

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Wheatley—the village without a green

Mrs Stone will celebrate her hundredth birthday in May. Wheatley will also celebrate its thousandth birthday this year.

In order to mark the thousandth anniversary of the earliest surviving document about Wheatley the Oxfordshire Record Society is issuing a volume devoted to the records of Wheatley, edited by the Secretary of the Society, Dr W. O. Hassall of the Bodleian Library.

I naturally began my investigations by calling on him.

‘Our surviving links with the past,’ he said, ‘are many and various. My own home, for instance, the Manor House, has a connexion with John Milton. When the house was rebuilt in 1601 it was the property of his wife’s uncle. There is the picturesque whitewashed Cromwell Cottage, so called because it used to contain panelling from Holton Park where Cromwell’s daughter, Bridget, was married to General Ireton.

‘Then there is the lovely old house “Wayside” in Crown Road where Dr Johnson and Boswell were entertained to tea by William Mickle, the Scots poet.

‘The old parish pit is the last place in England where bullbaiting was practised. That was well over a hundred years ago. It was also used for badger-baiting and cock-fighting. There was a

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considerable element of undesirable toughs in those days.

‘In the children’s playground you will see a curious stone round house with a spiral top. This was built in 1834 as a lock-up for the drunks.

‘Wheatley stands on a geological fault where the clay meets the stone, so that we have dry-stone walls on one side and quickset hedges on the other. The clay-pits produced the bricks from which Keble, Didcot and North Oxford were built. The stone quarries produced the stone from which Merton and Windsor Castle were built.

‘On top of the hill above the village stands Wheatley grinding mill which was a landmark in 1671. It lost its sails in a great storm in 1940. It changed from grinding com to grinding ochre which was used for painting the farm wagons yellow.

‘The family of Cripps, from whom R. D. Blackmore probably took the name for his novel *Cripps the Carrier*, still live in it.

‘The ordnance map marks the Saxon burial ground and we too had our Roman villa. The old highway from London to Stratford-upon-Avon and the north ran through Wheatley, but not through Oxford. It went through Islip. The road now known as A40 was not built till 1775, and it by-passed the village, causing considerable loss to the shopkeepers and the closing of many inns. You will notice that the streets run parallel, the High Street, mainly seventeenth century running below Church Street which is mainly eighteenth century. The church is nineteenth century.

‘Before that Wheatley was a Chapel-of-Ease to Cuddesdon. The present Lord Elton’s grandfather was the first Vicar here and was a great power in the land doing a tremendous amount of good in the village.

‘The very large Vicarage has now been converted into a Children’s Home.’

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‘I have read somewhere,’ I said, ‘that as you walk through Wheatley you can see wooden trawler-bobbins for Grimsby fishing nets being turned out by the hundred.’

‘You’ll be lucky,’ said Dr Hassall. ‘I’ve never seen one and I’ve never met anyone who has ever seen one.*

I scented a mystery here, so my next port of call was Avery’s huge woodyard and sawmills adjoining the railway station.

Here I met two remarkable brothers, Albert George Avery who was celebrating his sixty-seventh birthday and his elder brother Harry who is nearly eighty-four but still spends all his days in the mill sharpening the forty-five foot long circular saws.

‘I’ve spent sixty-two years in the sawmill,’ said Harry Avery. ‘I remember those bobbins for fishing nets about thirty years ago but they transferred the trade to some place up in the Chilterns.’

He took me off to see the furnace where they were burning the sweet smelling sawdust and then into the engine house.

‘We’ve had that engine for forty years and she’s as good today as the day we bought her.’

Outside I noticed a crystal clear fast-flowing stream running beside the mill.

‘That comes,’ said the old man, ‘from Betty Brown’s Spring and it’s never failed or dried up in my lifetime, and they do say that it has never known to fail in all the history of Wheatley.’

‘Where,’ I asked, ‘do you get your timber?’

There were massive tree trunks lying about in hundreds.

‘We never use any foreign timber,’ said Harry, ‘we rely mainly on elm and the other mixed hard woods, oak and ash. There used to be a wonderful lot of elm all round Wheatley, in Shotover Park, and on Forest Hill, but it’s disappearing far too fast. We buy from a radius of about forty miles, but we sometimes have to go farther.’

‘In spite of being by the side of the railway line,’ I said, ‘I see you use lorries.’

‘We use nothing else. Lorries save loading and unloading twice, they’re quicker in time and cheaper in money. We’ve finished with the railway. It’s a thing of the past. We used to handle the biggest

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lot of timber in England.'

