

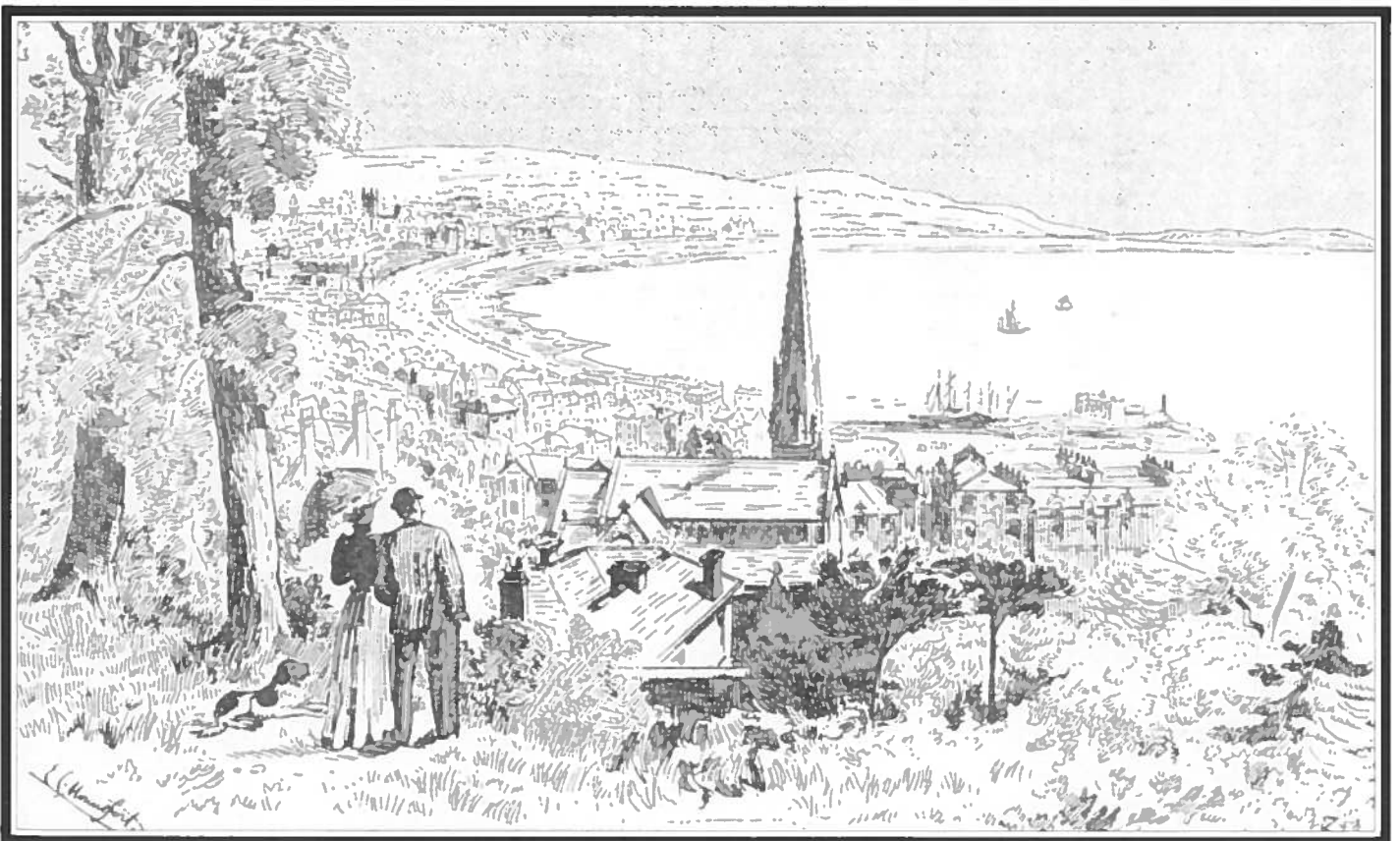


# Weston View

Number 120

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50 pence



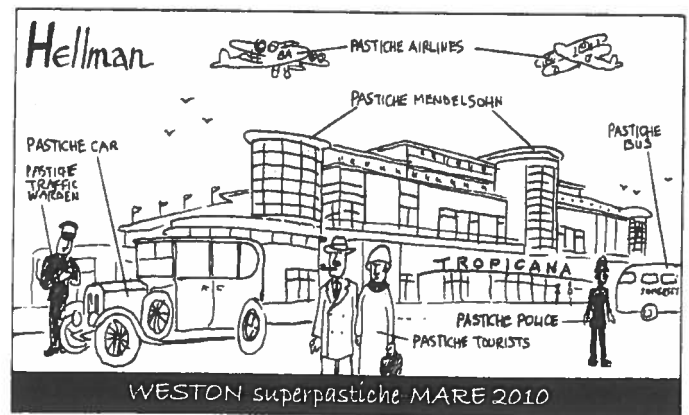
# Viewpoint

## A BIT OF A RUT

WE HAVE BEEN SO PREOCCUPIED lately with the potential harmful effects on our town of successive plans to exploit the Tropicana site, that we have said little about the random nature of the architecture. This is, of course, because of our contention that the whole project, even if it were appropriately designed, is just too big, too destructive of local character and almost entirely unsuitable for its setting. Recent proposals for Birnbeck constitute an even more blatant architectural free-for-all.

A leading article in a recent edition of the *Architects Journal* quotes a suggestion that urban design is 'stuck in a bit of a rut': 'no one is really making new ... developments that are authentically rooted in their locations'. The writer, Kieran Long, laments 'the kind of deployable, non-specific architecture that exists all over the country'. News about the future of the seafront in Weston-super-Mare is regarded as instructive in this context:

'The runners and riders are as follows: a selection of blobs and mounds on the Urban Splash competition shortlist for Birnbeck Pier; a hotel that will, I'm willing to bet, be one of Foster & Partners' less-published schemes; Acanthus Ferguson Mann's proposal, which looks like a Connecticut boathouse, with its inexplicable symmetry and jolly flag poles;



