dark they should take a lantern, as he did. Another person objected strongly to the rate for education, although that did not form part of the general district rate. He considered that the only use for Board Schools was "to teach children to kick tin cans about."

Referring to vital statistics, Mr. Macdonald said : 'It is rather remarkable that although there has been a decided diminution in the birth rate, in common with the rest of the country, the published records show that the births registered in Woking are now practically double what they were 20 years ago. Owing to the improved conditions of sanitary methods generally the death rate has dropped considerably, and whilst the population has increased by 100 per cent, the actual number of deaths is now no greater than it was formerly – a fact which speaks very highly for the general efficiency of the sanitary and public health departments of the Council.'

Electric Light – and Candles!

Mr. Macdonald passed on to refer to public lighting, and said it must be about 20 years ago when the first instalment of public street lighting took place. The electric light at that time was being manufactured by Messrs.

New and Mayne, who established their works upon the site of the present Electric Supply Company's buildings, and had an office in Walton Road. The first portion of the district to be lighted was along the Maybury Road and towards Maybury Hill with a double lamp in front of Messrs. Ashby's Bank and one at the junction of Guildford Road with Goldsworth Road and High Street, near the Railway Arch.

'The anticipated pleasure of seeing streets lit by electric current had been so long postponed,' said Mr. Macdonald, 'that little interest was excited, but I well remember that about 8 o'clock upon the first evening the "usual" happened, and for a quarter of an hour a small crowd gathered here and there to watch the light come up again. In those days private consumers always had to keep a store of candles on hand, because it was a frequent occurrence for the current to fail. We have made great advances since those days.'

A Lost Opportunity.

Describing the Station District thirty years ago, Mr. Macdonald said: 'When I first came to Woking, what is named Maybury Road was simply a track across the common from the railway station to Monument Arch. There were very few houses in the immediate neighbourhood of the station, and the shopping centre was practically confined to the section of the High Street between Chapel Street and the Albion Hotel, where a few small cottages existed, which at a later date had shop fronts put to them. The railway company lost a splendid opportunity, for at that time it would have been possible to have purchased the cottages for a comparatively small amount, and the acquisition of such a site would have afforded them ample accommodation for all purposes on the north side of the line, whereas at present the congested traffic is a matter of great inconvenience and constant complaint without any apparent means of remedying it. The late Mr. H. W. Gloster, who was a sane and far-seeing tradesman, was always of the opinion that Commercial Road should have been selected as the trading centre of the town.

'Even twenty years ago nearly the whole of the Mount Hermon district was what was known as Oaks Farm, which was farmed by Mr. N. E. Brothers. When the Local Board came into being, the only houses between the south side of the station and Elm Bridges were a few in the first section of Mount Hermon Road – the section which is now intersected by a pathway leading from Tin Bridges to Guildford Road. The whole of York Road and the adjacent roads, with all the Hockering Estate, have been the development of the past few years. Chertsey Road was still coming into being, and it seems hardly credible that only twenty-five years ago the site of the most important business premises of that road was occupied by tent dwellers and utilised for roundabouts and Aunt Sallies.'

The mention of this triangular piece of ground recalled to mind the late Mr. George Rastrick, whose determination to sell no land for building purposes greatly retarded the development of Woking in the immediate vicinity of the Station. He did, however, sell the site upon which Ashby's Bank – now Barclay's Bank – stands, but was so angered to find that the purchaser had made a market out of his price within a few days, that he determined to sell no more land while he lived. And, added Mr. Macdonald, he kept his word.

Mr. Rastrick died in 1905, and in July of that year one of the most remarkable sales of property ever held in Woking took place, no less than £16,480 being realised by Mr. Rastrick's property in ninety minutes. Messrs. Alex. Turner and Co. were the auctioneers. The triangular piece of land, on part of which the new technical institute is now being erected was bought by Mr. W. C. Slocock for £3,000, but the largest amount realised by a single lot was £3,100, which was given for a piece of land on the south side of the Station.

Discussing the value of land, Mr. Macdonald quoted as probably the most remarkable price ever given for land at Woking the site of Mr. W. R. Skeet's former shop at the corner of High Street and Church Path. That was purchased for a sum of £3, 300 by the London County and Westminster Banking Company, who have erected a palatial bank. Woking has three other banks, viz Barclay's (formerly Ashby's, situate opposite the station, but which formerly occupied premises in Commercial Road now absorbed by Messrs. Gammon's drapery establishment), the Capital and Counties, and the London and South-Western banks.

Two Striking Personalities.

In the opinion of Mr. Macdonald, two of the most important men who were associated with Woking during the period under review were Mr. L. J. Plymen who died in February 1901 and Mr. H. W. Gloster, founder of the firm of Gloster and Sons, who died in 1908. To them were accorded the most imposing funerals which were ever seen in the parish. Church Street was lined by rows of children from the schools when the funeral took place of Mr Plymen, who was the first headmaster of Maybury School, which was the first Board School in the district. He was a wonderful man and a man of great energy. He came from Ripley and took over the management of the school and nursed it in a most remarkable way. Mr. Plymen was idolised by the children and gave them a thorough ground work not only in ordinary scholastic training, but also in moral training. Mr. Gloster was one of the pioneers of modern trading in the place, and established himself with such marked success that before his death he had enjoyed every honour that the parish could confer upon him. At his funeral every section of society was represented.

The Future – a Second Croydon.

Conversation then took another turn, and Mr. Macdonald was asked his views as to the future of Woking. Did he share the sanguine expectation of Mr. Midgley Taylor, who estimated that in thirty years' time the population would be upwards of 60,000?

Mr. Macdonald ventured upon no estimate, but he is distinctly an optimist so far as Woking's future is concerned.

'My own view,' he said, 'is that Woking is not played out or likely to be. Fine air, a splendid train service with easy accessibility to London, and the fact that we have three eighteen-hole golf courses in the parish, to say nothing of several others in the immediate vicinity, all make for the continual growth of Woking as a residential centre. At the present time the lettings of houses are very good. We have a few large houses which are empty, but, generally speaking, our empties are not a considerable item, and certainly not so extensive as in some neighbouring districts. The covering of Hook Heath with stately mansions, and the marvellous development by Mr. W. G. Tarrant, of the Hockering and Clear Down estates are proofs of the desirability of Woking as a residential centre, and that it is likely to go ahead in future. As to the smaller class of houses there are hardly any empty, and with the growth of the electrical works and the increasing necessity for industrial occupation I feel sure that we shall have in the immediate future a much larger demand for properties of this class. There are yet many sites capable of development, and I see no reason why the town should not be in the course of a very few years, as has been frequently prognosticated, a second Croydon. One of the factors which will conduce to the future development of Woking will, I think, be the electrification of the railway line and the probable extension of the station. Generally speaking, I think, there is an alert optimistic view held in regard to Woking's future, and although there has undoubtedly been a set-back, I am convinced that we are on the way now to a decided improvement on all sides.'

Before parting Mr. Macdonald informed our representative that he assisted at the birth of the 'Woking News' which was first published by Mr. Moore at the present offices in Chertsey Road, and was a development of a monthly news magazine, which had a gratuitous circulation of 1,000 copies. Mr. Macdonald was himself responsible for the editorials of the first few issues. The 'News' afterwards passed into the hands of its present proprietors, who had already acquired the 'Woking Mail' from Messrs. Chandler and Evans, and by them the two papers were merged, the title being as now 'The Woking News and Mail.'