

**An Open Meeting on Wednesday March 15<sup>th</sup> 2016**  
**Late Victorian Wokingham**  
**A presentation by members of a Local Research Group**

Following the successful publication by the Wokingham Society of *Late Victorian Wokingham* by a local research group, the Society had invited them to make a presentation at the March Open Meeting, and an audience of over 100 gathered in the Main Hall of Wokingham Town Hall to listen to the presentation, led by the book's editor Paul King and three of his fellow researchers.

Paul began by explaining how the project had started in 2008 when a group of people with a mutual interest in local history came together to choose a subject local to Wokingham, which could be undertaken by a group and which had not been researched by anyone else. Their inspiration in selecting a topic had been the booklet *An Account of Early Victorian Wokingham Town and Parish*, which had analysed the 1851 census and described Wokingham as it had been at that time.

The project team decided that they would take the 1901 census and do a similar exercise, but predominantly undertaking a comparison between Wokingham in 1851 and in 1901. They had supplemented their research by accessing local newspapers, trade directories and other records held at the Berkshire Office. There had been many changes in the 50 years since 1851, not least in the occupations and lifestyles of the residents. In 1901 there were fewer craftsmen, but there were far more domestic servants. There were more retired people and people living on their own means with many households employing 2-3 servants and a few employing as many as ten. One of the main occupations referred to in the 1851 census had been boot and shoe making, but by the time of the 1901 census it had disappeared altogether. Agricultural employment had peaked in the 1870s and by 1901 far fewer people were working on the land.

Paul said that the group had discovered that the size of families had increased considerably by 1901 with some having up to ten family members. It was noted that not many children were dying in childhood and that there were not as many large age gaps in families as there had been in 1851, seemingly confirming the decline of the death rate in infants and children. In general Wokingham Parish had become far more prosperous and there was far greater migration into and out of the parish.

Having set the scene, Paul handed over to Peter Dawe to talk about their findings in their research into Transport and Communications. Peter traced the growth of the roads and railways, starting with the decline in the importance of the Windsor Forest Turnpike, one relic of which is the milestone outside the Post Office in Broad Street, which sadly is in urgent need of restoration. Different railway companies had expanded and diversified and presented a major challenge to the coach service, which by 1901 had ceased to operate altogether. Goods and passengers were transported much more quickly and conveniently and London became readily accessible. A telegraph service had been introduced from East to West and the need to co-ordinate the time of clocks was recognized so that London time

became railway time. The Windsor Forest Turnpike Company became bankrupt in 1895 and the dominance of the railway was complete. Despite the failure of the plan to build a line from Wokingham to Basingstoke, a venture thwarted by vested interests.

By 1895 20 trains a day passed each way through Wokingham, an increase from the 4 passenger trains a day which had been the norm until the 1870s. Only the privileged few had been able to afford the cost of travelling by train, but by 1901 the cost of train travel had remained static and far more people could make use of the service. However, local carriers still plied their trade on the roads, carrying coal and other vital supplies. In fact most goods in the area were still transported by horse-drawn carts and the 1901 census showed that of the 115 people employed in transport and communications, 39 were employed on road transport and 53 on the railway.

Peter concluded by saying that major house building had started in the south of the parish and the town was undergoing major changes thanks to the improvements in communications and transport, but the first local newspaper did not appear until 1903.

The next speaker was Linda Lowe who provided a fascinating insight into the lives of the poor. She began by referring to 'the tramps' lodging house' in Down Street, now the jeweller's shop *Kaanaanmaa* in what has become Denmark Street. She then provided fascinating information about the first Union Workhouse in Wokingham, founded in 1849 in Barkham Road, the building now known as the Wokingham Hospital. The workhouse was home to 200 people and it was controlled by a Board of Governors consisting of the good and the grand of the parish. Men and women were kept separately and all inmates had to work: if they failed to do so they were punished. Medical treatment was provided and dietary charts were drawn up, containing 7 types of diets meeting what were considered to be individual needs, depending on age, sex and disabilities. In 1901 a manual of workhouse cookery was produced containing the instruction that all food should be boiled and not roasted: the emphasis was on economy. The 1901 census recorded that there were 111 residents in the workhouse, 72 male and 39 female and it was noted that families had to contribute to their upkeep.

It was also noted that in the parish in general 79% of men and 29% of women over the age of ten were in employment and relatively few children under the age of 10 were employed, a major change from the 1851 census. Not surprisingly most families lived in rented accommodation, but the setting up of building societies and the beginning of the mass production of furniture led to major changes in the structure of society in Wokingham.

That last point was taken up and developed by the final speaker, Julia McLaren, who concentrated on the lifestyles of the growing middle classes and the nouveau riche. She pointed out that the middle class consisted mainly of professional people like solicitors or bankers, businessmen and retailers. In 1851 Rose Street and Peach Street were the most popular streets in which to live, but by 1901 Broad Street had become more popular and villas and family houses were being built in the outlying areas of the parish. Prosperous businessmen and men and women with private means bought existing large houses and enlarged them or had properties built to their own specifications and designs, often knocking down established properties in the process. The vigorous middle classes were held

together by the churches which by 1901 consisted of all the major denominations and a number of influential and affluent families led the way in defining the religious and social life of the town. Houses like *the Elms* and *Glebelands* became the centre of fashionable society and their owners also became involved in the political and charitable life of the parish.

By 1901 Wokingham had in fact been transformed in so many ways. 4 wells had been provided and water was piped directly to houses. Many roads were dug up to provide sewers, and sanitation had improved dramatically. Law and order were fully established. No murders or bank robberies were reported and there were strict punishments for the infringement of local bylaws such as riding a bicycle on the pavement, which carried a fine of 5 shillings or a week in prison. Children were expected to attend school and those who did not do so were punished.

At that point Paul King briefly rounded off the presentation by expressing his thanks to the Society for not only publishing the book, but giving him and his fellow contributors the opportunity of sharing their research. After questions had been answered, Peter Must thanked all the speakers for providing the audience with so many fascinating details about life in Wokingham over 100 years ago, and he pointed out that the book itself contained a wealth of additional factual interpretation and detailed analysis supporting and complementing the information presented at the meeting.. The loud applause following his comments left the speakers in no doubt that their presentation had been extremely successful and animated conversations continued over refreshments.