Louis Hellman's cartoon appeared in the February 28th 2008 edition of *Architects Journal*. We reproduce it here with his kind permission.

and Mountford Piggott's leisure-tecture confection, which comes on like a steroidal De La Warr Pavilion and heaves into view bringing old-school values of a leisure destination under one roof, surrounded by car parking.'

'What will future generations think of a town that has four such contrasting visions of its future? Will they celebrate our open-minded pluralism, astounded at the breadth of imagination of planning authorities able to judge these schemes alongside one another? Or will they just demolish the crap and make the considered judgements about quality that we seem unable to make?'

# Around the Society

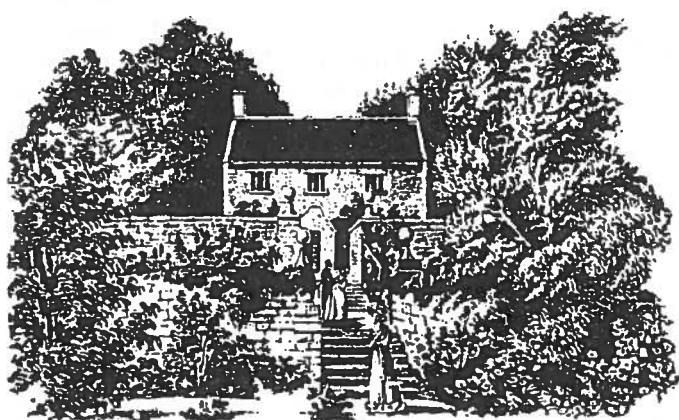
## GREEN FESTIVAL @ THE QUARRY

SATURDAY, AUGUST 30th is the date for all diaries. Based on the success of last year's Open Day, this year's event, organised jointly with the Environmental Network of North Somerset, is to have a specifically 'green' theme, with sustainable solutions introduced through information and demonstrations. There will also be wildlife and local crafts, copious refreshments and lots of fun and competitions for children. Offers of help with stewarding will be particularly welcome: contact the Quarry at 628050. Attractions will open at 12.00 noon and the day will finish with a Pig Roast and an evening ceilidh.

