

Maggie Hartford drops in to . . .

Wheatley

If there's one thing it's difficult to complain of in Wheatley, it's boredom.

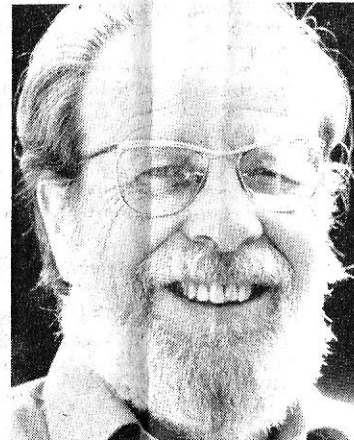
Its 40 to 50 different societies and groups must be some kind of record for a village of 4,000 people.

Since the war the population has quadrupled with private and council housing built at each end of the village, and the cosy feel of the old village centre could easily have been overwhelmed by a semi-suburban commuter atmosphere.

It would be difficult to deny that there is tension between the newcomers and those born and bred in the village.

Four years ago, a new group called Village Concern fielded candidates for the council — many of them lecturers at that new-fangled institution, the Polytechnic. Last year, Village Concern gained "control" of the parish council from the old guard, who adopted the title Village Candidates to counter the rival group.

Both sides agree that hostilities have now ceased. Parish council chairman John Brooks says: "There are still basic differences of attitude,



Mr John Brooks — Wheatley councillor and Morris dancer.

but it would be wrong to see it as a simple political split.

The postmaster, Gerald McGowan, was one of the original councillors. "My politics are mostly Conservative, but I stand as an Independent. We all get on very well — there is no animosity at all. On some questions

people don't side according to party, but vote in their own ways."

Paradoxically, it has been the newcomers who have been behind the revival of the oldest and most traditional village customs in recent years. John Brooks, for instance, is one of the founding members of Wheatley Morris Men.

John Drake is a researcher in social anthropology. When he moved to Wheatley, he thought it would be a good place to try out his interests in local customs. The Wheatley Morris Men had faded out in 1882, but he discovered written records of five Wheatley morris dances.

A friendly Morris Man from Abingdon agreed to show them the steps, and the Wheatley Morris Men have never looked back.

The maypole tradition has also been revived.

Each May sees a gaggle of children processing through the village, bedecked with flowers, to dance around the maypole on the recreation ground.

Another success has been the Mummers — a group of Morris Men who have started reviving traditional mummers' plays. John Drake can talk for hours about the origin and meaning of some of these village customs, but for those who take part it's just good fun, he admits.

The climax of the year is the village festival on Spring Bank Holiday.

It began with the Silver Jubilee celebrations. John Brooks says: "The whole village enjoyed doing things together and having a whole day of activities, and we thought that rather than leave it for another 25 years, we would do it annually."

The festival ends with a street ceilidh (singing and dancing) on the Monday night.

One of the biggest of the new groups in the village is the Wheatley Society, which grew out of a row over a planning application six years ago. John Drake, one of the people who helped to set it up, says: "A public meeting about the plans degenerated into a slanging match. It was obvious that many people had not been given the right information and that the parish and district councils had not made information available."

"People thought the decision had already been taken. Some people at the meeting were so disturbed at the lack of communication that they set up a steering committee. And out of that grew the Wheatley Society."

They have details of every building of note in the village to make sure nothing can be altered or demolished without a fight.

The 100 or so members have now



Mary Powell and Bill Cherry have a natter over coffee at the OAPs' club in the village hall.

split into a history group, a drama group, and an environment group. The history and environment groups have just scored a major success by winning fourth prize in an Oxfordshire Rural Community Council local history competition.

"People who work in Oxford who have moved in from other areas are the ones who have the enthusiasm for these things," says John Drake. "Our problem has always been to make contact with people born and bred in the village, who surprisingly accept these newcomers' interest, but when it comes to doing something, they don't get involved to the same extent." The society's annual exhibition in the village hall, the Merry Bells, gives people the chance to see old photographs and talk about how things have changed.

Wheatley has two flourishing playgroups.

The "little playgroup" with up to 20 children, meets in the Merry Bells — a former temperance hotel that has been taken over by the parish and provides a home for many local groups.

The older group has found an almost perfect home — part of the old village school. It had been standing almost derelict for several years and had creepers growing through the roof when the parents decided to restore and convert it. It has the advantage of its own playground, plenty of space for equipment and no worries about clearing up each evening.

At the other end of the age range is the drop-in coffee club for old people, started by Marion Audley-Miller and a band of helpers at the Merry Bells.

Volunteer drivers help collect

housebound people on Tuesdays, and those who can get there under their own steam drop in four mornings a week.

The community education tutor for Wheatley, John Rogers, is responsible for more than 30 adult education classes, from Kai Men (Chinese Yoga) to cake decoration.

