

Golden age of steam recalled

OLD and new have come together in a quiet Oxfordshire village, where a bygone era has been preserved in a housing development.

In a simple road naming Wheatley Parish Council has kept alive part of village history, and recaptured the golden age of steam railway.

The council approached residents after South Oxfordshire District Council and asked for road names for a new housing estate, being built on the site of the old railway station.

Parish council clerk Mrs Pam Simmonds explains how Wheatley's redoubtable, community spirit came to the rescue:

"We got a tremendous number of suggestions - it was a real village effort. There are quite a few people here who remember the railway line."

The new estate off Ladder Hill is being developed in phases by builders Edo in Kidlington. When completed, it will contain more than 120 homes, but the plans have not gone through without a fight from villagers.

But Mrs Simmonds says that once construction got under way, the parish wanted to make their own contribution.

"When parishes get new developments in the area, they often get saddled with terrible or bland names.

"We wanted to preserve connections in the village with previous activities on the site,"

Two evocative names were selected. Kimber Close: named after the last station master at Wheatley, already graces the new estate.

And it will soon be joined by a second name plate, bearing the name Kelham Hall Drive.

This has an even more intriguing derivation, and prompted one rail enthusiast to produce an exhaustive history when the developers greeted the suggestion with blank stares.

A railway engine built in 1931, took that name from a fourteenth century country mansion at Newark in Nottinghamshire.

The engine was based at Oxford from about 1939 to 1951, and it was during this time that it was a regular sight at Wheatley, one of the stations on the Oxford to Princes Risborough line.

Records show that the station buildings at Wheatley were very modest, and one unusual feature was the lack of a footbridge. Passengers wanting to change platform had to leave the station and cross the Ladder Hill road bridge, before coming back in.

With cheaper travel being provided by bus, however, the line was forced to close, and the last train passed through Wheatley in January 1963