

Opinion: When Guildford Really Was A Dirty Old Town!

By David Rose

It's easy to look at old photographs and say "wasn't it so much nicer back then", and "what a shame they pulled those lovely buildings down".



A very early photo of Guildford High Street from about 1860 with the cattle market in full swing. The market was moved to North Street five years later. Picture: Guildford Institute collection. Click on all pictures to enlarge in a new window.

Having studied what's probably a few thousand vintage photos of Guildford over many years, I am strongly of the opinion it really *wasn't* better in the "olden days".



Someone's sweeping up muck in Guildford High Street c.1870. Guildford Institute collection.

Parts of Guildford were, in the 19th century and into the 20th century, filthy places.



Picture postcard from the 1900s with the white chalk clunch of Castle Arch blackened by soot.

The photos here reveal what it was really like – a time when buildings were blacked by smoke and pollution, animal excrement smothered poor road surfaces, and the working-classes often living in run-down houses whose owners may well have been reluctant to undertake repairs and upkeep.



When the Royal Grammar School looked decidedly grey with soot and smut. Guildford Institute Collection.

When such buildings were at the point of falling down, it was easier back then to pull them down and rebuild. Our forebears may not have understood their historical importance and just didn't have the means or finance to conserve and save them.



Park Street cottages featured on a picture postcard in the early 1900s looking delapidated then. They were eventually demolished in the 1950s, surely unfit for human habitation?

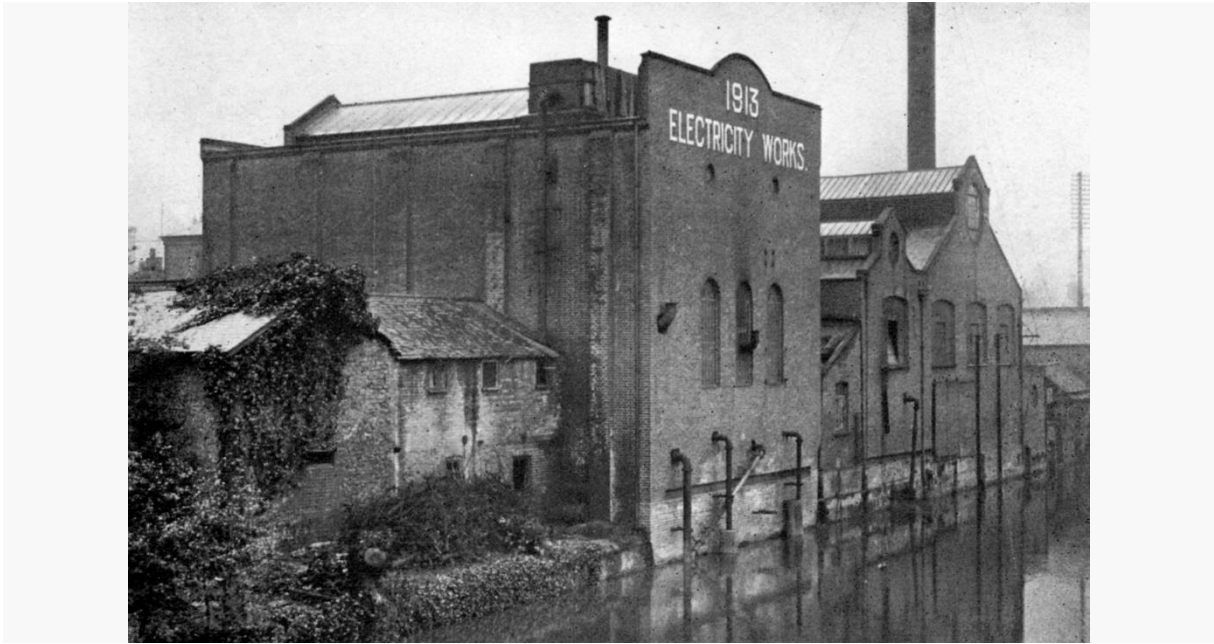


The last cattle market in North Street in 1896 before it moved to Woodbridge Road. Guildford Institute collection.

