

From Hetfelle to Hatfield - over 1000 years of history

HATFIELD LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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HATFIELD TOWN CENTRE: THE FIRST 30 YEARS

A recent display of local newspaper reports at Mill Green Museum has provided a glimpse of Hatfield and its town centre from 1960. Here are some snippets:



“Sunshine and summer frocks put Hatfield’s new town centre in its most smiling mood when it was ceremonially declared open on 28th May, and the market moved from its temporary home on the Gracemead car park. The 30 feet wide “Water Mirror” along the south and east sides will never become smelly as it will be constantly circulated through a pump. This waterway will undoubtedly prove to be a great attraction and put Hatfield in a unique position compared to other New Towns.” Another 1960 report headlined Cafe Society, noted: *“Hatfield, with its population of 18,000 people has 20 cafes – twice as many as neighbouring WGC with its 30,000 population...”* And that, *“...Hatfield firms are clamouring for labour, so much so that the local Labour Exchange is sending lists of vacancies to London. Only a dozen single women and local men are at present unemployed and most of these are elderly...”*

Life was certainly rosy in the Hatfield of 50 years ago. And the shopping experience improved still further in the autumn of 1972 when the giant ‘larger than life’ Woolco department store opened in the town centre. And in 1982 the store issued a newspaper to celebrate its 10th anniversary which - apart from announcing ten days worth of special offers - included a host of special events, displays and visits by celebrities such as boxer Henry Cooper, Ruth Madoc from TVs Hi-Di-Hi, pop group Musical Youth and even Noddy’s legendary little car made an appearance. There were free rides on a vintage bus, and a miniature rifle range under the supervision of the Royal Anglian Regiment. Much more was laid

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on too. The Woolco 'paper stated that more than 300 people worked at their Hatfield store, but only a portion of those were *'out on that massive shop floor'*; the rest being hidden from view in the background among the dozens of stock rooms, corridors, offices and loading bay – all places teeming with activity.

In 1982 there were 96 shops and offices in Hatfield town centre plus 1,740 car parking spaces - including a total of 492 at Woolco itself. The place was positively thriving. But a salutary wake-up call for local shopping arrived just 12 months later as its future was considered by Welwyn Hatfield Council. In October 1983 they received a consultants study report of the town centre which made some stark observations about the apparent neglect of the place; its wasted spaces, and the impending threat of out of town hypermarkets. Whilst, at the time, a modest sized Tesco store was already operating in the town centre (the current Boots site), the Council were proposing to create a large 18,000 sq ft supermarket in the market place; a move that would see the market move to White Lion Square – which the consultants described as, *"a rather bleak place that would benefit by the introduction of more activity. In principle, moving the (existing) market there will do much to improve its liveliness..."*

They also suggested it would help improve the already circular pedestrian shopping pattern which could follow the route: Woolco – Library – New supermarket (in Market Place) – Arcade – New market place in White Lion Square – Avenue of shops & banks - Woolco.

In about 1984 it was likely that Tesco were offered the chance to create a new superstore in the existing market place, but by then they may well have been making plans to build a new giant store on the former Jack Oldings site. In any event, no superstore was built in the town centre and Woolco's closed in late 1985. Gateway took over the site in early 1986 but then closed in 1989 when ASDA took over.

Further competition for the town centre came with the opening of Tesco's Oldings Corner superstore in Feb 1988 (necessitating the closure of their town centre store), and the opening of the large shopping malls at WGC's Howard Centre in 1990 and The Galleria in 1991. Another blow came shortly after with the announcement that Hatfield's main employer - the aircraft manufacturer BAe - were to close down. And the rest, they say, is history!

REMOVAL OF GRAVES FROM PARK STREET CHAPEL

By Susan Hall of HALS (abridged)

On the 19 November 1965 the following article appeared in the Hatfield Herald:

"Bulldozers and mechanical excavators have moved in to change the scene in Park Street, Hatfield. The little settlement which has been the home of a couple of dozen Hatfield residents for several hundred years, is being turned into a heap of rubble and mud. But this is all in the interests of progress, and soon there will be a street of modern three storey houses and a pleasant residential scene to take its place.

All except three of the residents have now moved out of Chapmans Yard, and the last, Miss Mary Stokes and her sister and sister-in-law, will be moving into a far more modern home at 39 The Pastures. But there are other 'removals' taking place in Chapmans yard; the tiny graveyard at the rear, which once belonged to Park Street chapel (no longer standing) is being dug up, and the graves and contents are to be moved on to a mass grave right at the rear, against the wall. Some of them have been at rest for over a hundred years, and even this present move will be their last, for they are to be put into boxes and carried off to the premises of Messrs. Burgess, the Hatfield undertakers, who will care for them until the

ceremony of reinterment can be arranged in the near future.

The largest monument in the little graveyard is that which was erected by the congregation of the tiny Park Street chapel in loving memory of their pastor, Reverend John Cox Bird, who died at the age of 35 years, and was buried in June, 1879. In the same tomb lies his wife Jane who outlived him by a number of years.

