426–430 ASHLEY ROAD

ABSTRACT
This visual essay explores the life of an ordinary Dorset Victorian building. It depicts this life as an anthology of change, as shaped by the activities of people. It aims to connect the reader to these changes and to the stories that they yield. The intent is to evoke an awareness of our own stories and the part they play in the changes to our localities, however ordinary.
426–430 Ashley Road is located in Upper Parkstone, Poole, Dorset, South-west England. It is a relatively large brick building, designed along the lines of a turn of the 19th century religious meeting hall. It presents an archetypal architectural model typical of buildings on many an English high street.

However, unlike the stories in Hollis’s book, these stories do not connect us to the spectacular or the famous. Instead, they connect us to the everyday mundane events that make up the fabric of ordinary people’s lives. In doing so, they connect us to the immediacy of a moment, which in turn connects us to the inexorable continuum of moments: two conditions described by Penelope Corfield in her book Time and the Shape in History (2007) as the ‘synchronic’ and the ‘diachronic’. Merged, that is accepting that ‘the synchronic is always in the diachronic’ or that every short-term moment contributes to a much longer one and vice versa, they form the ‘diachromesh’ (p. xv).

It is the spirit of the ‘diachromesh’ that these juxtapositions of text and image aim to present—the sense of possible narratives of everyday people doing everyday things, each action constituting fleeting synchronic moments that link to langthier diachronic ones, eventually accumulating to form the life story of our building. The aim is to invoke in us an awareness of the stories that our local buildings have to tell. It also aims to invoke in us a sense of the everyday contributions that we make toward these stories as ‘part of a shared and living process of diachromesh’ (p. xviii).

Although lacking architectural grandeur and worthy provenance, 426–430 Ashley Road and many other buildings like it are a part of this shared process. As noted by Stamp in Lost Victorian Britain (2013 (2010)), they speak of vigorous civic pride, (p.9) of building for longevity and also of a vanishing landscape. Yet the stories they tell perhaps speak more of human character than do their modern counterparts, from which, as noted by John Bejteman ‘the human element is (often) missing’ (cited in Stamp, 2013(2010): 59). Personal views notwithstanding, the stories yielded by these Victorian high-street buildings should be accepted as an important part of the ongoing fabric of our heritage.

The visual feel of this essay comprises a variety of materials, ranging from directories, microfiches, maps and photographs. Presenting a variable assemblage, their amalgamation into a cohesive design determined that visual threads be created by loose bondings of font choice, colour and grid structure. Beyond this, each spread is graphically distinct.

While aspects of the stories can be verified, others cannot and they have had to be pieced together from peripheral data. As such, they are subjective constructs, presented as glimpses of potential experiences.

There are five spreads. Each one represents a segment of time as formed by the suggested clusters of gathered data. The first spread explores the building’s story from 1887 to 1906. Records from this era are at their most sparse, anecdotal memories are long past and all that remains are the fuzzy boundaries of supposition pieced together from maps, local historians, directories and conveyance documents. The second spread spans 1906 to the early 1920s. It marks the first change in the building’s usage and its first structural alteration. Reflecting similar changes across the county (Dyson, 1996: 4), this alteration embodies the technological developments that would irrevocably alter the ways in which people amused themselves.

For, during this period of time, gatherings at 426–430 Ashley Road would probably have been a source of much interest, laughter, shock and conceivably the occasional tear. The third spread covers a period of 32 years (1923–1955). Our building’s use as a venue of amusement is superseded by purpose-built sites and instead 426–430 Ashley Road becomes host to a variety of independent local businesses. Their diversity and distinct names are testimony to an era that predates high street chains and supermarkets. The change in number from 310 to its current 426–430 suggests that they formed a part of a growing and thriving urban economy. The fourth spread addresses the period from 1957 to 1988. It marks the most stable period in the history of this building with the predominant occupation of a single local company. Significant interior and exterior structural and aesthetic alterations were made in order to ensure its continuing fitness for purpose. 426–430 Ashley Road was now firmly a place of retail, its suitability as a place for games and amusement were over for now. The final spread concludes the story to date and reflects upon the links between times past and the potential for times future. It also finally reveals the building in its eccentric entirety.

