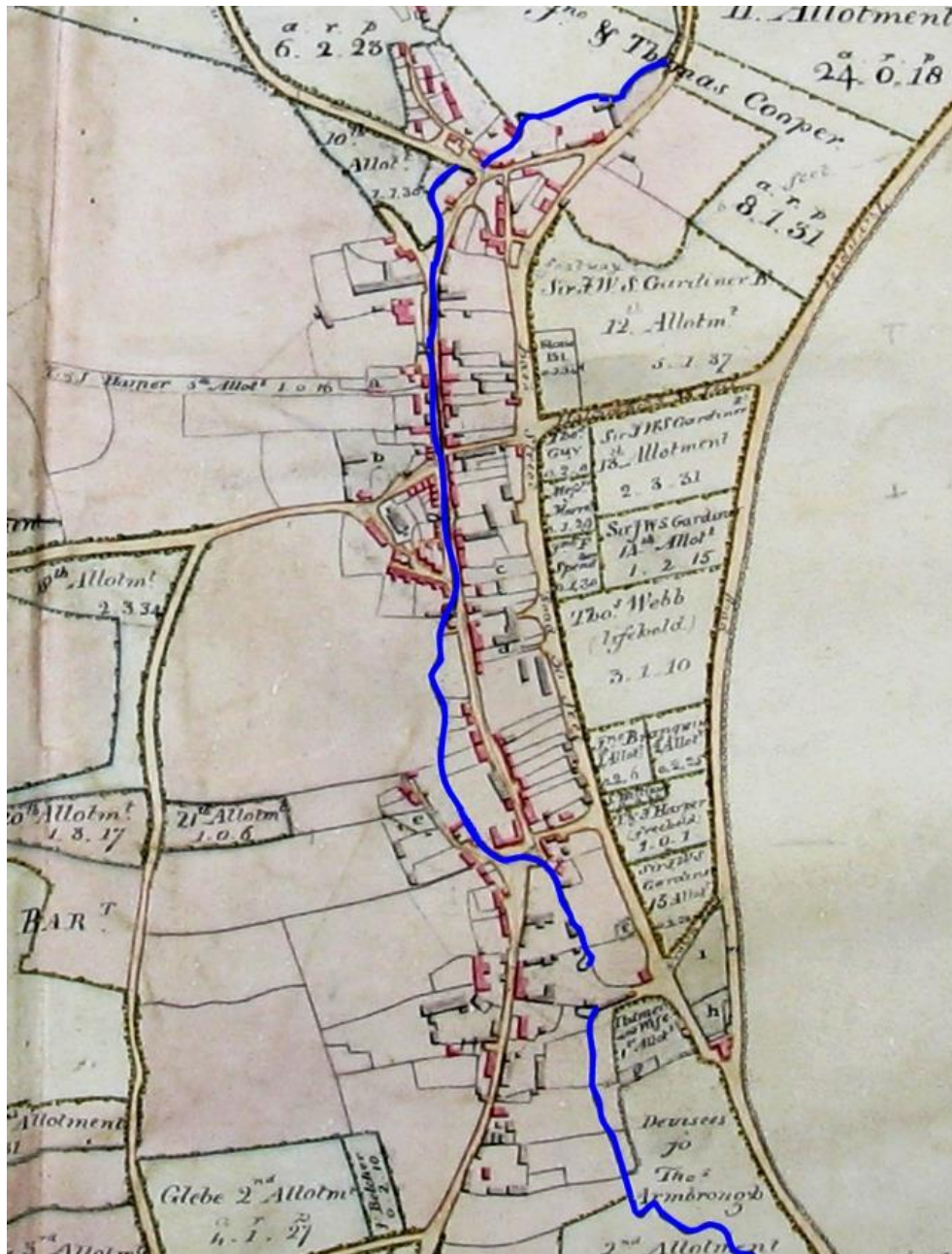


Tanning was a known industry in Wheatley from, at least, 1773. In December of that year, a yard was let to a fellmonger, leather-dresser or parchment-maker. In order to carry on this business, a good and plentiful source of water was needed, so the brook coming through the back yards of the properties was apposite. Wheatley brook ran along the High Street until the end of Chillingworth House garden when it went south and behind the (current) shops and the remainder of the houses along High Street then emerging and crossing Crown Square, all as shown below. (The brook is now in a culvert under the entire length of the High Street but can still flood).