**MAKE SURE TO BE AT THE QUARRY ON SATURDAY, AUGUST 30th!**

# Past and Present

*We have now serialised the whole of the Civic Society's first set of Local History Trails, publications which remained in print for some years in the late 1970s and early 1980s and sold many thousands of copies. By the time stocks of the first titles and their reprints were running out, the Society had established a Heritage Centre in Wadham Street and two new trails were produced which presupposed the use of that building as a starting point for exploration of the streets of the old town. This series was produced jointly with Woodspring District Council and each leaflet cost 30p. The trails were printed in dark green and brown on cream paper. They were not as wide-ranging or as detailed as the first series, but they offered a worthwhile introduction to Weston's history and are still useful as a digest of what needs to be known about the town's site and its early development. We are reprinting the essential information from this second series and end here with the whole of the Town Centre trail.*



## Town Centre

THE NAME WESTON-SUPER-MARE is medieval in origin. In 1348 a clerk at Wells Cathedral added 'super mare' (Latin for 'on sea') to distinguish this small fishing and farming village from several other Westons in Somerset. The settlement is probably over 1000 years old, originating at the foot of the hill by a natural spring in the area which is now Grove Park. Over centuries the manor house, church and priest's house were renewed or rebuilt on the same ancient site.

Even before that, the same spot was occupied by British farmers whose tribe built the massive stronghold of Worlebury Camp on the hilltop before the time of Christ.

The village fields lay along the lower slopes of the hill. The hilltop and the flat moor (part of the Northmarsh, the North Somerset Levels) were open and used for grazing sheep and cattle.

*Above: the early Grove House*

Weston's first visitors arrived over 200 years ago. Growth accelerated after the railway came and the old village changed into the town centre of a fashionable, elegant watering place. Now it is mainly the street plan that recalls village times.

There are many interesting and attractive buildings in the Victorian town centre, but to appreciate them you often need to look above the modern shopfronts which in many cases are unworthy of the architecture.

The area has marked contrasts, reflecting the wide gulf between rich and poor in the last century. Large, imposing shops and public buildings are only a stone's throw away from the densely packed working class streets of terraced housing, corner shops, stables and workshops. This trail shows you something of these two Westons, cheek-by-jowl in terms of distance, but worlds apart in other ways.

This trail starts at the Heritage Centre in Wadham Street and takes about one hour to complete. The Heritage Centre (1) was built in 1896-7 as a coach house, with a tailor's workshop above. The garage next door was Dickie Dart's stables, and there were more stables round the corner at Old Post Office Lane. Wadham Street was first developed by the Smyth-Pigott family in 1846, the terraces at the southern end being the first such building initiative on the Lord of the Manor's land. It was named after Rev. Wadham Pigott (died 1823), the first member of the family to settle in Weston.

The Blakehay (2) was the town's first Baptist Church (1850). The present façade was added in 1863 by Hans Fowler Price, Weston's leading architect for over half a century. This is his earliest known public building. He was to design many others, handsome and striking, as well as dozens of private houses.

Grove Park (3) is the site of the original 'West tun' ('tun' is a Saxon word for a farmstead or estate) in a sheltered combe or hollow in the hillside. The manor house stood here for centuries. The present park was its grounds, with barns and cowsheds. To the left St. John's Church (rebuilt 1824 and later enlarged) is on the site of the Norman village church, and next to it is the Glebe House, Weston's oldest house, part of which is over 300 years old..

In the 18th century the Pigott family, the Lords of the Manor, who owned many manors in North Somerset, used the house here as a summer retreat, influenced by the new fashion for visiting the seaside. Their guests were Weston's first visitors. The Pigotts enlarged the house and landscaped the grounds. 'The Grove' became a public park after they gave up the property in 1889. The bandstand (bearing the maker's name 'Hills Brothers, Sun Foundry, Alloa') was erected the following year. Grove House was one of many properties in Weston hit by bombing during the Second World War, The surviving wing is now part of the Mayor's Parlour.