Albert George here took up the tale.

. 'Let me show you what we do.'

He took me first to a wonderful saw which was cutting up a thick trunk of elm into neat thin slices, with the ease of a ham-cutter or a bread-slicer.

'Those are for coffin-boards,' said Albert George, 'our biggest trade.'

They were piled up in hundreds.

'It certainly looks like a big demand,' I said.

'There's no end to it. We can't keep up with it. We can get the timber but we can't get the labour. All the lads go straight into the factories where they earn ten, twelve, fourteen and sixteen pounds a week straight away without training or skill. We keep our men all their lives, but we can't compete with those wages.'

'Are the coffins always of elm?' I asked.

'They mainly have to be these days. The undertaker's charges are so high that people can no longer afford oak which is of course dearer.'

He led me along to more piled up blocks of wood. 'Here,' he said, 'are chair seats, arm-chair seats, and stool tops.' In another section: 'This is timber for the farm. Stakes, rails, props and so on.'

Outside I watched men loading a lorry.

'That's going to the Nottinghamshire coal mines. Those are covering boards for the coal ceilings and blocks of what are called "chocks," cut into two and three feet lengths. We also do the floors of railway wagon trucks and ash planks for the bodies of motor cars.'

He fondled the sawn blocks of timber as he was talking.

'Oak, ash and elm,' he said. 'Those are the good woods of Old England and they're dying out fast. They added beauty to the countryside which is more than you can say for the Forestry Commissioners' idea of planting spruce and conifers as thick and dense as a regiment of soldiers. Trees are like people. If they're to grow properly they must have room to breathe and expand. There's

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no beauty in all these larches and firs.'

Wheatley is very timber-minded.

On the way down the hill I called in at Cullums, the wheelwright's shop, now acquired by Mr Weller, and here I met Mr Hollifield, the last of the Wheatley wheelwrights.

'When I left school,' he said, 'I was apprenticed at a shilling a week, and after six years I was given eighteen shillings a week. I married on twenty-five shillings a week.

'In early days I was mainly making farm wagons and carts. It used to cost about thirty-two pounds ten shillings to make a wagon and took about six months and we were lucky if we made a profit of ten shillings on each wagon. In the winter we made the wheels with the body standing in the shop. That industry practically died out in 1919. There has been no wagon-making for years. I've made butcher's carts, baker's carts, gentlemen's gigs, all sorts. Tying the wheels was the most difficult job. Bending the solid iron tyres, which were sometimes four inches across, and firing them correctly took quite a bit of doing what with allowing for expansion and all that.

'Do you know that in the Oxfordshire wagon there was never a straight square piece of wood? They were always curved slightly. The Oxfordshire wagon framework was in two separate sections.

'I once made a model wagonette, to the scale of one third the ordinary size, and now it is being used in a gentleman's garden for gathering leaves.'

'And what do you do now that there are no more wooden wheels and wagons to make?' I asked.

'I work on the bench. Lately I've done a kissing-gate for a private house, a lych-gate for a churchyard, and before you go I must show you a bookcase I've made for our own house.'

Mr Hollifield's house faces the carpenter's yard. Two of his grandchildren were very angry with me for interrupting their television programme in order that I should see the beautifully made oak bookcase of their grandfather. I wondered if either of them would ever read the books in the case. I felt pretty certain that

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they would never be as good craftsmen as their grandfather.

In this village, which contains so many excellent elderly craftsmen, there is no one among the younger generation willing to carry on their father's craft. The factories are mainly and schools in part responsible for this.

My heart sang as I heard the music of the hammer on the anvil in Church Street. Wheatley still has a blacksmith, Wilfrid Sheldon, who is also churchwarden.

'My father and my grandfather had this smithy before me,' he said proudly.

'And your son?' I asked.

'My son works in a bank in Oxford,' he replied. 'I've got one assistant. He's been here forty-two years.'

To my delight I saw that the smoky walls were covered with horseshoes.

'So the horse isn't quite extinct in Wheatley,' I said.

'It's quickly dying out,' he said. 'I am the only blacksmith for miles around, so I get all the shoeing there is, for the South Oxfordshire hunt, the Horspath riding school, pony clubs, the few farm horses that still exist, and so on.'

The stone cobbled floor of the shoeing shed looked bare and clean. No horses today I thought. A farmer came in with an iron shaft to be repaired.

'The trouble is,' said Mr Sheldon, 'that most farmers don't trouble about repairs. They prefer to get a new part.'

