

In and around Eltham's Arcade

A talk to The Eltham Society by John Kennett
Thursday 5th December 2002

The Eltham Society's December lecture with slides, delivered by John Kennett, was entitled "In and Around Eltham's Arcade" and covered an area which, up to the 19th century, was known as Pit's Field and was completely rural. Before its development the only structures there were a Police house and an animal pound in, of course, Pound Place.

Later, schools, and a chapel were the site's main occupants. Where the Arcade now stands a Congregational Chapel opened in 1839 the first Eltham National School was built on the corner of Messiter and Pound Places on ground leased from the Crown in 1814, with an Infants' section added in 1840, the older children moved to Roper Street in 1868.

There was a non-conformist school from 1865 to 1881 on what later became the Avery-Truman shop, now the oldest surviving building on the site.

The 1880s brought a change of character when the school building was adapted to become the Eltham Public Hall. It was used for dances, pantomimes, political meetings (including General Strike Committees in the 1920s), a Choral Society and even inquests - it was here that the inquest was held into the death of Fabian Bland, the 15 year old son of E Nesbit of Railway Children' fame in 1900.

There had been a strong industrial phase with the building of the original Eltham Gas Works and James Gathercole's Envelope Factory (1850 to 1856), which must have created a fragrant ambience for the houses erected in the 1850s in Elm Terrace, laid down as a new road at this time. Pound Place had been in existence since Tudor Times.

In 1928/29 the Arcade was projected with plans for 31 shops but the entrepreneur went bankrupt and the plan was adjusted to 15 shops. Daimler motor show-rooms were due to occupy the High Street frontage of the Arcade area, as recorded in a drawing of 1929. The Public Hall became the Arcade Ballroom in 1931, the building being refurbished and equipped with a new sprung floor; it proved very popular surviving until the late 50s.

The opening event was a Carnival Flannel Dance and, after the war, Teddy Edwards' band with the Stardusters were in residence until the last dance in 1957. Roller-skating briefly flourished before the Arcade became what we now see, with Avery's taking over the ballroom as a hardware store.

Other shops in the Arcade over the years have included Booers, Showells, Cryers, the Arcade Bookshop, Eltham Travel, Tony's Clothing and Oliver's Barbers. An adjacent indoor market existed briefly until 1935 but a more modern development is the regular Kent Farmer's Market held at the rear of the Arcade.

Within recent memory the 1970s saw a builder's yard and two houses demolished for the creation of a Tesco store (revealing an underground air-raid shelter during demolition), the store was opened by TV comedian Ken Goodwin in 1973, but was subsequently replaced by first Kwiksave and then Poundstop. 1988 saw the arrival of Sainsbury's which led to the transfer of the

long-established Metcalfe's Lawn-Motor Centre to the other end of the High Street ... and of course, other changes inevitably continue.

John Kennet's customary detailed research into a popular and often lively part of Eltham's High Street produced a wealth of information on the unknown past as well as invoking memories of recent times for his capacity audience.

Report by Les Murrell
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