### High Street

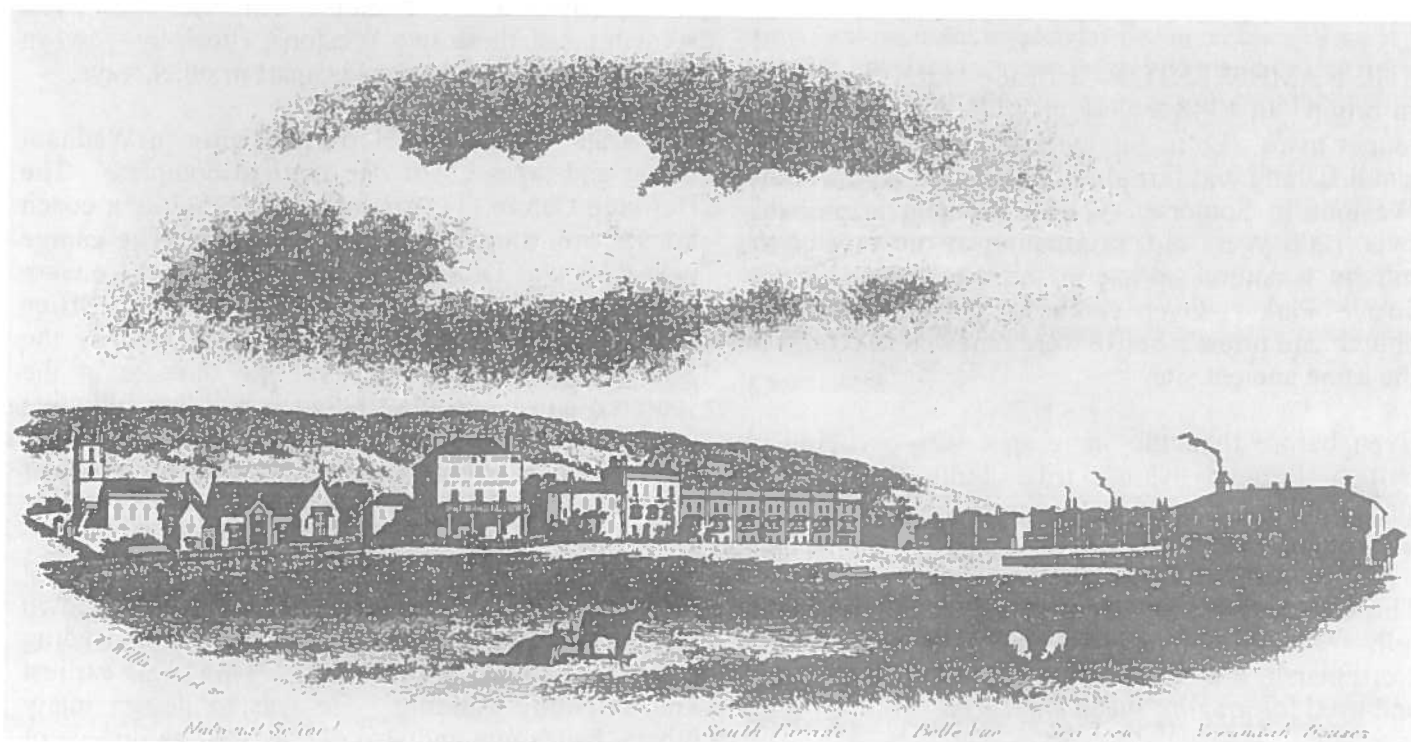
Turn down High Street. This was simply 'The Street' in village days, with a straggle of farms and cottages. The Playhouse (4) is on the site of the market established to serve the young resort in 1827. Hans Price designed the terraces on either side in 1887 and 1897. West Street, to the right, was one of the old village lanes, leading to the beach, the harbour at Knightstone and the fisheries beyond.

Cross by the traffic lights to the open space at the top of the main High Street. This area was a field belonging to Weston's first hotel, now the Royal (5), which opened in 1810 (it was enlarged in 1845). During its early years beer had to be brought from Worle, then a much bigger village than Weston, and on these happy occasions a bell was rung to announce that it was available at Weston. In South Parade is Weston's second hotel, The Imperial (6), originally called The Bath Hotel (1819).

The hotel field (7) remained undeveloped throughout the last century because properties facing it had covenants protecting their sea views. Genteel visitors to the best shops had to pass a field containing cows and the old village duckpond! Once a year the 'Wessun Revel' was held here, a local festivity with stalls, shows, games and races. This was probably the survival of an old village fair and took place on the last Thursday in June. It was perhaps the only time when the distinction between rich and poor was forgotten. It was later moved to the beach.

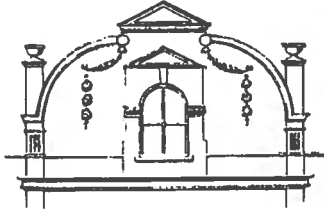
In the 1920s the Gardens were laid out and the Winter Gardens Pavilion built adjoining the sea front. Henry Butt, a prominent local businessman and self-made millionaire, gave most of the money. The new Sovereign Centre (8) was built on the site of the 1897 General Post Office and the old Royal Arcade (another casualty of the air raids in the war) 1889-91.