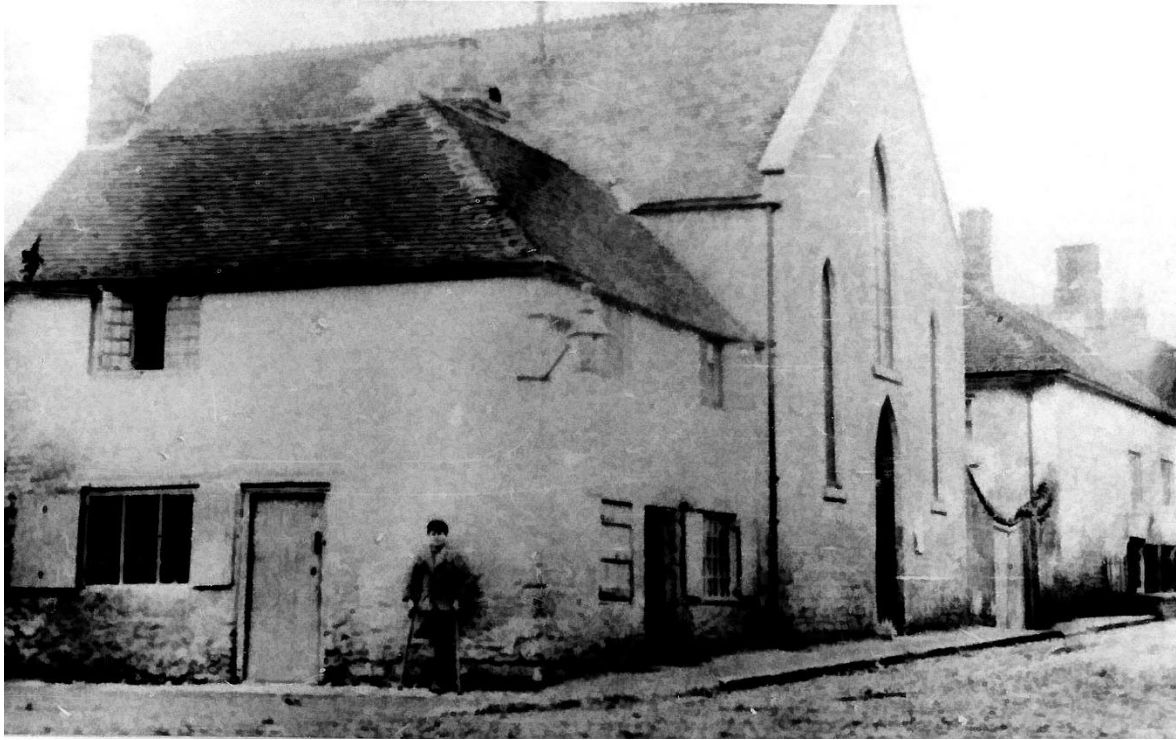


As tanning was a rather messy business this resulted in the likelihood of contamination of the brook through the preparation of the hides and the use of bark to stain them. However, being at the eastern and less populated end of the village meant that this would be less of a problem so this business seems to have been concentrated here. Many members of the Crook family appear to have been engaged in the trade, certainly from the beginning of the 19th century, but probably before. There were two Noah Crooks of about the same age, one living

1757-1825 and the other 1763-1826. In the next generation there were George, William and James. The family were also involved in parchment making. Large quantities of dried oak bark would be delivered to the local tannery. Here the bark's tannin would be extracted ready for use by soaking the bark, now finely ground, in tanks filled with cold water. These tanks were called leaching pits. The tanning of raw animal hides using oak bark could take up to twelve months or more. Before the hides could be tanned, they had to be prepared. They were washed and cleaned and then placed in lime baths to loosen the hair roots and lower layers of epidermis so that both could be removed. The length of time that the hides remained in the lime baths depended on the quality of leather required. Soft shoe leather could need up to six weeks. After removal the hides were scraped clean (the job of the fellmonger) and finally placed in the pits containing the tanning liquor before being, at a later stage, hung to dry. The coloured map extract below shows, shaded yellow with the brook in blue, the Wheatley buildings believed to have been used for its tanning business, and these buildings fronting High Street.



The buildings with High Street frontage used for the business included the following shown with their current use. The large upstairs room in Cromwell House was used for drying hides, and this passed into the hands of James Slater in 1852. Roberts House was originally in the single ownership of Richard Williams, who had bought it for £38 in 1752. In 1775, he advertised for two parchment makers in Jacksons Journal. These properties remained in Williams's family until Noah Crook bought Roberts House for £60. Later, in March 1787, John Turner, parchment maker, who had worked 18 months with fellmonger and parchment-maker Williams, absconded, leaving a quantity of skins in frames unfinished. Notice was posted giving his description and asking for information as to his whereabouts. On Noah's death his wife, Mary, sold it in 1836. The Congregational Chapel, below and without the schoolroom building to the east, as shown in a pre-1897 photograph, was previously used as a bark barn.



The tanning business seems to have had died out, however, by the mid-1800s, and the brook was culverted by 1858. In the early 1840s, William Waine who had been a tanner and hide dealer, sold the bark barn to the Congregationalists, who founded their church here in 1843, after Wheatley people had worshipped since 1794 in rooms owned by Samuel Standley and Sarah Allen and others elsewhere.