

The Genesis of the Wheatley Society

In the early 1970s, Wheatley was expanding rapidly. The old village centre together with the houses that had been added earlier in the twentieth century along Church Road, up Ladder Hill and down the London Road were being bulked out by developments such as Beech Road and Farm Close Road. The rising population certainly required more shops and services, but the building of the parade of shops opposite the Merry Bells — clearly undertaken with no concern for the architectural context — showed how easy it would be for the fabric of the old village to be eaten away progressively for lack of proper oversight. In 1973, the news that the Co-op was seeking planning permission to demolish Vale Brook House and build a supermarket next to the new shops alarmed those who felt that Wheatley's best features deserved to be protected. Similarly, the proposal to build a new primary school off Crown Road in order to free up the site of the old school indicated the extent to which important elements of the village's character were vulnerable to uncontrolled development.

A small group of like-minded individuals — John Minett, Jon Drake, Charles Brock, myself and one or two more — decided it was necessary to create a channel whereby the residents could express their views as developments were proposed rather than having to wait for periodic local elections. Moreover, discussions with friends and neighbours confirmed a widespread desire for a community organisation that would bring together all aspects of village life not already covered by existing bodies (Church groups, British Legion, Women's Institute, etc.). Accordingly, I produced a flyer setting out the case for such an organisation and inviting all residents to an open meeting. We delivered a copy to every house in the village and booked the Merry Bells in preparation.

On the evening in question, the hall was packed. The meeting, which I chaired, revealed strong support for the idea of an organisation that would monitor and speak out on proposed developments as well as putting forward its own ideas regarding desirable changes. But there was equally strong support for an organisation that would provide a framework for specific interest groups: drama, music, local history and footpaths were mentioned. A steering committee was elected with the remit to draft a constitution reflecting the ideas put forward at the meeting and to present it at a second meeting a month later. As those attending departed, one person commented: 'Wheatley has woken up.'

At the second meeting, attendance was lower but the proposed constitution was approved overwhelmingly together with the name The Wheatley Society. A committee was elected, with Jon Drake as Chair: membership included individuals committed to forming an Environment Group, a Drama Group and a Local History Group.