

# The Death of a Building

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IN OCTOBER, 1972, a minor timber-framed building in the centre of Reigate was demolished. The demolition was preceded by a day of protests and marches in the town and was followed by acrimonious words in the Council chamber. But nothing changed. No heads rolled, there were no stirrings in the ballot box and a new building has just risen in its place which contributes as little to the townscape of Reigate as do others built in the town centre in the last ten years or so.

The controversy that was sparked off by the destruction of the building, which was known as the Old Wheel, was, in one sense, encouraging. It did at least demonstrate that there were people in the borough who cared about such things. There is, however, a danger that the real lesson is being missed. The degrading and eventual destruction of the Old Wheel coupled with the promises that were made about the building that is now replacing it, had almost classical aspects. The story that can be traced from the columns of the *Surrey Mirror* was a repetition of things that have happened time and time again up and down the country and are likely to go on happening.

The Old Wheel, like most old buildings, had undergone several alterations and adaptations in its three or four hundred year life. The earlier parts of it had been built when Reigate was a thriving market town with a flourishing oatmeal milling industry. Barn-like storage buildings were then needed in the centre of the town and the Old Wheel was originally one of them. Additions were made and we know that in the closing decades of the 18th century it was used as a malthouse — a place for storing barley — by the Neale family, local brewers. In the 19th century demand for accommodation grew and demand for grain storage fell, so the buildings were divided into cottages. In 1926 they were recombined and the Old Wheel resulted — a pleasant, unpretentious, not to say cosy, restaurant.

Before the second World War a bloodless building with sham timber framing was erected on its western

side, where a house had stood in the 18th century—the “message” to which the malthouse had been a pendant in 1785. After the war the erection of a poorly-detailed office block, badly out of scale, was permitted immediately to the east. The rot had set in and the writing was on the wall. The life of the Old Wheel as a restaurant ended in 1970 when the proprietrix died after a road accident. The property was put up for sale and rumours circulated regarding its future. In July, 1971, the *Surrey Mirror* published the fears of Mr. Eric Heatt, Secretary of the Reigate Society, that the property would be replaced by offices. This brought a rejoinder from Vernon Smith and Co., local estate agents, that the “prospective purchasers” had at no time “proposed . . . to demolish the Old Wheel.”

In March, 1972, however, the S.E. Divisional Planning Committee of the Surrey County Council gave permission for the rebuilding of the rear part of the premises and the “renovation” of the front. This was heralded at the time as “a great victory” and presumably the decision was based on the misguided view that what can’t easily be seen from the street is of no interest or importance. In fact, the wing that was demolished was the oldest part of the property and the key both to the structure and to the history of the building.

Following the demolition of the rear wing, the rest of the building was left gaping open to the weather for six months. It was hardly surprising that eventually the claim was successfully made that the remainder of the building was in poor shape and could not be preserved. The decision to accept this claim was afforded the minimum publicity despite the well-known public interest in the building. When the news eventually broke, public reaction was immediate and vociferous but ineffective. We have, as a result, lost the last substantial link with Reigate’s past as a rural milling and brewing centre where storage buildings on the agricultural pattern were a feature of the street scene. One or two smaller fragments remain, and the Old Town Hall still stands as a monument to

the town's marketing past, but the Old Wheel was the last obvious agrarian link.

The manner of its passing was despicable. Early rumours, a pat denial, followed eventually by destructive nibbling, and inadequate provision for what remained, preceded a final decision taken with minimum publicity. All this is typical of the methods by which historically and archaeologically interesting buildings are removed from our towns and countryside. And what has replaced the Old Wheel? The citizens of Reigate have been offered the insult of a "carefully built" pastiche. In place of a building of genuine historic interest and considerable sentimental appeal from which much could be learnt, they have been given yet another sham which does nothing more than demonstrate the low esteem

in which genuine contemporary architecture is widely held.

This sad story can be paralleled all over Britain. It is hard to believe that it resulted from anything but an unholy alliance between avarice, insensitivity and shortsightedness with incompetence as a willing bystander. How much more is going to be lost in the same way in Britain?

The law of the land is sufficient to stop this destruction, but only if it is administered in a wise, alert and sensitive way by our elected representatives on planning committees. The law only sets the rules of the game: how it is played and who wins depends on the abilities and the vigilance of the players—developers, councillors, planners, parliamentarians and ourselves.

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## Excavations

**CITY**, by Guildhall Museum, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term rescue excavations. Enquiries to Brian Hobley, Chief Urban Archaeologist, Guildhall Museum, 55 Basinghall Street, E.C.2. (01-606 3030, ext. 2747).

**BRENTFORD**, by the West London Archaeological Field Group. July 6-September. 9.30-5.30 Sunday to Friday. At the rear of 232 Brentford High Street (junction with St. Paul's Road). Experience not necessary. This site is adjacent to a site excavated 1970-1972. Enquiries to Roy Canham, London Museum, Kensington, W.8 (01-937 9816).

**EGHAM**, by Surrey Archaeological Society Motorway Rescue Group. Two sites at Thorpe Lea Nurseries, one Bronze Age, one Roman. Digging every day; enquiries to Bernard Johnson, S.A.E.C., Montague Chambers, Montague Close, S.E.1 (01-407 1989).

**FULHAM**, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Site at junction of Fulham Palace Road, and Fulham Road directed by Keith Whitehouse. The site includes a section of the moat surrounding Fulham Palace. Week-ends. Enquiries to 53 Tamworth Street, S.W.6 (01-385 6038).

**HENDON**, by Hendon & District Archaeological Society. Various sites on the development area at Church End, Hendon, will be dug throughout the summer. Enquiries to Mrs. Bridget Grafton-Green, 88 Temple Fortune Lane, N.W.11 (01-455 9050).

**HOOK**, by Martin Dean for Kingston-upon-Thames Museum. The Grapsome, a possible medieval moated site on the Esher by-pass. Week-ends only. Enquiries to Marion Smith at Kingston Museum (01-546 8905).

**NORTHOLT**, by Northolt Archaeological & Historical Research Group. Work is continuing on the Saxon and medieval site. Saturdays 1-5 p.m. Sundays 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Enquiries to Bob Lancaster, Gunnersbury Park Museum, W.3. (01-922 2247).

**PUTNEY**, by Wandsworth Historical Society. Site off the Upper Richmond Road behind the Police Station, directed by Pat and Joan Loobey. It is expected that the north/south Roman road will be picked up. Alternate week-ends. Enquiries to 157 Longcille House, Arndale Walk, S.W.18. (01-874 9309).

**SOUTHWARK**, by Southwark Archaeological Excavation Committee. Several sites from the Roman period onwards. Enquiries to Harvey Sheldon, S.A.E.C., Montague Chambers, Montague Close, S.E.1 (01-407 1989).

**STAINES**, by London & Middlesex Archaeological Society. A site off Staines High Street, on the outer defences of the Roman settlement. Every day from mid-June. Enquiries to Kevin Crouch (01-560 3880 day) or (09328-62874 eve).

FULL-TIME work is also taking place along the route of the proposed M11 in the Redbridge—Chigwell—Theydon Bois area all summer. Enquiries to the M11 Field Officer, Mr. T. Betts, 3 The Green, Palmerston Road, Buckhurst Hill, Essex (01-504 6708).

### EXCAVATIONS

*The Council for British Archaeology produces a monthly Calendar of Excavations from March to September, with a final issue in January summarising the main results of fieldwork. The Calendar gives details of extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscription is 80p. post-free, which should be made payable to C.B.A., 8 St. Andrew's Place, N.W.1.*