As you walk down High Street you can still trace the wandering line of the old village street. By the



View of South Parade and part of High Street. The drawing was published in *Whereat's Guide* of 1847.

second half of the last century<sup>1</sup> handsome shops were replacing earlier buildings. On the right is Osterley Buildings (9), a long terrace with a central gable, built in 1875. On the left Woolworth's (10) occupies the former Independent Church of 1855 – you can still see buttresses and gothic windows round the side!



*Upper elevation, 75 High Street*

Victorian shopfronts were designed to be part of the architecture. The lettering on the fascia boards was often gilt and there was elaborate carved ornament in the woodwork. Other interesting details still survive above the modern shopfronts, such as nice ironwork and windows above Next, Stead and Simpson's and Rumbelow's (11) on the left<sup>2</sup>. At the end on the right is Burton's, a 1930s building, where the decorations include elephants!

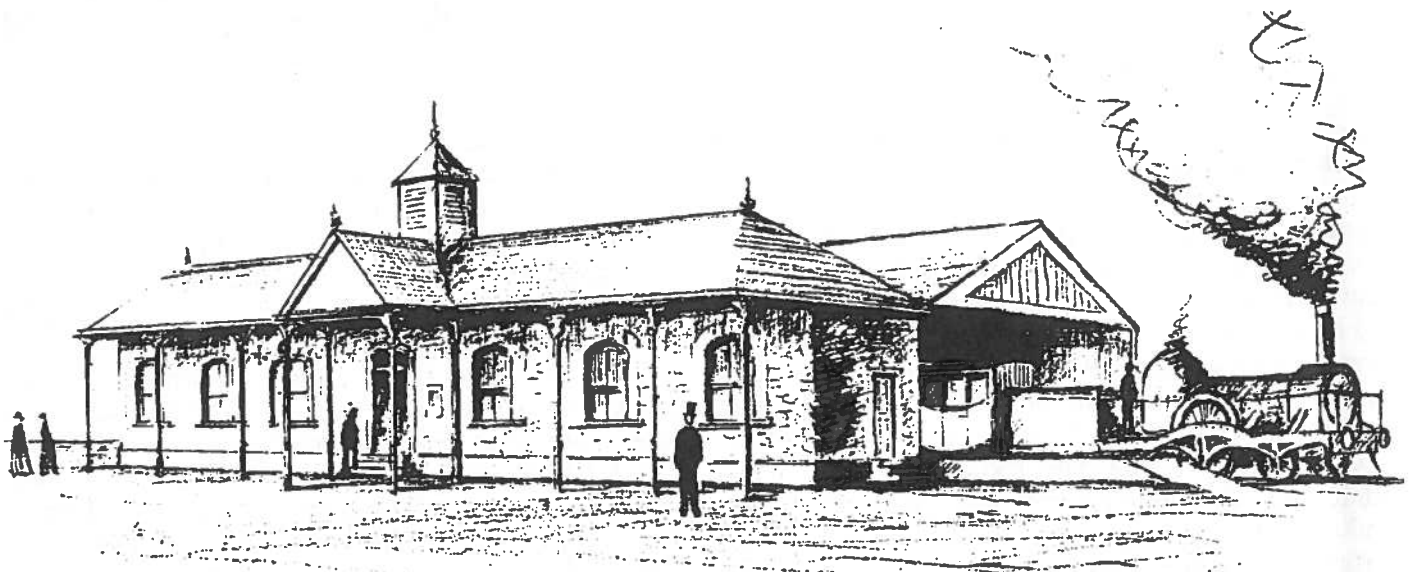
### **Village Green**

The village ended at Regent Street (then called Watersill Road) and the open moor began, stretching all the way to Uphill beyond the sand dunes. The corner occupied by the Midland Bank (12) was Weston's tiny village green. Even when this had been built over, the corner remained a meeting place for locals and was known as Gossip Corner. It was later called Big Lamp Corner from an imposing gas lamp at the road junction. New High Street, ahead, is a 1960s creation replacing a warren of lanes and working class dwellings that led to the Victorian gas works.