We can see the dirt and grime in these old photos, but we have to imagine the stench! All the smells of the cattle market when it was in the town centre, first in the High Street, then North Street and then Woodbridge Road.

Opinion

The smells wafting from the various breweries. Those at the turn of the 20th century being Friary, Holroyd & Healy's Brewery, between Onslow Street and Commercial Road; Lascelles, Tickner & Co's Castle Brewery, between Portsmouth Road and Bury Street; and Crooke's Brewery, just over the Town Bridge and opposite St Nicolas Church.



The electricity works in the 1920s, looking a bit rundown even then.

Add to those the smells and pollution from the gasworks off Woodbridge Road, and later the electricity works first off Onslow Street and then the power station in Woodbridge Road.



The coal-fired electricity power station in Woodbridge Road. Opened 1928, closed 1968.

There was also the smoke, fumes and pollution from steam engines, particularly from Guildford's engine shed.

The River Wey Navigation had a dual use after ordinary people began to have a little more leisure time from about the 1870s. Upstream, rowing boats could be hired, and the walk along the towpath was enjoyed. Children learned to swim at "Three Oaks" beyond St Catherine's Lock – presumably the water was cleaner there and less rubbish thrown in.



Industry reigns: Looking downstream from the Town Bridge in the early 1900s with Crooke's Brewery on the left. Issued as a picture postcard, and featured in David Rose's book *Lost Guildford*.

On the other hand, there was industry and muck along the navigation close to the town centre, including a foundry, timber yards, coal merchants, the aforementioned Crooke's Brewery, and other small industries such as clay tobacco pipe makers.

Night photography was a very unusual subject more than 100 years ago. That's probably because after dark the town centre was an extremely gloomy place.

Guildford town centre did have gas lighting, but the pall of light from its lamps would have been dull compared to today's brilliant electric lights from street lamps and the light flooding onto the streets from shops and businesses.

Folk singer Ewan McColl wrote the song *Dirty Old Town* about Salford, Manchester. Though Guildford was a world away from the harsh realities of more industrial parts of Britain, it was definitely grubby in its own way.

And a few more photos of the "bad old days"...



Spot the horse dung in this view of the High Street from the Town Bridge.



Lympo's smithy in the upper High Street in the 1900s. It's a wonder the building hasn't collapsed. A bit ironic perhaps as this was between the entrances to today's Eastgate Gardens and Alexander Terrace, and with a row of empty shops there at the time of writing dubbed 'The Street of Doom'. Guildford Institute collection.

