

A Short History of
WHEATLEY STONE

By W. O. HASSALL



ILLUSTRATED BY PETER TYSOE

1955

Printed at the Oxford School of Art

WHEATLEY STONE

The earliest quarry at Wheatley to be named in the records is called Chalgrove, but it is not to be confused with the famous field of the same name where John Hampden was mortally wounded and which was transformed into an aerodrome during the war. Chalgrove in Wheatley lies on the edge of Wheatley West field, near the boundary of Shotover Park on the south side of the road from London to High Wycombe, opposite a turning to Forest Hill and Islip where a modern quarry is worked for lime, six miles East of Oxford.

The name of Chalgrove in Wheatley is almost forgotten, except by the elderly, though the name appears in the Rate books. The exact position is marked in a map of 1593 at All Souls College and grass covered depressions which mark the site are visible from the passing buses. The All Souls map shows that some of these depressions, a little further east, were called in Queen Elizabeth's reign Glovers and Cleves pits. The Queen would have passed near them when she travelled as a prisoner from Woodstock to Rycot on a stormy day when the wind was so rough that her captors had to hold down her dress and later when she came in triumph to be welcomed by the City and University at Shotover, on her way to Oxford.

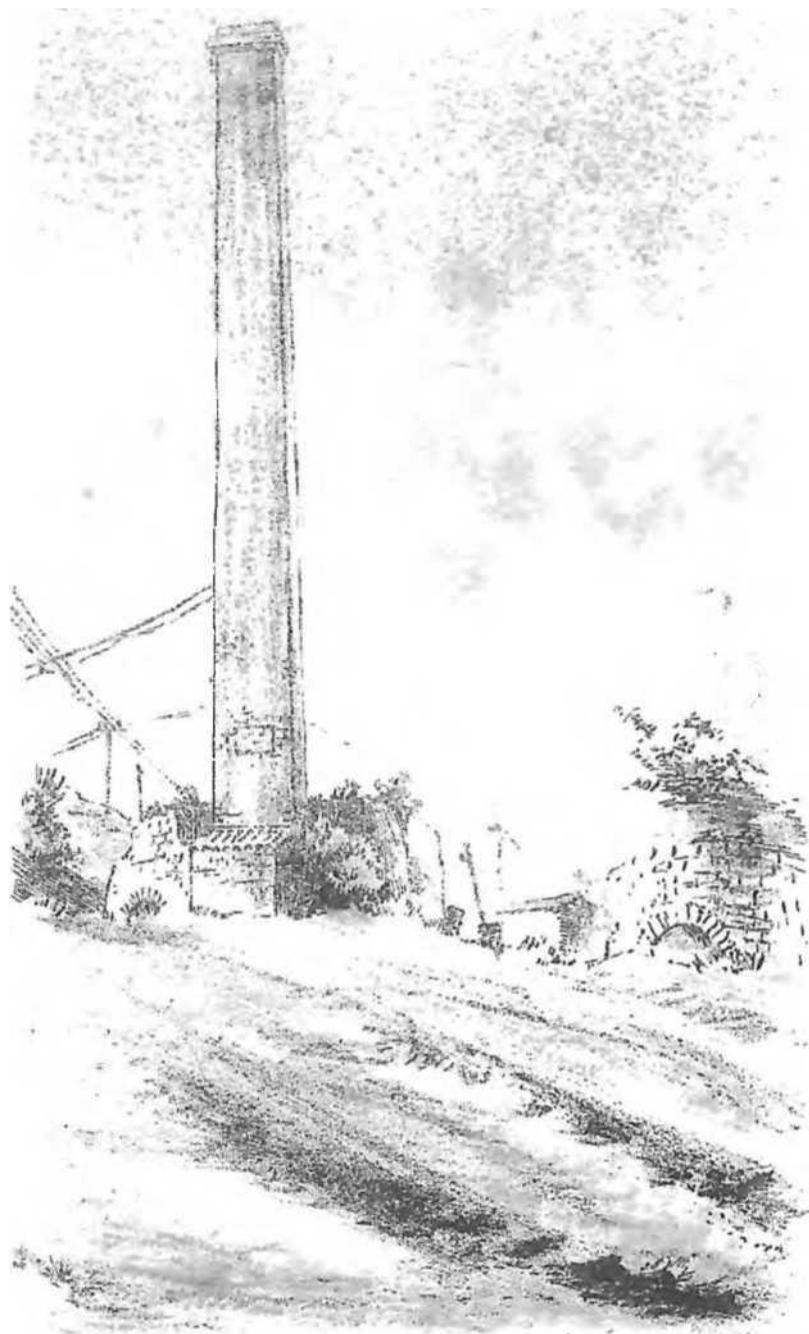
The name Chalgrove is so old that under the spelling *Ceorla graf* it occurs in a charter from King Edwy dated A.D. 956 as one of the landmarks on the boundaries of the ancient parish of Cuddesdon, for Cuddesdon used to include Wheatley when it was an estate of the Abbey of Abingdon. Philologists think the name means 'the grove of the churls' though in *Stones of Oxford* Mr. Arkell suggests that the name means the limestone quarry. He did not know that the name occurred so early for the interpretation of the Saxon charter had eluded scholars who were unfamiliar with the old boundaries of Cuddesdon and with the local names for landmarks along them, but if he is right the appearance of the name as early as 959 might indicate that this field yielded stone for Saxon Oxford one thousand years ago.

