

Individuality of Wheatley

A transcript of an article by Anthony Steven, in 1936
(probably from the Oxford Times or Oxford Mail)

I discovered Wheatley - a village invisible to the casual observer; a place of growing prosperity, of fierce feuds and, as someone explained to me, of "terrible independence." And Wheatley has individuality. It is the second healthiest village in the British Isles.

This is a curious fact, and it is one of which Mr William Tombs, the Chairman of the Parish council, is justly proud.

RESIDENTIAL CENTRE

"I could prove it to you with statistics," he told me, "but they're unnecessary. I think it is more satisfactory proof that Wheatley is becoming a popular residential centre. Many Oxford businessmen have settled here, and I think that many more will follow them."

"The population has nearly doubled in the last twenty years, and today there are between 1,400 and 1,500 people living in Wheatley. And it is the new element which has caused the discord. Employed in Oxford shops, the Morris Works, or the Pressed Steel Works, they missed the facilities available in the City and sought to bring them to Wheatley. At this the natives roused themselves and declared with a fine conservative vigour that they wanted no change. They were content with the old conditions.

But although the feud still exists, it seems that the natives are fighting a losing battle. The shops in the village are unexpected both in their number and in the quality of their goods.

New houses have been built for the industrial workers, but I learnt from Mr Tombs that there are very few slums. Some of the older cottages could do with repairs, but they are not in a bad way.

ARTIST'S ADVENTURE

Indeed, many of them are so charming that artists visit Wheatley on their account. "One day" Mr Tombs told me laughing, I saw a bloke running all the way along the vegetable gardens, hopping the walls, getting down on his knees and squinting this way an' that with a really mad look in his eye. I knew what that meant. One of the chappies from the Littlemore Asylum had escaped, so I rang up the police without more ado, and up they comes and arrests him. And what d'you think? He wasn't from Littlemore at all, son, he was an Oxford professor, no looney, but a gentleman come sketching."

Coopers (Wheatley) Brickworks, Ltd. is a flourishing concern, employing some 67 men and turning out between 150,000 and 160,000 bricks a week. These go as far as London, Brighton, and Southampton, and are remarkable for their fine quality. For, although some are machine made, over two-thirds of the facing bricks are hand-made.

HOW BRICKS ARE MADE

I was shown over the works by Herr Habla, a charming Austrian, who will shortly reorganise the whole process, modernising it and so improving the quality of the products. Together we explored the pit face and the giant machinery, and I was shown how the bricks are hand-made.

"It is worth our while to make hant-mate breeks. The price they fetch is excellent." Herr Habla explained. I saw men busy working raw clay with their hands and putting it into moulds and cutting it with wires. "Exactly as they mate them 4,000 years ago," said Herr Habla.

Outside in the sunlight the scene was busy and the effect magnificently pictorial. Men in gaily

coloured shirts trundled past with barrow-loads of golden bricks, their background huge kilns and the great chimney-stacks with their rolling streamers of black smoke.

As Herr Habla pointed out, Belgium sold something like 500,000,000 bricks in this country last year. It is a golden age for English brickworks, and the products of Wheatley, whether they be common wire-cut bricks or bullnose, squints or special shapes, find a ready market.

TIMBER MILL

Not far away beyond the railway station lies the timber mill of William Avery and Sons, Ltd. Here I saw splendid elms and splendid oaks, once standing proudly in the fields and woods of Oxfordshire, now lying in giant piles, waiting for the crane to place them within reach of the ravenous saws.

The wood is cut to suitable sizes and sent to the High Wycombe furniture factories, whence it eventually emerges as the polished product for the bedroom, dining-room or lounge.

Thus Wheatley finds employment for all its men who are worthy of the name, and thus it establishes its right to think and act independently.

No stranger may rule the roost in this village. Wheatley may be led but it will never be driven. I began to realise this when I heard the tale of one unfortunate vicar. Some 23 years ago he diverted, perhaps unintentionally, the proceeds of a local charity. The entire village rose in arms. His effigy, clad in parson's clothes, was paraded through the village, headed by a boys' band, carried through his own house, and finally burnt at the stake.

STOCKS PRESERVED

It was a strong lesson, administered by a people with a spirit of "terrible independence."

Perhaps this fierce insistence on justice is one of Wheatley's many attractions. An attraction of a more material character is provided by the many public houses: but drunkenness has never been a popular pastime in Wheatley, and the 18th century 'Roundhouse' contains a pair of stocks where many a merry fellow was left to cool his aching brow.

But for real comfort and excellent food Wheatley can boast near at hand Brimpton Grange Hotel. It is a fine old building set in pleasant gardens, and Captain Bruford has done a great deal to make this place an ideal "pause" for the traveller crossing England.

And every Saturday evening, in the comfortable superiority of white tie and tails, or evening gown, you may wear the itch out of your feet on the fine floor in the "Bam." There is a good band and Ken Vokings, the pianist, has wizardry in his fingertips.

This then is the last but not the least reason why the tired Oxford businessman finds Wheatley a welcome escape from the migraine of office life.

Wheatley has a lot to offer besides health. I was immensely surprised.