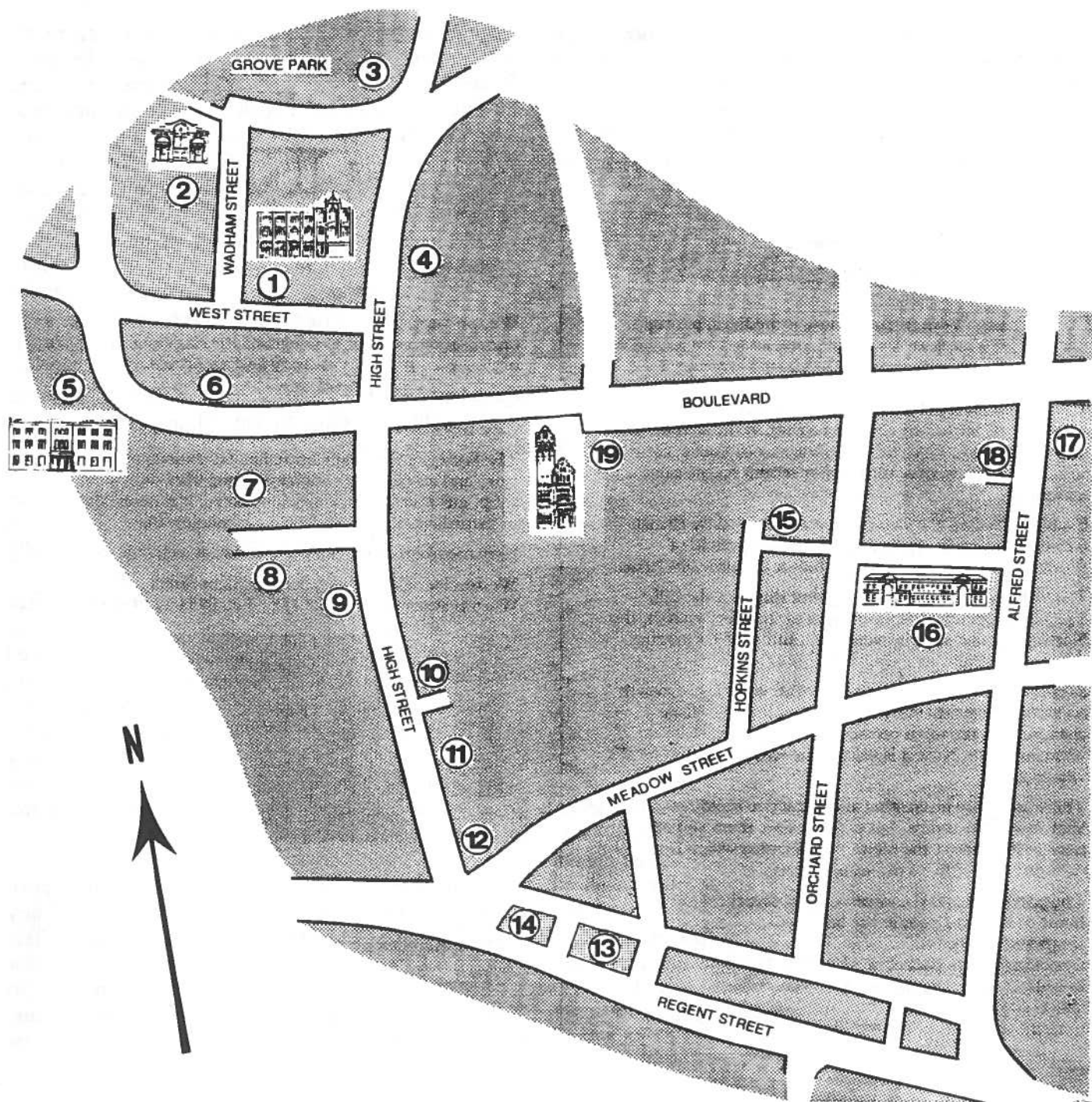
Turning left and crossing over, you come to the long open space known as The Plantation. Weston's first railway station was at the nearer end, the site of the Floral Clock (13). A branch from Brunel's Bristol and Exeter Railway reached Weston in 1841. For the first ten years visitors changing at 'Wessun Junction' were brought along on the branch in carriages 'drawn by three horses in tandem fashion ridden by boys'. A second station was built in 1866, where Tesco's is today behind the Odeon, and the open space became Old Station Square. Ballad singers and street traders waited here for the arriving crowds. In 1884 the present station was built on a new loop line, farther out again, and the 1866 station became the Goods Station. The building on the 'island' (14) was built in the 1840s as the Railway Hotel.