I began examining bits of iron rods.

'The rise in the cost of iron is one of the worrying things. It used to cost me seven pounds ten shillings a ton. It now costs me fifty pounds a ton.'

And somebody standing by me said:

'And Mr Sheldon still charges the same low charges for his shoes.'

He took no notice of that but smiled and handed me a very flat, wide and unusual shoe.

'I don't suppose iron cost so much when that was made. That is

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an ox-shoe made for the oxen when they used them for ploughing.'

'I should hate to shoe a cow,' I said.

I was surprised to see the old hand-bellows still in use and a stone trough that looked as old as a Saxon coffin. The anvil, he told me, was forty years old.

It was Mrs Sheldon, clerk to the Parish Council, Wilfrid Sheldon's namesake, who lives a few doors away, who told me about Mrs Stone.

'We all live to a great age in Wheatley,' she said, 'but Mrs Stone will be a hundred years old in May. Unfortunately she's bedridden.'

It was Mrs Sheldon who told me about the garish brick building which bears the jolly name of 'The Merry Bells'.

'Nearly all the village activities take place there,' she said. 'It was once a Temperance hotel, now it is run by a committee and hired out to the various societies.'

'In other words it is the Village Hall,' I said.

'It functions as the Village Hall. The W.I. who are over a hundred strong and are very flourishing hold their whist drives and classes there. They have Old Time dances there and once a week a mobile cinema. The Vegetable Produce Association have Whist Drives and meetings there. There's an Old Folks' Club, called the "Not so Young Club" and we have a flourishing Mothers' Union and Women's British Legion. Mrs Morgan of Mulberry Court has turned over her bam to be used as the Church Hall where the G.F.S. meet.

It used to be the Salvation Army Barracks. Mr Mackintosh runs a Youth Club in the Congregational Church, and there's a Men's Licensed Club at the "Lion." '

I heard more about village social activities from Mrs Perkins at the 'King and Queen.'

As I walked in four stalwart elderly gentlemen walked out.

'It's their dinner time,' said Mrs Perkins. "They're four pensioners who call themselves the "Idle Rich." They come in every morning at half past ten, settle down to dominoes and get up

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at the stroke of twelve, as you've seen.

'I was born in this house, and I remember when they used to play a sort of quoits game called "Corks and Leathers." That was before the licensing hours and there was one old man who used to come in at six o'clock in the morning and he'd play all day. Then there was the wheelwright who always came in with his bag on his back and stood over by the fireplace. They always said that if ever he took his bag off his back he'd stay till eleven at night, and sure enough he always did.

'In those days we had a Song Club and met at the "Merry Bells." I took the leading part in *II Trovatore*. We used to amuse ourselves in those days. Now television keeps everybody away.

Mr Anson, the headmaster of the very costly and handsome modern Secondary school which holds three hundred and sixty pupils drawn from about a dozen surrounding villages, agreed with that.

'I have a Drama Club in the school for adults in the evenings, dressmaking and bee-keeping classes, lectures on America by the W.E.A. First Aid, Woodwork and a Choral Society. We're doing the *Messiah*. I circularize all the village but they're slow to respond. They prefer television.'

He showed me the magnificent hall and stage where children were playing net-ball. I saw children at work in the library, in the labs., in the art school and in the domestic science room. It would be difficult to imagine a more expensively equipped or more up-to-date set of buildings.

I asked him what was the fate of the boys and girls.

'Most of them go into industry,' he said.

'They won't follow the crafts of their fathers, wheelwrights, blacksmiths and so on?' I asked.

'No.'

So we get fewer and fewer of the happy and efficient skilled craftsmen of the calibre of Wilfrid Sheldon and Mr Hollifield whose work is their pride and passion.

I got a startling and disquieting view of the sporting activities of

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Wheatley from Tom Barlow, the walls of whose home are hung with photographs of past Wheatley cricket and football teams.

‘We used to have grand football and cricket teams in Wheatley.’ he said, ‘when I was playing, before I broke my leg playing in the Oxford Junior League. We once held three cups in cricket, the Littlemore Cup, the Oxford League Cup, and the Wyful Cup.

‘We used to get as many as three hundred spectators. Now we’ve got no ground.

‘The cricket team had to play only away matches last year and the footballers have had to play on a rough field behind Rectory Farm which is very wet.’

‘What’s happened to the Wheatley Ground?’ I asked.

