

MODERN CITIZENSHIP: RECENT GROWTH OF THE VILLAGE OF WHEATLEY (A paper submitted by Mr J G Key, Wheatley C.E. (Mixed) School (Headmaster 1925 - 1954)

What's in a name? The word "Wheatley" is apt to conjure up pictures of fields of wheat and it is necessary to rid oneself of this idea in order to begin to understand the village of Wheatley which lies six miles east of Oxford. The word is really derived from the O.E. "HWAET" meaning sharp of bold in the moral sense and the O.E. "LEY" or "LEAY" meaning clearing or open space. The correct interpretation is therefore, "the clearing or open space inhabited by a bold or active people".

The above explanation is necessary in order to understand that the village cannot be classed as rural even by name though often mistakenly looked upon as such. URBAN? Yes. RURAL? No.

The changes since the GREAT WAR have been such as almost to cut agriculture out of the lives of the people when considered as a means of livelihood. Prior to 1914 the chief occupations followed were:

- (A) In two timber yards
- (B) In brickmaking
- (C) Horticulture
- (D) Agriculture

None of these could pay a high wage and many of the dwellings were very poor indeed. An attempt to solve the slum problem led to a change which had an almost revolutionary effect though I doubt if it was at all visualised by the originators of the scheme to build upwards of fifty council Houses. These were to be rented at from 12/6 to 14/6 per week, and here came the problem. The people for whom the houses were intended could not contemplate an increase in rent amounting in some cases to 300%, with the result that a newer and better class of workman was attracted to the village. These people did not depend on local employment but worked at such places as Morris' Motor Works and The Pressed Steel Company at Cowley. It was not long before a higher standard of living in this new part of the village had its effect upon the rest of the population which hastened to take advantage of the higher wages to be obtained nearer Oxford. Here I may say that the population has risen by 50% in the last 20 years.

The general result of this was by no means solely beneficial, in that, of the two types of wage earners, one could be relied upon to live in a more or less economical manner, whereas the other had to be educated in ways which concealed their true object. Prior to 1914 a boy who had left school was quite content with his eight to ten shillings a week. What is to be done with this mentality which suddenly finds it is capable of commanding four, five and even six times the wage? The example of the new-comers did much - but any lasting effect could only be produced by true fusion through social activities. Fortunately the building in the district was not confined entirely to the Council Houses for more than fifty private houses sprang up which are occupied by people possessing some talent for leadership. Gradually there has come into existence social activities of an all embracing character such as the Women's Institute, Nursing Association, Local Hospital Committee, Girls' Social Service League, Men's Club, Boys' Club, and Boy Scouts.

These have been started by individuals interested in different activities without any true planning. There is no outstanding personality who can be looked upon as Leader of the Leaders, with the result that the various organisations are run more or less independently and with a tendency to look upon the others as unnecessary. There can be no doubt that a pooling of resources would lead to greater harmony and benefit to the parish as a whole. Here arises an interesting point in village life. Who is to be the outstanding personality? Is he necessary? Is the presence of the rapidly vanishing old type of Lord of the Manor essential to successful planning? Would one person meet the need or does it require a group? I hesitate to supply the answers.

The present position seems to be that there is a danger of unorganised organisations chiefly due to the lack of any real nucleus round which to build a planned society. Indeed I would say that there is a grave danger of over-stimulation especially among the children.

There is another factor to be considered. I have already mentioned that agriculture played no very important part in the lives of the people, yet even that little has become less. Is this movement away from the land in the best interests of all? The village holds many people who might reasonably be expected to live in or near the city of Oxford and their presence has introduced a new outlook which does not visualise the land as a means of livelihood.

Their lives are shaped by a town income spent in urban surroundings. On the whole their work is governed according to hours prescribed by law. This attitude to work has made itself felt among the population as a whole. Ten years ago the average inhabitant was not guided in his work by the clock but by his duty to the work in hand. Now it is becoming increasingly difficult to find the individual whose work is his hobby or rather his hobby is his means of income.

As for Local Government, the village of Wheatley possesses a Parish Council of which it has just cause to be proud. To explain this it is necessary to give a little of its history. In 1854 Wheatley was made a Civil Parish and three years later became a District under the Public Health Act. In 1894 came the change to Urban District Council followed, in 1932, by the latest development to Parish Council with its executive powers limited to a 3d rate.

It was at first thought that this final alteration would lead to lack of personal contact and was viewed with some misgiving owing to the curtailment of local powers. Experience however, has proved the reverse to be true for the Parish Council, which meets regularly once a month, now looks upon itself as a watchdog whose duty it is to guard the parish rights and privileges. Through its activities the past ten years have seen the introduction of gas, electricity, public water supply and superior roads. It is true that the rates have risen to 13 shillings in the pound (Id produces £20.1s.9d) but the amenities provided are generally considered to be worth the expense.

There is another interesting point. I refer to the change when the executive powers of the local council were taken over by the much wider District Council. Has this alteration been beneficial? It certainly has not led to a reduction in administrative charges, but there can be no doubt about the ultimate greater efficiency. In this place, at any rate, the members of the Parish Council have been placed on their mettle and are constantly initiating

improvements which have to pass through various channels before being carried into effect. It may be a major movement, such as Water Supply requiring an additional shilling on the rates or it may be merely a matter of a few pot-holes but whatever the issues involved, the initiators are guided by local requirements and these receive the benefit of the wider experience of the district and County councils. Thus no heavy capital expense can be undertaken without due care and planning.

The Parish Council may not be aware of the fact but, to a mere observer like myself, it would seem that the change has made for a truer economic planning aiming at the greatest welfare of the greatest number.

It may be noticed that there has so far been no mention of two very important features of village life, the Church and the School. I am diffident to speak of either of these factors chiefly because it is often the one at the centre of things who is the least competent to judge the effects of the whole.

The attendance at Church has of late years fallen off but I am sure it is not due to any decline in religion. Rather would I say that there is an absence of compulsory religion or the type that attends church in the hope of finding a sovereign at the bottom of the cup of wine. My work or hobby as village schoolmaster may not permit of the detached view which is necessary for correct judgement but I should suggest that the centre of life here is nearer the School than the Church. Nor is the reason far to seek. The school must of necessity cater for all types and there is a common meeting ground which few other activities afford.

Reorganisation has, as yet, but barely reached us and we are still in the happy position of having the children right up to the age of fourteen. The constant and uninterrupted point of contact between school and home is of inestimable value when schooldays are over. I consider those last few words to be very important in that the success or failure of a school depends to a very great extent upon what happens to its pupils when they leave school rather than what successes they achieved while they were in compulsory attendance.

To sum up, it would be fairly safe to conclude that the village of Wheatley with its 1,500 inhabitants is fortunate in its local government but there is an urgent need for truer economic planning for leisure on a centralised basis.

Perhaps it would be fitting to conclude with a question:

"Should the social life of the village be under the direction of the Parish Council?"