Turn back into Meadow Street. Like other street names in this area this recalls the farms to which Meadow Lane once led. The district grew rapidly as a working class quarter after the railway's arrival, and Meadow Street, with its pubs and coffee taverns among the shops, became the main street for the poorer classes who lived in the close-packed terraces in adjoining streets: labourers, boatmen, domestic servants, coachmen, porters, chimney sweeps, gardeners, building tradesmen, blacksmiths, laundry women, small shopkeepers, and many more. On the right, beyond the fine terrace, look for the eagle on the parapet of the former Spread Eagle Hotel<sup>3</sup>.

Later in the Victorian period more and more working people were able to take holidays. They would buy their own food and take it back to their lodgings to be cooked by their landladies. Meadow Street was nicknamed 'Food Street'. Turn left into Hopkins Street: well built, trim terraced houses, some with tiny front gardens. Weston had few of



*The first railway station was built in 1841 and stood where the Floral Clock now is in Regent Street.*



the slums to be found in inland industrial cities. Up to a dozen people might live in each of these houses.

Working families often took in lodgers, sometimes giving up their own beds in summer and sleeping in armchairs or on the sofa. The children might have to bed down under the kitchen table. On the right is the former British School (15) of 1855 in grey limestone. It was supported by Nonconformist parents in preference to the Anglican National School. The children paid sixpence a week. The Adult School opened here later, with over 100 working men joining the first classes in reading, writing and Bible study. Down the side of the

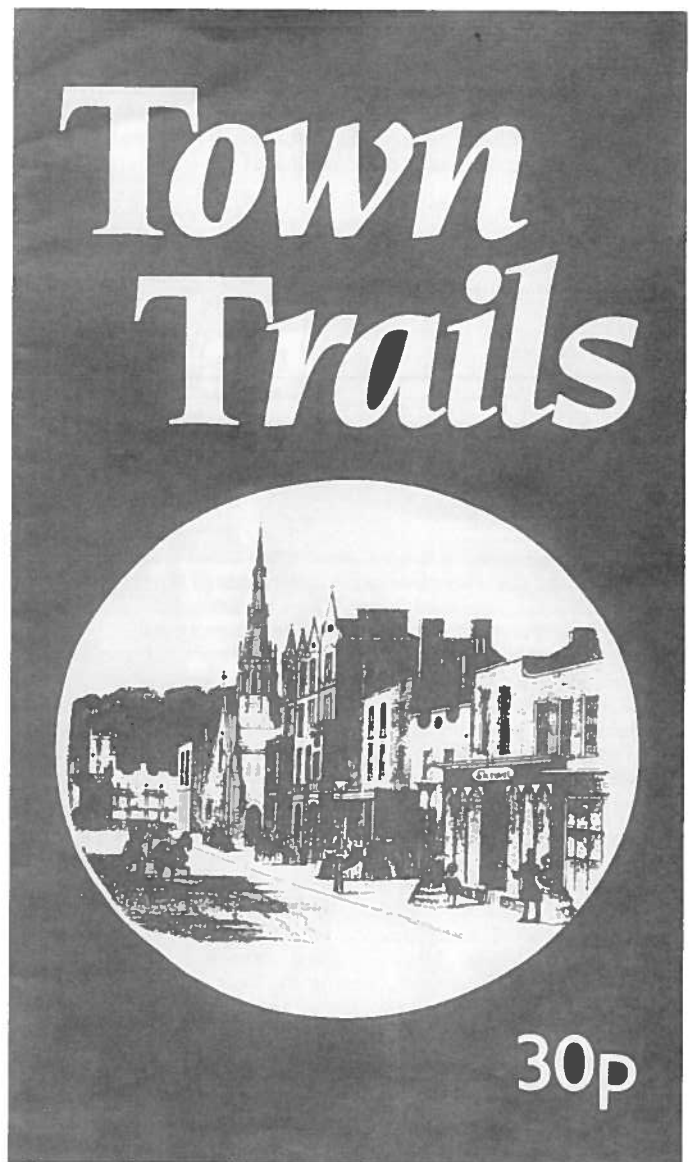
School and across Orchard Street in Burlington Street is the Woodspring Museum<sup>4</sup> (16) occupying the former Gas Company Offices and Workshops designed by Hans Price in 1912. Inside you can see the original wood-block courtyard of the stables (wood blocks were used in some of the streets of Weston earlier this century<sup>5</sup>). The Museum moved here in 1975 and has won several national awards. More recently it opened Clara's Cottage, just up the street, and also has the small chapel built by the Bible Christians. Lock-up garages have crowded onto the market gardens opposite – a great shame – but you can see Meadow Villas behind, 1850s with later infilling.

