

Back Then...
Circa 1964 -
Tom Taylor's
Metal
Workshop
(Next to
Moose Hall
Car Park)



The Swindon Society Newsletter - December 2023



... And More
Recently -
December
2023



Welcome to the December Newsletter

Hello and welcome to the December newsletter.

In the words of the song... "Here we are again, happy as can be, all good pals and jolly good company!" **It's party time!**

Make sure you collected your free raffle ticket when you signed in. We will be drawing that a little later in the evening.

Meanwhile we have a "where in Swindon is this?" and a "guess the baby" quiz to keep you occupied whilst you have a drink and a plate of nibbles.

All that remains is for us to say Merry Christmas to one and all, and all the very best for a Happy New Year!

(PS) If you feel like writing down a memory of your Swindon childhood over the Christmas break, we would love to read it. Please do share it with us in our newsletter. You can reach us on either of these:

- me - angie.phillips@ntlworld.com
- or - info@theswindonsociety.co.uk

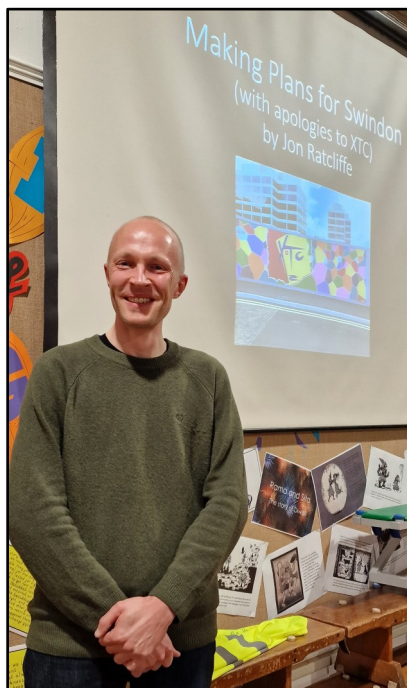


Making Plans for Swindon by Jon Ratcliffe

8th November 2023

We had a slightly different evening in November, in that it was the Swindon that never really was, as opposed to our usual Swindon as it was. It was an evening of maps, artist's impressions, computer renderings and models of Swindon in the planning stages.

The first and earliest image we saw was of the proposed hospital which was to be built in Emlyn Square in the 1920s/30s. Jon then moved on to the proposals for the Civic Centre, of which the Wyvern Theatre is pretty much the only thing still standing. Jon revealed that the plans for this area were far more extensive than were actually built – there was a proposed Civic Hall with two event floors,



including a ballroom. The idea was that the footbridge could be crossed over Princes Street between the Civic Hall and the Wyvern Theatre. The temporary library would also have been demolished and rebuilt with a lecture theatre. Jon described how the separation of pedestrians and traffic, with “streets in the sky” is a very 1960s idea and at the time, very modern. Interestingly, the court building (which was built), jumps around a lot on the various plans, closer to and further from the rest of the Civic Centre area.

Wyvern footbridge under construction 1970



Jon continued to show us plans for the town centre and how the pedestrian walkways would have linked up. Temple Street would either needed to have been raised or Regent Street lowered to accommodate these plans. The ideal was that you would have been able to walk all the way through the town centre and to Queens Park, without having to cross any roads. Jon told us that ironically, one of the reference buildings on all the plans is the Baptist Tabernacle, itself demolished in the 1980s. Jon also told us about the post-war redevelopment plan for Swindon, which was a huge document with beautiful drawings. It encompassed the entirety of the town centre, all the way from the Railway Station to the foot of Old Town.

Jon then moved us on to something a little more modern – the plan for a business park at Coate Water. This was proposed in the 1990s, when we were still a part of Thamesdown Borough Council. The business park would have been to the east of Coate Water, with a buffer between the business park and the country park. The buffer would have been a championship golf course, which is a slightly odd choice considering how close it would have been to the Broome Manor Golf Course. However, as Jon reminded us, Swindon was riding the wave of our own successful professional golfer David Howell.

Jon then took us on a journey through the planned redevelopment of The Works. It was in the planning for a long time; unsurprisingly since it was such a large site. (The size of the site was ably demonstrated when Jon did some acrobatics to reach



Oasis 1976

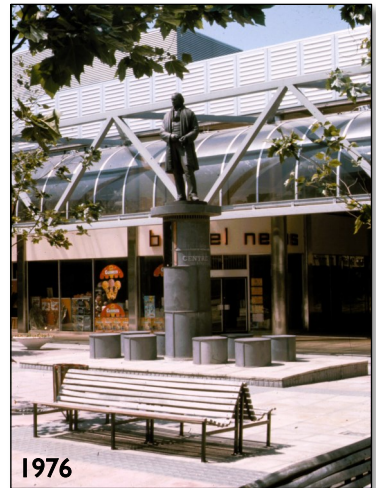
up to the top of the screen and point out various reference points to us!) It's easy to forget that The Oasis was built on former Works' land back in the mid-1970s. The main chunk of planning and development done in the 1980s was by Tarmac and was presented as a mixture of retail and residential.