‘The educational authorities acquired it to build the new Secondary School on it. It was a ground on which the Wheatley boys had worked day and night to get the pitch right. They promised to let us play on the school ground until we got another to take its place, and now they won’t let us play there, and we haven’t got another ground.’

‘I’ve never known a village without a recreation ground. What happens?’

‘If anybody wants a game he has to go to Headington to play.

Tom Barlow, who is one of the last of the smallholders, with ten acres and two cows has another grievance.

‘There’s a move on foot to acquire my little bit of land compulsorily for a new housing estate. I’ve built it up from nothing, and now wean calves and fatten them till they are two years old, about three a year. I also fatten pigs. It just keeps a roof over my head, but if they take my land away they take my livelihood. I don’t want to make a fortune, but I do want to make a living, and all I shall get in compensation is the agricultural value of the land. The Farmers’ Union are supporting me and the case is to be heard next month.’

Alderman William Tombs of College Farm, who was Wheatley’s first Chairman of the Parish Council twenty-five years ago and has remained Chairman ever since, told me that he had

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introduced electric light, main drainage and a water supply into the village and that six years ago it was reckoned to be the healthiest village in the country.

‘Doctors,’ he said shrewdly, ‘wouldn’t come here to five in such numbers otherwise. We have put up one hundred and ten council houses which everyone agrees are exceptionally handsome, and sixty more have been put up by private enterprise, but of course we still want more.

‘The population has risen in my time from 900 to 1670 and is still growing. The village is of course changing. We have now only three farms of which the largest, Rectory Farm, is one of four hundred and twenty acres owned by Mr Graves who fattens beasts, sheep, and pigs.

‘But we are still very much a village and we mean to keep it so. I think it’s the best village in England. We are the only village in England, to my knowledge, with a thatched bank.

‘There is only one big blot on our landscape, and that is the rag and bone factory the smell from which, when the wind is in the south, causes a good deal of discomfort. The licence comes up for renewal in September and there is to be an enquiry.’

I learnt more of old Wheatley from Mr Roberts the owner of Holton Mill which is mentioned in Domesday book. The old wooden mill-wheel still stands above the Thame where the river runs through picturesque water meadows so beautiful that I was not surprised to hear Mr Roberts say that this sector of country had been scheduled for preservation.

He has built himself a fine house of local stone just above the flood level and in the converted piggeries at the back he employs about a dozen Wheatley girls in manufacturing, packing and despatching the very famous and efficacious remedy for chapped hands and sore feet known as Melrose Tablets. The compound that I saw being mixed looked like rich yellow butter being churned. All the work is done in a pleasant quiet atmosphere under one roof.

Mr Roberts also has a controlling interest in Brookside Garage on the London Road next door to a cafe bearing the ominous name

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‘Last Chance.’

He took me for a conducted tour through the village and showed me the magnificent wrought-iron decorated sign on the ‘King’s Arms,’ the Model Bakery, and the old churchyard.

‘The children used to have a grand time digging up the skulls here and then rolling them down the street.’

He shewed me what was left of the old village green and the Breech field. ‘The Breech field was mentioned in the thirteenth century and it means waste land. There used to be a tannery here and there also used to be a big market. Today as you see, they content themselves with a little stall of fruit and flowers outside the shop which was once the “Chequers” inn. Most of the old inns have gone. The doctor’s house is an offshoot of what was once the “Crown,” a famous coaching house.’

We stopped by the Wheatley brook which runs past the ‘Chequers’ to talk to a postman on a bicycle. He told me that there were four postmen in all and that there were two deliveries a day with a twenty mile round. ‘And we’re glad of the people who regularly give us tea. So many of the houses haven’t got letterboxes and it means stretching up to drop letters through windows or kneeling down to push them under the doors.’

That was an aspect of the postman’s life that hadn’t occurred to me.

I left Wheatley at dusk when the blue smoke was curling up from the cottage chimneys towards a new moon clear-cut in the cloudless sky. There were bonfires in the gardens, lights in lattice windows, cats stealing across the road (I have never seen so many cats as I saw in Wheatley), and here and there I heard voices of children playing in the road and invisible dogs barking.

And as I passed the one-storeyed, uneven tiled whitewashed Cromwell Cottage the door opened and Mr Weller beckoned me inside.

‘There’s a comer cupboard,’ he said, ‘that has been here ever since the house was built and here’s a Cromwellian rapier that I picked up in the scrap-heap. Fun, isn’t it?’

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Fun, friendly, very old, and very much a village. That is Wheatley.