However, a weather vane rusted to a fixed direction, regardless of the prevailing winds, and the addition of a pitched roof Edwardian-style façade awkwardly conjoined to the front of the building hall. It presents an archetypal architectural model typical of buildings on many an English high street.
IN 1887, THE CENTRAL Victoria Hall, 310 Ashley Road, as it was then numbered, opened its doors. Built in celebration of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee, it apparently opened without ceremony. At a time when the Borough of Poole was commemorating this event with the planning and opening of new parks, libraries, hospitals and colleges, and enthusiastically arranging celebratory teas, dinners, illuminated processions and bonfires, just why this building appeared to be so ignominiously treated is not known (Hillier, 1990: 162; Parkstone Reminder, 1887: 203–204; Poole & Bournemouth Herald, 1887: 2–4).

ALL THAT CAN BE definitely said is that between 1887 and 1888 the land was conveyed from Henry Mooring Aldridge to John Baker to Thomas Taylor Ryan to Charles Henry Child with the express covenant that ‘no intoxicating drinks of any kind’ be sold on it (Borough of Poole, 2011a: 5). Apart from this, no concrete information appears to exist that accounts for any activities that might have taken place at the hall, although one local historian suggests its use as a billiard room (Clark interview, 2015). However it may have been used, evidence presenting Ashley Road as an expanding community suggests that it was used in some way.

NUMEROUS PLANNING applications for sheds, stables and houses, and listings for businesses verify this, perhaps hinting that, at the very least, local shopkeepers such as William Allen Knight the bootmaker, Edward Norrish the grocer and George Rose the butcher might have known about and participated in the activities that took place there, alcoholic drinks notwithstanding (DC/PL/6/1896 Building Control (microfiche); Poole Directories, 1783–1885: 1261).
AROUND 1906, a new façade was added to the front of the building. Appearing more domestic than civic in its style, its purpose is assumed by some as a ticketing office, as, by 1911, the Central Victoria Hall was known to locals as the ‘premises where bioscope films could be enjoyed’ (Clark interview, 2015; Dyson, 1996: 37).

THE PARKSTONE EMPIRE or, as it was also known ‘the Bijou’, was managed by Mr Rutter Senior, who later went on to manage the larger Poole Electric Theatre.

BIOSCOPE FILMS were an early form of cinematography. They were black and white and silent. An orchestra often accompanied them. Titles of films screened at the Bijou may have included The Innocent Sinner featuring Miriam Cooper and/or The Fatal Ring presenting ‘everybody’s favourite’ Pearl White (Dyson, 1996: 40).

HOMEMADE CINEMA slides asking for egg donations for wounded ‘Tommies’ might also have been shown. The Bijou screened for about 10 years (p. 40).
Between 1923 and 1955, many diverse businesses operated out of 310 Ashley Road. Their trades indicate a thriving and expanding locality as does the number change in 1959 from 310 to the current 426–430 Ashley Road. The following listing is extracted from the Kelly’s directories (forerunners to the Yellow Pages and Thompsons directories). Each business is assigned a tonal opacity commensurate with the duration that the business operated from the building.

BY 1957, Coronet Silversmiths Ltd had moved out of numbers 426–428 and Windsers Furniture Co. Ltd. had moved in. Atlas Instruments remained at number 430. In January 1958, Windsers were duly granted permission to display their name in 7-inch red and green neon letters. These colours were to ‘burn’ their glow over the pavement for the next 13 years (Borough of Poole, 1958: 8648/1).

BY 1959, permission was granted for Windsers to install a first floor with an accompanying staircase. The cost was £850 (Borough of Poole, 1959, microfiche). Business was apparently good. In 1967, Smith J. Turf commssn. agt – a betting shop, commenced business in 430 Ashley Road. By 1971, they had moved out and Windsers assumed the full address. They applied for and were granted permission to install a new shop front and signage (Borough of Poole, 1959, microfiche). Business was still apparently good.