On Wednesday morning a "Times-Herald" reporter stood by as workmen dug up the first coffin, from the grave of a Mr William Church who died on 28 July 1893.

Altogether 127 people were buried in the graveyard, but only 14 of the graves are marked, so that some of the remains may never be found, although workmen and officials will be taking every care to see that as many as possible are removed to the larger grave."

In the Hatfield Herald of 17 December 1965 on page 27, the following article appeared:

A most unusual tale ended quietly on Friday morning, when the final ceremony of re-interment was held in the little Union Chapel graveyard, in Hatfield's Park Street.

The Rev. D. E. Phipps-Jones conducted the service, as the row of coffins containing the remains of 34 Hatfield people were re-intered in a large communal grave at the rear end of the grave yard. The story began when it was found that the tiny burial ground was in the way of a redevelopment scheme replacing the old cottages in Chapmans Yard.

It was announced that the graves, some of which had been there for 100 years, would have to be dug up to make way for foundations, drainage, etc.

Among those buried there were members of the Church family, Hatfield residents for over 100 years and descendants of a prominent Hatfield coachman.

Three of the family were at the ceremony on Friday morning, and officiating as funeral director was Mr Burgess of Batterdale, who was re-intering eight members of his own family."

In the Gerish collection, Box 36, at Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, there is a transcription of the monumental inscriptions of the headstones of the Park Street Chapel, which in 1909, lists 44 people who were members of the following families :

Bird, Brewster, Burgess, Bennett, Church, Cox, Ellis, Elliot, Gregory, Holland, Holmes, King, Notcutt, Parry, Payne, Powell, Raban, Saunders, Valentine, Walby and Wickes.

Chapmans Yard and the graveyard are now a residential area of Hatfield, the road is called Park Close and the gravestones are still against the wall at the back of the estate, as you can see from the last few photos.



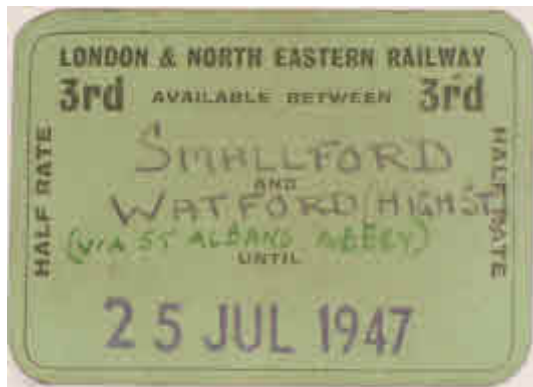
The Park Street Chapel graveyard in 1965



Relatives and an official at the re-interment

SMALLFORD STATION PROJECT UPDATE

In January, English Heritage awarded a substantial grant to help a community group record the history of Smallford railway station. Happily for researchers, plenty of evidence still remains of it on the former 6 mile branch line (now the Alban Way footpath) which ran from Hatfield Station to the Abbey terminal in St. Albans. Although the line closed to passengers in 1951 - and freight by the early 1960s - the main Smallford station ticket office, platform and



Both sides of the quarterly 3rd Class season ticket that schoolboy Basil Stoker used in 1947



Station master's house still exist, and in remarkably good repair. Over the years, the stations' premises have been used for coal storage, as a scrap metal merchants and currently as a large scaffolding store for a building company.

There are about 20 active enthusiasts trying to unearth as much of Smallford Station's history as the twelve month project will allow. There have been visits to the York Railway museum and the archives at Kew. Also people who have had some association with the former branch line have been sought and interviewed in an effort to record as much of the anecdotal history of this little railway as is possible. And it is through some of those interviews that a wider local history surfaces. For example, one chap - Lew Badham - used to catch the train at Smallford to travel to work at De Havillands during WW2 and alight at the then newly built platform Lemsford Road Halt in 1942. He also happened to mention that, as a young boy in the early 1930s, he would stay at his Nan's house next to Smallford Station. On one occasion he and his pals walked over to watch the popular, but now little known, greyhound racing at the oval track by Popes farm on the De Havilland airfield. As they watched one particular race, the mechanical 'hare' broke free from its cable and shot off over the track and across the St. Albans Road; still eagerly pursued by the six greyhounds!

Another interviewee, Basil Stoker, lived in Colney Heath. During the mid 1940s, he used to catch the train at Smallford to the Abbey Station in St. Albans, where he would walk across the platform to catch another train to Watford where he attended the Technical School.

Basil also donated the perfectly preserved quarterly season ticket (above) to the research group who will later decide which museum to donate it to.

If any HLHS members have any recollections of this old branch line - or know of any others who have - then please get in touch. An exhibition is currently being planned for December.



Smallford Station c 1972
The track was lifted in 1970



Humped-back bridge over branch line at Birchwood
Photo courtesy David Dickenson