

Pauline and Stephen Minshull: Bygone Sandbach: The Last 60 Years

“Bygone Sandbach: The Last 60 Years” was the title of a presentation given to Sandbach History Society by Pauline and Stephen Minshull. Using photographs from the collection of the late John Minshull showing Sandbach at various points in its history - continued by his son Stephen - and using digital techniques to superimpose recent photographs over older ones, they were able to show how places and things had changed since the 1960s. In that time, the population of Sandbach had doubled from 11,000 to 22,000, it was said.

The area covered was the centre of Sandbach together with the roads which converge on the town – from Alsager, Crewe, Middlewich and Congleton. One of the most noticeable changes was in the road network. Images showed the various stages in the building of the M6 in 1963 (and the service area in 1974), the Wheelock by-pass in 1990 and the construction of Old Mill Road, by-passing the town centre, in 1985.

It seemed unbelievable that until the opening of the town by-pass, all traffic, from all directions, came through the middle of the town, controlled by traffic lights. One photograph showed an enormously long metal storage tank, carried on an extremely long low-loader, trying to manoeuvre through the town centre from where the traffic lights had been temporarily removed to assist its passage.

Sadly, Sandbach Market has declined in popularity over the years. Photographs from the 1960s showed both Commons covered with large crowds of people who filled the streets to capacity. One of the High Street was particularly interesting with the pavement along its length being covered with market stalls selling green-grocery and shoppers mingling with the busy two-way traffic to purchase their goods.

A street plan of Sandbach was used to compare the location and size of housing stock in the 1960s and the present day. The expansion was extensive, some of it being built on unsightly areas like scrapyards, redundant industries and sub-standard housing but in other cases it had necessitated the demolition (many at the meeting obviously thought needlessly) of some much-loved buildings or by taking over former cricket and football fields.

Attention was drawn to the removal of what were often regarded as iconic Sandbach buildings like Marriott House (replaced by the present library), Westfields (a former Foden house, for Council offices) and Brook House (for new apartments).

Retail outlets had been subjected to considerable change, in both use and name, reflecting the move from small individual shops to larger stores, supermarkets, out-of-town retail parks and online shopping. Some shops had been demolished – like AW Dickinson and Zan – to be replaced by a new-build Boots store. Changes in shop names reflected not only change of use but change of fashion. In other cases, it was change of ownership; Iceland had previously been Tesco, Victor Value and Kwik Save. Before that the site had been occupied by Frank S Barker, Watchmaker and Jeweller. Waitrose had been built for Safeway in 1986 and had originally been the site of one of the town’s four mills, employing at its height 1,000 people. The mill was demolished in 1984 as part of the town’s by-pass scheme.

Other earlier shop names brought back memories for those attending: Evans, green grocer; the Army and Navy store; Ashe and Nephew, wines and spirits; Pollit’s, newsagent; Eachus and Son, printers; the Toy and Hobby shop; and Cath Jones music shop, etc.

A number of businesses involved in the hospitality industry were shown: Saxon Cross Motel; Florrie's chip shop; La Petite; Kansas Cookhouse; and the Crosses Café.

Mrs and Mr Minshull had an appreciative audience, with many having been residents of Sandbach since the sixties and beyond. In the one-hour presentation they had been taken on a virtual journey covering the development of most of the streets of central Sandbach over the last sixty years. It was regarded as an important piece of social history.

John Higgins