THE NEXT DECADE witnessed significant changes to furniture retail and, as indicated by the Yellow Pages Business Directory, the flat-plan furniture and mass-produced products offered by companies like MFI and G Plan rapidly grew in popularity. Windsers’ advertising space shrank accordingly and, in 1988, an apparent combination of this and a leaking pitched roof necessitated a relocation and merger with another local furnishing company called Clark (Brooking interview, 2015).

THE PROBLEM with the roof appears ongoing and in 2016 a council surveyor reported that there is ‘an awkward roof arrangement between the rooms and the hall. This is causing maintenance problems and leaks in the roof’ (Borough of Poole, 2011a: APP/11/00223/F).

The new shop front, built in 1971, meant that this inset doorway was extended to become level with the rest of the front of the building. The separate shop to the left was removed and the main entrance re-situated to the right. The left comprised two large plate-glass windows and the red and green neon letters were replaced with red and black ones on a Sapele-finished plywood fascia.

Although they are an adjunct to the story of the life of this building, the images of these plans are worth mentioning. They are microfiches, the originals having long been ‘retired’. A matter for debate, as outlined in Nicholson Baker’s book Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper (2001), the use of microfiches as a means of preserving paper documents is contentious. Often resulting in loss of context, colour and readability, printing from microfiches tends to yield a grey landscape, where the difference between foreground and background is barely distinguishable. Circumventing this problem led to photographing them on a light box. While posing its own set of issues, the fact that this information remains at all, when legally it need only be kept for 15 years, is testimony to Dorset Council’s approach to the preservation of our printed and written heritage, however seemingly mundane (Borough of Poole, 1959, microfiche).

Fortunately, the misspelling of Windsers as Winers was caught before the neon sign was made.

This part of the plan indicates that the original building layout consisted of an open space with two raised viewing galleries at either end, joined together, they became the new first floor.
IN 1990, the Borough of Poole approved an application to replace the old Windsers sign with a new illuminated acrylic yellow, red, black and blue one. The Ritz Video Film Hire, Family Video Store had opened for business (Borough of Poole, 1990). In 1995, their sign was replaced by the once familiar blue, yellow and white one of a Blockbusters Video Express (Borough of Poole, 1994, 1995). Until 2013, when Blockbusters went into receivership (BBC News, 2013), and perhaps reminiscent of its days as the Bijou and the Parkstone Empire, 426–430 Ashley Road once again provided cinematic entertainment.

ON 31 DECEMBER 2010, a planning application was lodged requesting the conversion of the first floor into three flats (Borough of Poole, 2010). On 15 March 2011, it was rejected. The grounds given concerned parking and access to natural light in one of the flats. The replacement of the pitched roof with a flat mansard one was also rejected as this proposal was deemed to be ‘to the detriment of [the] visual amenities’ (Borough of Poole, 2011b). While such an alteration would merely have contributed another story to the ‘life’ of this building, it is heartening that its quirky oddity is now formally viewed as a defining part of local cultural heritage.

BETWEEN 2014 AND 2016, Not Just an Antiques Emporium operated from the premises. An ‘Aladdin’s cave’ of artefacts, the business also served as a conduit for local entrepreneurs, who rented space there. Psychic fairs were also held upstairs. Sadly, the modern mechanisms and costs associated with running local, independent businesses affected its demise and on 30 January 2016 Not Just an Antiques Emporium closed, ending another chapter in the life of this building.

426–430 ASHLEY ROAD is a character, metamorphosed from meeting hall to cinema to retail outlet to spiritual gathering place, each story echoing a changing rhythm of local life. It presents an ongoing tale, a local legacy not solely built of bricks and mortar or famous events and/or persons but one ‘generated indirectly by the ordinary actions of the people, just as a flower cannot be made, only generated from a seed’ (Alexander, cited in Hollis, 2009: 11). It is a legacy in which we all participate.

AT THE TIME OF WRITING, 420-430 Ashley Road stood empty, awaiting the next chapter in its story.

IT HAS SINCE REOPENED as a Domino’s Pizza.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank David Watkins at the Poole History Centre and Sam Johnston at the Dorset History Centre for their help in researching this piece.

FUNDING

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors and there is no conflict of interest.

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