

Wokingham Remembers

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REVIEW

The past which has shaped our present...

This week Mike Churcher reviews the Wokingham Remembers articles of the past four months and discusses some of the factors which contributed to the making of Wokingham and its environment.



OVER the past months the Wokingham Remembers page has been providing an early picture of how a small market town and a few villages on the edge of a forest is today ranked as one of the country's leading communities.

Education, religion, industry, transport, social structures, national politics and local government are all important pieces in building the great Wokingham jigsaw. Here now is a summary of our contributions to date and a few ideas on the next round of articles.

Education, Education, Education

Today's Wokingham is renowned as one of the country's centres of excellence for education; this is partly due to strong school performance and the motivated parents who live in one of the most highly educated communities in the UK.

If we look into the history of Wokingham's schools we can see how education is woven into its DNA. Prior to the Great War, Wokingham was surrounded by manor houses and members of the landed gentry who wanted to be close to the levers of power; i.e. the royal households of Windsor.

In turn these upper echelons possessed a serious sense of duty and a responsibility to ensure their community received at least a basic education. Wokingham also had a powerful professional class, a strong church community (including the non-conformists) and together they shared a strong belief in the importance of teaching.

The result was with the skills, the motivation and the finance available, there developed a culture of education which still holds strong to this day.

Wokingham transport

Transport is probably the single most important factor in Wokingham's development, in both its rail and road systems.

Future articles will look at the introduction of the railways and the

major impact they had on the town and we have already made a start with the road system by mapping out the course of the old Forest Road.

Whilst the building of the M4 had a major influence on the introduction of the high tech businesses which now surround Wokingham, it is the A329M which in 1975 cut off the Forest Road and its natural connections between Emmbrook and the villages of Hurst and Binfield. The love and hate relationship with our rail and roads continue to this day!

Wokingham's military heritage

As 2015 is the bi-centenary of the Battle of Waterloo, there are a number of articles commemorating this world changing event. The area has always been noted for its contribution to the nation's military capability, with Arborfield's REME, RFA and Remount connections and the Sandhurst and Wellington Colleges all situated very nearby.

Even the Duke of Wellington took to living in Stratfield Saye which today is only half an hour away from Wokingham's town centre.

Wokingham's benefactor culture

The area around Wokingham was surrounded by many remarkable individuals and they were instrumental in building the much needed infrastructure which underpinned the establishment of a strong community.

We will later be telling the story of the Walter family and their contributions to the building of Wokingham and April's edition told the story of the much loved Arthur Hill, the 6th Marquess of Downshire.

Although one of Britain's wealthiest landowners, Arthur Hill doubled as the chief of the local Fire Brigade and was a major financial contributor to this part of Wokingham's public services. Later articles will illustrate the demise of these great manors and their incumbent social system and the rise of its replacement:



Wokingham Railway Station viewed from Wellington Road looking towards St Pauls Church.

local government.

Wokingham's wild side

Before we believe too much in the idea that Wokingham's development was a solidly sedate experience, May's article told the story of the rioting in the town centre during the time of the 1857 General Election.

Such events were a common sight in the town and this short and bloody battle between the Whigs and the Tories also highlighted the Bush and Rose hotels in Market Place as the headquarters of these two feral groups.

The story was also able to reflect upon the national scene and the corrupt nature of general elections before the introduction of the private ballot. Future articles will include further tales of anarchy and revelry in this old market town.

Wokingham at War

There are watershed moments in history which mark the moment of great change in a society and the Great War of 1914-1918 is one such time. Therefore a number of centenaries between 2014 and 2018 will commemorate the great losses of war which scarred the people of Wokingham for the rest of the 20th century.

May's edition followed the story of two brothers from Langborough Road in Wokingham town and one of our

historians, Sarah Huxford also took us on a journey to the old battlefields in search of their graves. This story reflects only a microcosm of the losses around the county of Berkshire, but affirms the importance of the wars in the development of our local character.

Wokingham and the Royal Forest

Looking at today's community, it is difficult to visualise just how rural the area once was and in part explains the sometimes fragile relationship between the old and new Wokingham; few areas in the UK have witnessed such extraordinary growth and change in the profile of its population.

Although Wokingham's history has always been intertwined with the surrounding villages by providing a market place for agricultural and commercial produce, it was also a Forest Town. The term 'forest' did not mean a cluster of trees, but a system of laws laid down by royalty for the protection of their hunting grounds.

These onerous rules restricted local people from using large parts of the land for sustenance and in part led to the rise of local highwaymen and general lawlessness. As a result, the subsequent Black Act of 1723 came down heavily on these 'Wokingham Blacks' and resulted in either their transportation or execution.

The story is told in June's edition which also commemorated the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta, signed at nearby Runnymede in 1215.

Shining a light on Wokingham's 'Dark Ages'

To bring us up to date the August articles are focused on the kids who are now entering into their summer holidays. What better way to use this month's editions than to tell the stories of the Romans, the Celts and the Saxons influence on the area before Wokingham was even a twinkle in old Wocca's eye?

David Nash Ford provides a set of articles and puzzles which makes history fun for the young and no doubt will also catch the interest of the parents who will be looking over their child's shoulder.

Here's to the next round of articles! Thanks go out to our contributors: Steve Bacon, Jim Bell, David Nash Ford, Sarah Huxford, Roger Long, Trevor Ottlewski and Peter Shilham for all their continuing contributions. All this work is provided by our local historians free of charge and can be found on the front page of the Wokingham Remembers website www.wokinghamremembers.com

Thanks also to Mark Ashwell at TradeMark for supporting the paper's commitment to this project.

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