Topographical records are rare before the middle of the

thirteenth century, but by then we found that the quarry was certainly in existence and had gained a certain notoriety as the place where a doe had been killed by a poacher. Thereafter references to stone from Chalgrove in Wheatley by Shotover become common, for it was used for the King's bridge over the Thame in 1286, for Merton College in 1278 and 1290, for the Oxford Dominicans (100 sq. ft.) in 1303-4, for the Augustinians (40 sq. ft.) in 1316 and for the Franciscans (50 sq. ft.) in 1364.

Such thirteenth century Wheatley stone merchants as Hugh Griffin and Nicholas and Thomas Prat have been identified as active within a ten-mile radius of the quarry and their activity suggests how many of the landless tenants whose names are recorded as living at Wheatley in 1280 may have earned their living. Indeed, the stone went further afield and was required for Wallingford Castle in 1353 & 1395. Also, in 1358 William Pollard & Nicholas Harold were instructed to recruit by force quarrymen and other labourers for the royal quarry. In 1362 William Cok of Wheatley & Nicholas Harald were described as masters & wardens of the quarry when they were empowered to take masons to dig and cut stones for Windsor Castle, transport it there by land and water, and bring objectors for imprisonment.

Scattered records show that Wheatley stone went to Windsor in 1344-69, Cuddesdon church 1375-6, Abingdon Abbey, Queen's College 1378-9, Exeter College 1383, New College 1396-1400, Magdalen College 1474 & Christ Church in 1525. The stone for Abingdon went by water from Sandford and the Abbey bought half an acre of quarry in 1375-6 from William Eustace, a representative of an important old Wheatley family who had been imprisoned in 1362 on account of a debt of £31



owed to a London pepperer. There were four distinct types of building stone.

In 1690 Robert and William Robinson repaired Wheatley bridge. Robert Robinson of Horspath was a 'freemason' and owner of a tavern at Wheatley called the 'Bell', the name of which is recorded in Bell Lane & Bell View. In 1814 Headington stone was preferred for Bishop Moss's School at Wheatley because it was cheaper, but local stone from the parish pit was used for Wheatley's church spire in 1866-7 and as late as 1890 damage occurred to windows through blasting. The parish pit had been a stronghold of bear-baiting after the sport was extinct elsewhere and after being filled with rubbish to the delight of the local rats, by the Bullingdon Rural District Council it has been levelled & used as a playground since 1950.