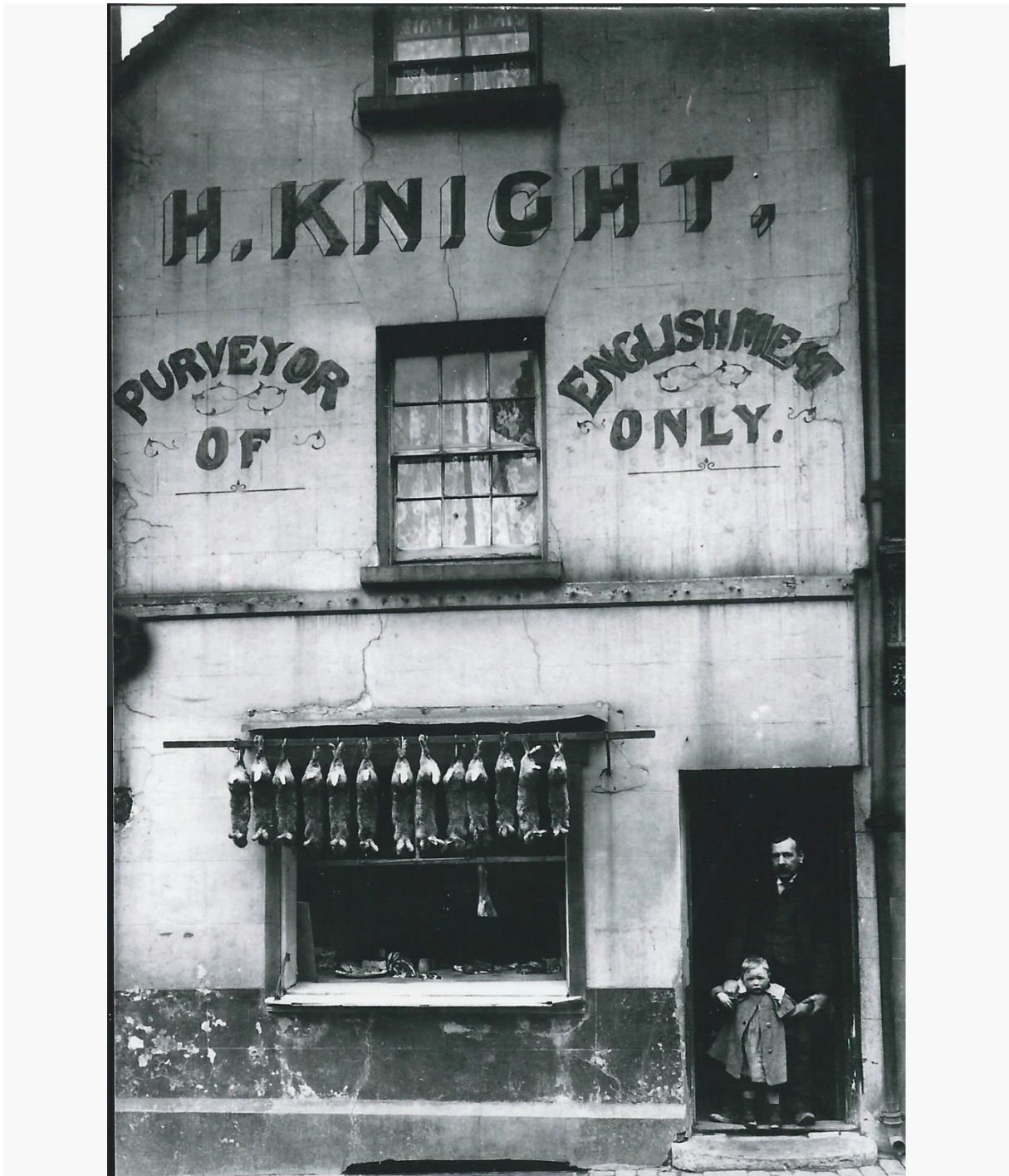


Ram Corner at the junction of High Street, Upper High Street and North Street. As well as the horse dung in the road, the Ram pub itself was demolished in 1913 to make way for necessary road widening as motor-traffic was rapidly increasing.

