

## The Wheatley Railway

A talk by Robert Avery (12/02/04)

The railway arrived in Wheatley in 1864 and the last passenger service ended in 1963.

When Robert Avery was a boy in Wheatley, the local railway played a significant part in the life of the village, and he was fascinated by it. He made friends with the people who worked in the station, and studied the timetables of the trains which passed through it. Railways became a lifelong interest.

On Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> February 2004 he gave a talk to the Wheatley Society, illustrated with photographs contrasting views from the 1950s and early 1960s with those of the present day. He spoke what it was like when the railway flourished in Wheatley.

- Photograph 1 (August 1950) Showed a London-bound passenger train passing under the Wheatley Railway Bridge, on Ladder hill, looking towards Oxford.
- Photograph 2 showed the same view in 2004 (Kimber Close)
- Photograph 3 (January 1963) Goods train (engine 6124) in Wheatley station in the snow, looking towards Oxford.

There were five people employed at Wheatley Station: the Station Master; two porters; one signalman-porter who was trained to take over from the signalman when necessary, and a 'Tad-porter'. The lad-porter was usually a boy of 14 or 15 who had just left school. One of his duties was to deliver the parcels which had arrived by train.

- Photograph 4 showed the same view in 2004 (Kimber Close)
- Photograph 5 showed a passenger train at the end of the "up platform", with footpath to Farm Close, August 1950
- Photograph 6 showed a goods train (engine 75007), in the station, looking towards Oxford with a view of the goods yard.

Until the Second World War, almost all the machinery and materials for the local trades people and farmers were transported by train, rather than by road. Farm animals, too, were moved around in this way, and trains would often stop, by arrangement, between stations, to unload a flock of sheep or herd of cows.

- Photograph 7 showed a view of a goods train (engine 857) in the station, taken from Ladder Hill Bridge, looking towards London
- Photograph 8 showed the same view in 2004
- Photograph 9 showed a goods train (engine 857) in the station, with the saw mill in the background
- Photograph 10 showed the same view in 2004
- Photograph 11 showed a London bound goods train approaching Ladder Hill Bridge through what is now the gardens of Howe Close.

Robert told a wonderful story of the three Miss Briggs who lived in Combe House at the top of Ladder Hill. They would telephone London stores like Harrods and Fortnum and Masons, to order delicacies for their lunch: asparagus, strawberries, and foie gras, for example, and ask to have them put on the train at Paddington to be dropped off at Wheatley. It was the lad-porter's job to take them up the hill and deliver them to the Miss Briggs' in time for lunch!

In 1962 (the year before the railway was closed to passenger trains and only two years before it

was closed altogether) the rail track through Wheatley was re-laid. However, an audit showed that the line was financially unviable, and the following year saw the end of passenger trains, and a year or so later the end of goods traffic also.

Robert was able to tell us the departure and arrival times of all the trains that ran through Wheatley. The early train (time?) was for the men who worked at Cowley. Then the second train was used by people going to work in Oxford.

Robert explained about the strange racquet-shaped 'tokens' which had to be exchanged by the Fireman at each station, to ensure safety. Only the train carrying the token was allowed to proceed along the single track line.

The train-drivers were idiosyncratic and rather proud men. Some of them were autocratic in manner towards the lower railway workers, others indulged in humorous and sometimes practical jokes.

The slides: NB the first eleven slides are on disc 1, and the last is on disc 2. (The first slide on the disc is the title page, therefore the numbering is different from the number of photographs.)

1. Title page: The Railway at Wheatley
2. The Wheatley Railway Bridge, on Ladder Hill, looking towards Oxford, August 1950
3. Same view 2004 from Kimber Drive (Close)
4. Wheatley Station, January 1963
5. Same view 2004 from Kimber Drive (Close)
6. End of "Up platform", with footpath to Farm Close, August 1950
7. Looking towards Oxford, showing goods yard, August 1962
8. View from Ladder Hill Bridge, looking towards London, May 1961
9. View from Ladder Hill, 2004
10. Station and Saw Mill, looking towards London, May 1961
11. Same view from Kimber Drive (Close)
12. London bound goods train approaching Ladder Hill bridge through what are now the gardens of Howe Close.