Wheatley building stone is full of marine fossils and is of a coralline character, but ironstone occurs on the plateau to the south which is of much younger geological formation. On 5 June, 1875, John Argali, the manager of a new iron mining company said that his firm had one hundred acres of land with six beds of ore 10 ft. thick with 36 to 48 per cent, metallic iron, worked in open cuttings, worth £3 to £3 6s. per ton (£10 clean), besides drying apparatus & calcining furnace for ochres and oxides. He expected to produce 2,000 tons weekly for 20 years, but the mine was a failure and was forgotten, though Argali's son was long remembered as the first local cyclist – for he shared a 'penny farthing' with the late Fred Fowler and this they used to let out to other youths who wanted to have a go at 6d. a time until the iron tyres were worn down & had to be replaced by Cullum the wheelwright.

The site of the iron mine was the field called 'the Bishop's Piece' and it is now arable once more. As there is no ironstone in all Berkshire & there were many ancient human settlements on the Berkshire downs, the Chilterns & in the Thames valley, it is interesting to speculate whether this ore may not have served as a source of supply during the Iron Age & in Saxon times. It might even be significant that the Abbot of Abingdon, who obtained the Cuddesdon estate for the Abbey in 956, was St. Ethelwold, a

practical man who was famous as an expert in the metallurgy of iron.

The iron mining company tried to lessen its difficulties by producing ochre. The ochre industry had flourished on the side of Shotover since at least as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century and Dr Plot has left a description of the processes employed. Smoke from an ochre works in Wheatley was described as a nuisance in 1881-2, but the paint factory, that was situated in the barn at Mulberry Court & which has since housed a Salvation Army Barracks and a Brownie troop, was closed owing to an over production of ochre that even flooded the Chinese market. The ochre was reputed to be the best in the world and the yellow paint gave the Oxfordshire farm waggons their characteristic hue. One pedlar used to take red and yellow ochre from Wheatley in panniers slung each side of a horse, travelling in his stained garments around the country.

The ochre was ground in a windmill which stands beside the site of the iron mine and a pit from which ochre was extracted. In 1671 it had been in ruins, but it was re-equipped with iron casting from the Eagle Foundry in Oxford in 1748 & in 1807 its capacity was eight loads of wheat weekly. Work was sufficient by the sixth decade of the nineteenth century to support a second mill hard by, but this was accidentally burnt about 1875 and was not rebuilt. The old mill has been disused since 1915 & lightning damaged the vanes in 1939. It belongs to the family of Cripps and it is remarkable that many of the older members of the family have Old Testament names like Ezra, its present owner, & Obadiah, who used to play his fiddle at neighbouring village feasts. This recalls the names of Zachariah & Leviticus Cripps in Blackmore's novel *Cripps the Carrier* of which the scene is ostensibly laid in Beckley, though it was in Wheatley and not in Beckley that Cripp's flourished.

A geological fault has caused the stone of Wheatley to lie in juxtaposition to excellent clay and anyone who looks at Chalgrove from the main road will see beyond it the Wheatley brickworks standing in front of a hillside gashed for clay, though idle since 1939. The village High Street is built on the stone,

which differs from the clay in being both drier for habitation yet supplying numerous wells, and up till the beginning of the seventeenth century the Manor House was the end house at the upper or western end of the High Street. It stood at the extreme edge of the coralline outcrop where it meets the clay, and drystone walls are accordingly replaced by quickset hedges.

Wheatley clay produced tobacco pipes in the eighteenth century and the bricks which made possible such nineteenth century creations as Didcot, and North Oxford. The successors of those who provided stone for the oldest Oxford colleges dug clay for the bricks of Keble College in an adjoining field. A Roman tombstone found at Holton and a clay pottery mould found at Horspath prove that both clay and stone were worked in the neighbourhood within a few centuries of the time of Christ, and it is this presence together of clay & stone which has given to the older houses of Wheatley their characteristic combination of grey stone walls & dull red tiled roofs. How early these tiles were made is unknown, but a generation before Wat Tyler's rebellion an inhabitant of Wheatley was called Wat Tyler.