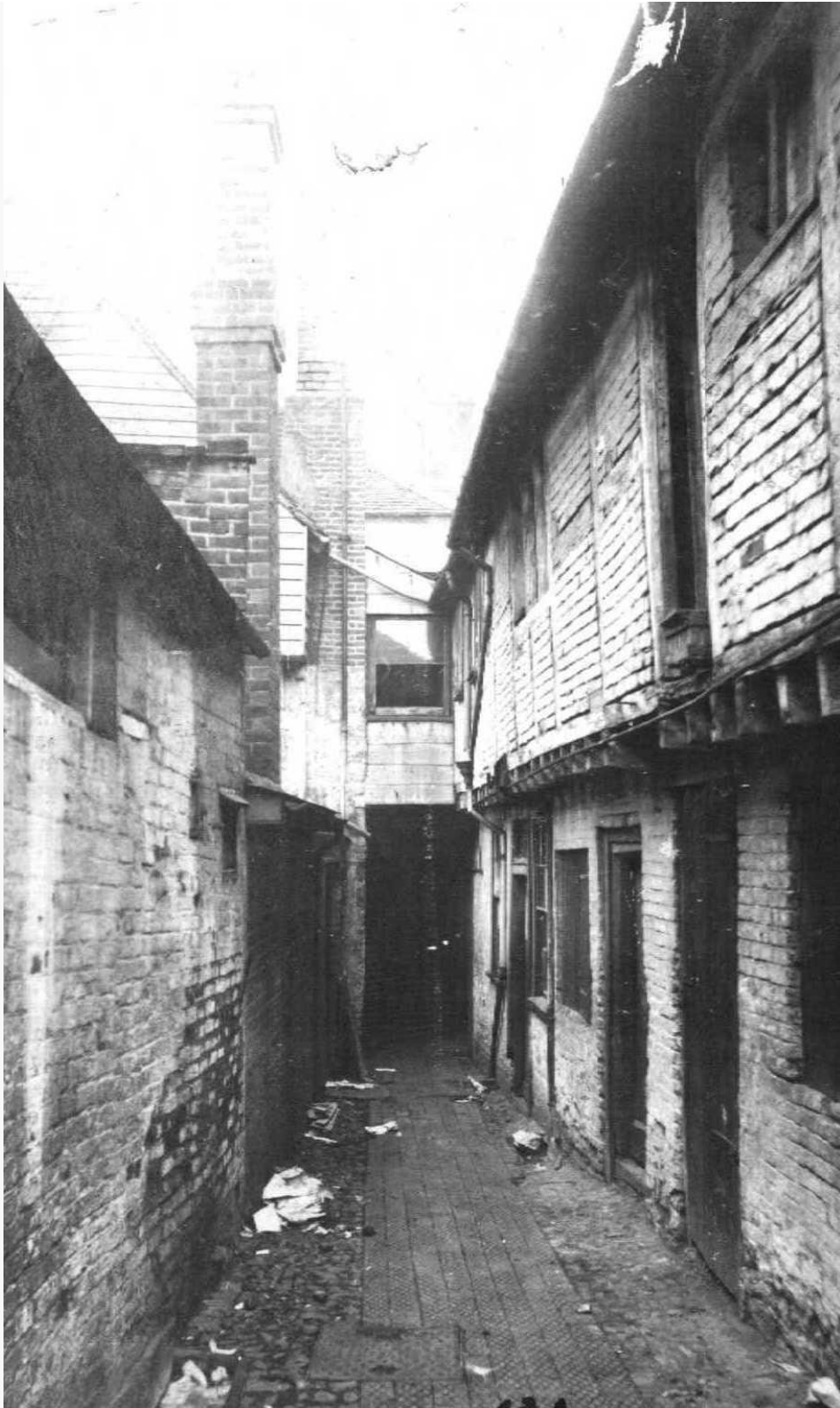


The above and below cottages do exist, they are at the Stoke Road end of Joseph's Road. But these photos from the Guildford Institute's collection are an excellent example of the slum housing in which some Guildford people lived. It's not surprising that many such homes had to be demolished.





H. Knight's butcher's shop in Chertsey Street. Today the building is the right-hand side of the Tup pub (formerly the Spread Eagle). The picture is a copy given to David Rose and featured in his talk Guildford's Lost Shops.



A passageway behind what was then 113 High Street, Guildford and much neglected buildings by the look of them. Number 113 is now 68 High Street, on the corner of Chapel Street (right-hand side). Guildford Institute Collection.



Perhaps this building should have been saved. Reputed to have been the birthplace of Archbishop George Abbot, it was later an alehouse called the Three Mariners and later still within Crooke's Brewery. It was demolished in the 1860s. At least people can park there today as it's the car park next to the George Abbot pub! Guildford Institute collection.

You can discover many more old photos of Guildford by visiting the [Guildford institute's](#) library in Ward Street when it re-opens, hopefully in the near future. Its entire collection has been digitised.

Guildford Museum has been also digitising its collection. A selection of vintage Guildford town centre street scenes from its collection can now be seen on Guildford Borough Council's website. [Click here.](#)