This was actually how it panned out – although not to the plans presented back then. Tarmac’s plans changed quite a bit, mainly because there was a lot of demolition of notable buildings like the Pattern Store. Jon told us how this so outraged the people of Swindon, that they got the building listed. Also in the plans, were that the centre of the archways along the Works wall were

going to be knocked out, leaving a more open plan space along Rodbourne Road. The Outlet Village was not in the mix of planning at this stage, so it was envisaged that the site would have had a bowling alley, multiplex cinema and hotel (not too dissimilar to the Shaw Ridge development slightly later), and that there would be railway lines kept in place to allow easy access for swapping out exhibits at the planned (and realised) railway museum. Unfortunately for the museum though, they did not keep any tracks in situ after all.

Jon then took us back in to the town centre and the development of the Brunel Centre. The centre was redeveloped in the 1990s with the addition of a mezzanine floor, and we saw an artist’s impression of this. What differed though was that they had planned to move the Brunel statue from Havelock Square to inside the plaza! Within the town centre development, Mclroys would have expanded to Granville Street. There were also plans for a lower arcade and there would also have been a children’s activity centre on one floor. And Jon took us back to an earlier theme of development plans – pedestrian walkways! There were several planned for this development, but this time due to the wind tunnel effect around the centre, rather than to avoid traffic. Jon also told us that expansion and redevelopment of the Brunel Centre was being thought about almost since it first opened.



Unfortunately, Jon then suffered a technical hitch with the projector rotating all the images in the next section 90 degrees. Despite Jon and Andy putting their heads together to fix it, they were unable to and we skipped further information on the Brunel to avoid the audience getting neckache!

Moving on, we were back up to the top of town with the long-awaited redevelopment of the Central Library, from “temporary” huts to something much more permanent. It was initially planned to be part of an arts and cultural centre, bolted on to the Town Hall building. It was envisaged that the courtyard between

the new building and the Town Hall would be enclosed, making it a usable space. This made me giggle – having worked in the library for 12 years, I can confirm that this has never been realised as a fully usable space because it is open to the elements (and the birds). Jon told us how the development of the area also included the Wyvern Theatre and at one point it was planned that the library could have a new home in The Savoy! Jon showed us some images of the Central Library and described how the building is designed to look quite industrial, with smoke stacks giving a nod to the town’s heritage.



Smoke Stacks!.. Who knew?



biggest Chinese building built outside of China at the time. Then it was the model of the BT building at North Star and then a very accurate model of the Link Centre, followed by the Brunel Centre, including Marks and Spencer (who refused to allow the canopy to be attached to their building) and the delivery spiral up to the roof of the centre. Jon explained that scale models are built because they are really useful to give people the 3D view, allowing people to even get down and underneath the planned buildings. Lastly, we saw an image of the scale model for The Carriage Works. It was accurate in scale, and part of what was so interesting about this model was that it shows the steep gradient of Radnor Street Cemetery nearby.

Jon then moved us out of the centre of town and out to the Renault Centre in Westlea. It was designed by Norman Foster and was the youngest listed building in the UK at the time of it’s being listed. We then saw several photos of scale models, including the design for The Chinese Experience restaurant in Peatmoor, which was the



The Chinese Experience 1995

Jon ended the talk with some adverts for the town and some appreciation for the man who mainly made it all happen – David Murray John. Jon reminded us, that it can be very easy to be cynical about Swindon and its heritage and planning, but DMJ paved the way for Swindon to grow in the way that it did by recognising that Swindon needed to change its direction as an industrial town towards new, modern businesses and distribution. Jon revealed though that the expansion of Swindon

would have happened earlier, but the Second World War intervened to postpone those plans. The adverts and brochures Jon showed us included for big Swindon businesses Galileo, Allied Dunbar, Intel and Honda. Poignantly, we also saw an advert for the Link Centre “Britain’s most exciting leisure complex” – currently Britain’s most recently flooded leisure complex!

Well done Jon, for an incredibly interesting presentation (and for persevering despite the technical difficulties).

Kelly Blake - December 2023

The Search is On...



Are you good with numbers? If so, you could be the one!

The Society is in need of someone to “audit” the financial accounts at the end of the season, in readiness for our AGM in May. If you have a financial background or quite simply are numerically competent we would really like you to look over the figures of our simple profit and loss account to ensure that the calculations are correct and the figures tally.

