

Anthony Wood

IT may not be much to look at now. In fact most people would probably call it a load of old junk. The 48-year-old Ransomes and Rapier steam crane stands in the yard of the Wheatley sawmills, its 35-foot jib slanting vacantly aloft, its five ton chassis driving its wheels deep into the earth.

But Alfred Thurston, the foreman, hopes an enthusiast will buy it when it comes under the hammer on January 8 and that it won't be knocked down as scrap.

Though his employers replaced it with an electric crane three years ago, he would still be using it if he had his way.

"With steam you can ease a log off the ground so gently," he says, "you can hardly see it move. With the electric it's one snatch and that's it."

Nonetheless, he recognises he can't put back the clock and now at the age of 55 he is preparing with commendable cheerfulness for an even more momentous change in his working life.

For the sawmills have been sold to Dolton, Bournes and Dolton, the High Wycombe and Oxford firm of timber importers, and after the superfluous plant and machinery have been auctioned on Saturday week will become a centre for planing and cutting imported softwoods.

"I'd still have carried on with the old English timber," says Alfred, smiling a little sadly. "But my boss said he couldn't get enough to make it worthwhile any more and I suppose he's right."

Time was when Wheatley stood in the middle of a densely wooded area and as early as 1524, a Subsidy Roll shows, a sawyer by the name of John Sparke was working there.

But by the 17th century the number of trees was already diminishing and when late in the 19th century a High Wycombe chair maker called William Avery, attracted by a site alongside the railway station, conceived the idea of setting up a sawmills in the village, he

Now Alfred's favourite crane is for sale

was advised against it.

Nonetheless, he came and by the time Alfred decided to give up working on a farm at Great Milton and join the mill in 1925, had a flourishing business.

Alfred says: "We used to unload two wagon-loads of tree-trunks with the steam crane every day in those days and 20-30 men were employed cutting them up into coffin boards, chair seats, stakes, fencing that sort of thing."

But as the sawmills prospered the number of oaks, elms, ashes, beeches and other trees in the area decreased and when William Avery's sons sold the business in 1956 it was nothing to travel 50-60 miles in search of timber.

Today they are a shadow of what they once were. Only four men are employed there and the trade is nothing like it was, though they do still turn out 500 to 1,000 dartboards a week. "There's a great demand for elm dartboards these days," says Alfred.

The magnificent Marshall steam engine that once drove all the saws in the mill is no more than a tangle of unwanted machinery for the nine cats that help to keep the rats at bay to scamper in and out of.

Its whistle that once served as a timepiece to the surrounding area has not sounded since 1960. And despite the reassuring buzz of the more modern saws and the immaculate condition in which Alfred keeps them, the whole place has an air of departed glory.

France during the First World War?

Well I have just had a letter from the Rev. H. Arthur Meek, saying that since 1914, when he was in the Oxford Mail and he told it on the Midland Home Service in November, he has been inundated with letters.

"I have not yet completely dealt with my fan-mail," says this lively 85-year-old Australian, who was padre to the unit which had the little organ sent out to them. "But so many romantic avenues have been opened up that there will have to be another story for the consideration of the B.B.C."

I look forward to hearing it in due course.

Alfred
Thurston
and the
steam crane.

An electric crane has replaced the 48 year old steam crane at Wheatley's saw mills which have gone into new ownership. - Ox. Times.