Discos at the youth centre in Littleworth Road have drawn more than 150 youngsters. The junior youth club has 120 members, and the senior club more than 200.

A rota of members helps to run the clubs and the youngsters decorated the rooms themselves some years ago and built new partitions to improve the layout. A new working party is now being set up to give the club a facelift.

A big talking point in the village at the moment is the plan for a major reshuffle of schools.

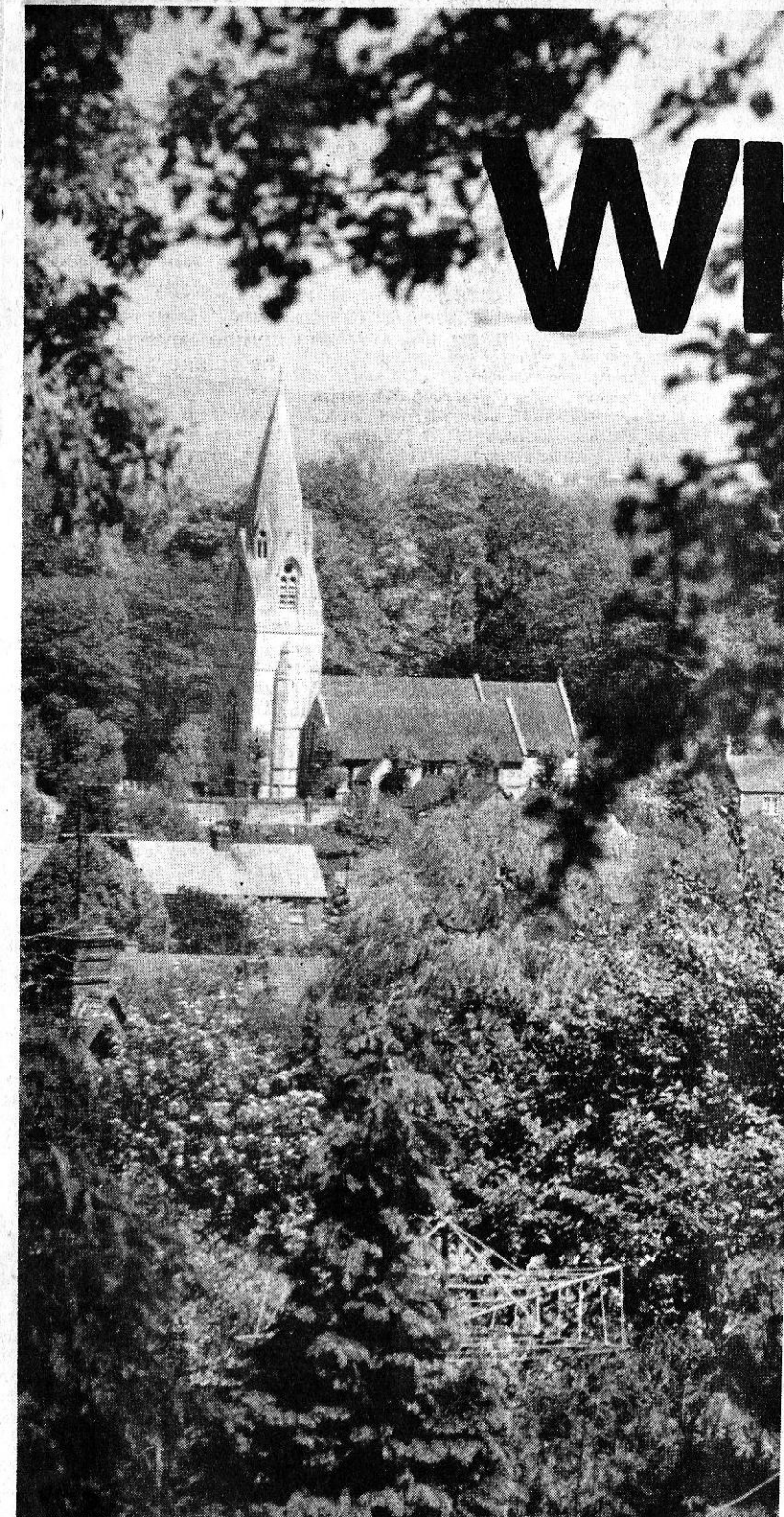
Wheatley Park Comprehensive has been suffering since its birth from being on three sites, with staff and pupils ferried from one side of the village to another.

The plan put forward by a county council working party involves building more classrooms at the upper school at Wheatley Park so that the school would be on one site, and moving the primary school to the lower school building in Littleworth Road. Various council offices like the social services department would also be moved there from Kidlington and Oxford.

John Rogers has produced a report suggesting that the new Wheatley Park School should become a "community college"



Playing happily at the Merry Bells, these children belong to the "little playgroup" — one of two flourishing playgroups in the village.



View of Wheatley showing the parish church. Picture by ROB COUSINS.