Can you help? Please let us know as soon as possible so that we can call off the search. Contact: Info@theswindonsociety.co.uk

Thank you!



Swindon Society Meeting

10th January 2024

Wiltshire Follies

by

Jonathan Holt

Wiltshire is one of the best counties in Britain for architectural fancy; residents have expressed their passion for building in a plethora of building styles including Gothic, Rustic, Classical, Monumental, Chinese, Indian, Italianate and Japanese. Equally there is a wide variety of building types, including shell houses, grottoes, pagodas, towers, temples, summer houses, tea houses, gazebos, belvederes, lodges, gatehouses, pavilions, arches, loggias... the list is endless. The stories behind them are many and various. Jonathan has written a book on these follies, but he is showing some of these to us in a personal appearance. So why not come and have a gander. This sounds like a really interesting evening of discovery.

SEE YOU AGAIN SOON!

Burmah Oil, Pipers Way - The Thatcher Connection

The photos on the front of our November newsletter generated quite a few comments when uploaded to our Facebook page. They depicted the building that was formerly the Burmah Oil headquarters at Pipers Way, later to be named Wakefield House.

On the back of this, we also received an email (via Yvonne from the Wiltshire Family History Society) from Martin Robins with some interesting photographs attached. Martin explained that when Denis Thatcher used to be a director of Burmah Oil back in the 1970s, Lady Thatcher would sometimes drop him off at work in her own car, a Rover P5B. Furthermore Margaret was a friend of Martin's old headmaster and she would sometimes stop off at his house for breakfast after delivering Denis to work. The photos, although not of Lady Thatcher herself, show her car, firstly parked outside the house in question and then outside Burmah HQ.



Surprisingly, it seems that the building was already called Wakefield House back then, so I wonder when the name was changed from Burmah Castrol House?.. Anyone know?

Thank you Martin for getting in touch.



Swindon Borough's Play Parks

Not so long ago, a lady called Caroline Hunt contacted the Society to offer us a photographic collection, and accompanying information, of the play parks that used to be dotted all around Swindon.

Most of the photos were taken prior to Swindon Borough Council's closure programme of 1996, and many of the parks do not exist any longer, but she did not want all this information to simply be skipped. This is a complete photographic record from circa 1994 of every play area managed by SBC and these folders will shortly be passed to Local Studies for archiving (they will not

just disappear!). Meanwhile though, I couldn't help but have a nosy through and a nostalgic look at the parks I haunted when I was little...



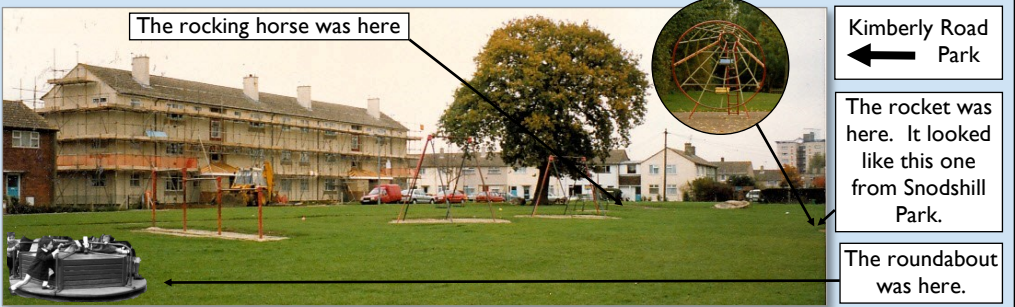
Lordsmith Green

I dived right in and found Ripon Way. Sadly, it was not the park at Ripon Way that I knew, it was the more modern one that

replaced it when they put the mounds in the green area (which I believe was the foundation mud from when Crosby Walk was built). The old park had a super-high slide with an enclosed slatted box at the top so that you couldn't fall over the top. I loved that slide! Shame there were no photos of that. However, something I did find particularly interesting, and never knew, was that this park is referred to as Lordsmith Green... Who knew? I have always lived in Park South and have never, ever heard the area being called this before! So, I Googled it, and guess what - Google hasn't heard of it either. So where did this name come from then? I am making it my mission to investigate.



Moving on then to what we kids called Charfield Close, but in the report is referred to as Kimberley Road. In this photo, some of what I remember was still there, but the best bits were missing; the rocket climbing frame, the roundabout, the long iron-headed wooden horse with lots of seats – all gone.



The rocking horse was here

Kimberly Road Park

The rocket was here. It looked like this one from Snodshill Park.

The roundabout was here.

So that was it. My two favourite (closest) parks were already very different from what I remembered... well, these photos were taken some time between 1990 to 1997 and the last time I “played out” was around 1975-ish, so what did I expect?

