

The brick bell mouth entrances of Whitchurch

Peter Hawley, Whitchurch & Goring Heath History Society, November 2018

Among the most distinctive heritage features of Whitchurch High Street Conservation area are the three eighteenth to nineteenth century Tilehurst brick "bell mouth" entrances to Walliscote Drive, Manor Road and Number 1 Whitchurch House.



The finest of these is the one at Walliscote Drive (formerly known as Church Drive). In my book *Relics and Monuments* I have described that this important and handsome feature was designed for the owner of Walliscote, Sir John Simeon MP, when he was seeking to enclose the entrance to Walliscote as part of a private "gentleman's" residence. The enclosure maps of the time show that up to then the driveway was not in fact private property but an open spur of the public village street. There was public outcry against Sir John. He succeeded in installing gates but was refused permission to lock them and the drive remained open to pedestrians (later as the Thames Path) and to vehicles having business at the Church. Nevertheless it was later possible for the owners of Walliscote to have the site of the driveway and verges registered at HM Land Registry as their private property.

This first bell mouth is of high quality and has elegant brick panelling. I have long supported the view that it was designed by the nationally important architect Sir John Soane (Dulwich Picture Gallery, Bank of England etc) who was said to have been born in the village and is known to have worked extensively for the Simeon family.

The second bell mouth, at Manor Road, is of similar date and constructed to form a main entrance to Samuel Gardiner's Coombe Park with gates which



were later moved a quarter mile to the West. This is slightly plainer than the Walliscote Drive example but is more appropriately set off by convex shaped pavements, still relatively uncluttered.

The third and much smaller bell mouth, at Whitchurch House, will have been contemporary with and originally formed part of the Coombe Park development.



Unfortunately the appearance of the first of these examples has been

marred over the years, first by use as a car park and latterly by a series of unmatching bollards and inconsistent surface treatments and it lacks the flattering convex pavements of the Manor Road entrance. More recently the owners have agreed to a floral planting scheme which has led to additional street furniture. As a heritage feature of some importance I would recommend a little tidying up. Bollards should in my view be confined to the wooden posts marking the pavement line. I will leave others to comment on the other temporary features but I believe the quality of Soane(?)'s work demands that the features either side of the entrance should at least be made to match each other and convex pavements (as at Manor Road) might also be considered.