## Contrasts

At the end of Burlington Street is Alfred Street, the eastern edge of the town when the 1842 Improvement Act set up Weston's first modern local government body, the Board of Commissioners. Across the street is the first Weston Hospital (17) built on church land in 1856 by Hans Price. It has several later extensions, culminating in the 1920s wing facing the Boulevard (another scheme led by Henry Butt)<sup>6</sup>. Behind the Alfred Street Hospital was the Workhouse, sometimes the last refuge for the local poor in old age. The former Christ Church Mission Room (18) of 1877 faces the original Hospital, one of several charitable schemes for working people run from the church on the hill. Farther up on the left is an imposing building originally the premises of Lalondes, auctioneers and later estate agents.

Turn left into the Boulevard and suddenly you are back in the well-to-do part of town. What a contrast between the workers' quarter and the streets of detached villas and leafy gardens on the hillside! Weston's most dramatic street was conceived in 1860 as a tree-lined boulevard by the Lord of the Manor, a devotee of Paris, who owned the land here. It was laid out to line up with the spire of Christ Church on the spur of the hill. Its buildings date mostly from the 1870s and 1880s.

Where the Boulevard narrows in Waterloo Street is the Mercury building (19) designed by Hans Price in 1885. James Dare started the paper as *The Westonian* in 1843 and it remained in the hands of the same family until recently. Price's own offices were a couple of buildings along. At the farther end of Waterloo Street road widening shows where there was more bomb damage. Old Westonians still call this junction Lances Corner after the department store of Lance and Lance that stood here.



*Part of the cover of the Trail reprinted above. A general view of the High Street, looking north, includes the spire of the Independent (Congregational) Church, the building that now houses Woolworth's.*

<sup>1</sup> The nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to keep up with the changing names of these shops, but one of them is currently Jessop's.

<sup>3</sup> The eagle seems to have flown, along with other decorative features which formerly graced the street.

<sup>4</sup> Local government changes have since caught up with the name.

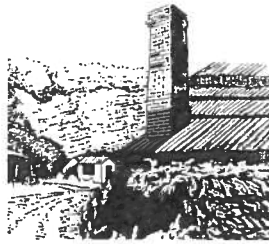
<sup>5</sup> The twentieth, of course.

<sup>6</sup> When the hospital moved out to Uphill these buildings were successfully converted into flats.

Yet another series of Trails was produced, just twenty year ago, and these involved for the first time going beyond the boundaries of urban Weston and venturing into Uphill, Kewstoke and Hutton. The three Countryside Trails formed part of the preparation of a Countryside Interpretation Strategy, produced by the Civic Society with funding from the Countryside Commission. Dr Paul Lane had a two-year contract as the Society's Countryside Interpretation Officer and produced a well-researched and elegantly argued document *Enjoying Our Countryside: A Strategy for the Future*. We shall not be serialising the Strategy, although it still awaits full implementation! The Trails, however ...

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QUARRY**

in South Road



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10.30 a.m — 4.30 p.m.  
**Wednesday to Saturday**  
12.00 noon — 4.30 p.m.  
**Sunday**

(Annual closure in the period between  
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**The Story of the Stone Town.**

Visit the shop and café.



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BOOKS



## Weston View

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The editors welcome comments and letters  
intended for publication.

**Weston Civic Society** is a charity and is  
registered with the Civic Trust.

The Society campaigns for a good quality  
environment based on an appreciation of  
the town's origin as a Victorian seaside  
resort.

The Society lobbies on planning matters  
and is active in practical environmental  
conservation work. Its major current  
project is at the Old Town Quarry in South  
Road, where it has restored several  
buildings, established craft workshops,  
created a wildlife reserve and installed on-  
site interpretation and an exhibition on The  
Story of the Stone Town.

New members are welcome, and will find a  
variety of activities to suit their interests.

### CIVIC SOCIETY SUBSCRIPTION

Individual membership : **£8**  
*per annum*

Family membership : **£8 + £4** for  
each extra members enrolled.

Life members pay **£80** once.