Another park nearby that I had forgotten even existed (as it wasn't there when I was a child) was listed as Lawn Amenity Area. It looks like just a few swings on the cycle track by Churchfields School, but my daughter assures me that there were other rides, including either a wooden roundabout or a witch's hat. As witch's hats were banned from use in the 1980s (considered to be too dangerous), the unsafe equipment was removed and by 1994 only the swings remained.



I rummaged through the rest of the list of parks from 1994 and jotted down a few observations. Here's what I noted:

- In West Swindon, there were 67 parks listed - 21 were closed and 1 opened.
- In South Swindon, there were 32 parks listed - 18 were closed and 3 opened.
- In North Swindon, there were 26 parks listed - 16 were closed and 10 opened.

One thing that was evident from the West Swindon development was the seemingly large number of “parks” that had just one or two pieces of equipment in the smallest nooks of green space. For example:

- Oasthouse Close in Nine Elmes had a wooden horse standing on a block-paved area and a bench. →
- Lowes Close, Sparcells had a horse and a slide – no bench. ↙



- Brandon Close, Grange Park had a wooden horse and pig (no bench) and was on paving slabs. ↘



- Similarly, Sidney Close also had a wooden horse and a pig on paving slabs and no bench. ←

And that amused me too... why pigs? That's an odd choice. I suppose the tiny parks were a nice idea, but unsurprisingly most are gone now.



I continued to flip through the folders, and from the smallest "parks" to the biggest; I was pleased to see a photo of the old Savernake Street Park in the collection. What a slide that was and remembered fondly by so many!

I hope today's generation will have some happy memories of playing in the parks, even if they are more likely to be riding on a zip-wire than on a fantastic, multi-seated, juddering (dangerous) rocking horse!

Angie Phillips - December 2023

Memories of Fred James's Butcher's Shop

Thank you for the October newsletter in which you mentioned Taylor James in Moredon Road where I was born in 1944, at the top end towards the old power station. I have not passed that way for many years but remember a previous occupant of the premises; Fred James the butcher. I collected meat from his shop when I was aged eight or nine. The shop was the front room of his house on the corner of Moredon Road and Church Walk North, with the counter facing Church Walk North. Is it coincidence, the name of James in both the estate agents and Fred James do you think?

Fred served meat from the counter, but before he handed it over, the customer had to pay Mrs James, who sat in a cupboard under the stairs towards the back of the shop.

Mr and Mrs James had a short-legged Pekingese dog that Fred used to feed titbits of meat. It roamed the shop floor which was always covered in two inches of sawdust; normal practice for butchers at that time I have been told. The fur around its stomach was coated with matted lumps that wobbled side to side as it ran around the shop! At the time I was quite amused to see this but now of course it would not be acceptable; times were quite different back then!

As to the mention of the old power station on the Purton Road, as a youngster we played near to the cooling tower running through the water vapour that exuded out through the supporting legs at the bottom; often getting quite wet, to my mother's annoyance. The reason we went there was to visit and talk to a tramp that lived along the old Wilts & Berks Canal that crossed the Purton Road just past the cooling tower.



Mervyn Hewlett - November 2023



Remembrance Sunday and Plaque Dedication Radnor Street Cemetery Sunday 12th November 2023

At 2pm on Remembrance Sunday many gathered, as they usually do, at the Radnor Street Cemetery chapel to remember those who fought and lost their lives during the two world wars, and in other conflicts.

The service began to the sound of the Wroughton Silver Band. Father Toby Boutle led the service, assisted by Father Ross and Father Tim.

After the hymn, Xander from the 18th Swindon Scouts troop read the poem *In Flanders Fields* by John McCray. The service concluded with Derek Webb playing *The Last Post* which is always a very moving experience.

As usual, Robert Buckland and other dignitaries were in attendance, and they laid wreaths on the cross of sacrifice followed by the laying of small wooden crosses by the 18th Swindon Scouts. The scouts then dispersed with their crosses in hand, placing one on every Commonwealth war grave in the cemetery.

After the ceremony, we were invited to witness the unveiling of a plaque on the chapel to remember and recognise the importance a very special man. Mark Sutton passed away in June 2022, but without Mark's input, the Radnor Street Cemetery remembrance ceremony and the popular cemetery walks would never have happened. His enduring dedication was amazing; his two children poignantly unveiled the plaque bearing his name.



Angie Phillips - December 2023

Swindon Quiz - Just for Fun!



Hands up - who knows the reason for the existence of this mound? It is situated just behind Ferndale Road and Harcourt Road on the Western Flyer Cycle route.

Let us know: info@theswindonsociety.co.uk

Grays Bakery - Bridge Street 1976



Swindon Town Station Footbridge and Platforms 1959

