PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS: of ~~WILLIAM~~ WILFRID SHELDON

This is in no sense an attempt to be a history of Wheatley, but just a few things that I remember of my early years. My dates may not be accurate, but only approximate.

I was born in February 1885 (correct). When only about 2½ years old I have always had a clear remembrance of being in the crowd in the Vicarage field at the celebration of Queen Victoria's "Golden Jubilee". As a school boy at the "Diamond Jubilee" we had a tea for all the school and were afterwards presented with a medal. I was about four years older when the queen died (1901). Her death was regarded almost as a national calamity. The newspapers came out with wide black edges and all the theatres and places of entertainment were closed until after the funeral and national mourning was ordered. All work stopped on the day of the funeral.

Wheatley in the 1890's was very much more restricted than today. In the west it finished at "Blenheim" and Kiln Lane and in the east at Crown Road, few houses beyond the "Crown". Opposite "Wayside" stood a large stone barn with farmyard behind it and another barn stood in front of "Ambrose" farmhouse. Only one house beyond that and then "Muddy Lane" which was almost impossible to use in the winter months. Of course in those days there were no motor cars, aeroplanes and cinemas and the bicycle was not in common use. The roads generally were bad; mud in winter and dust in summer. The method used in road-making was to spread the stones on the surface and leave it to the traffic to grind them in. My first bicycle had solid tyres and the "boom" in bikes only came with the pneumatic tyre. But we were by no means a cut-off village being on the route from London to Oxford, we had many interesting visitors. I remember German Bands, dancing bears, sword swallowers - what a thrill that was when he measured his sword against his body before putting it in his mouth! There were also fire-eaters who blew flames out of their mouths and I also remember one group of men on stilts walking through the village. There were frequent organ grinders with monkeys and the cheerful piano organs. These people seemed to have disappeared by the early 1900's but they gave us some cheap fun. We also got occasional visits from travelling circuses and menageries, usually in the "Crown Yard". One I remember well included the Lion trainer entering the Lion's cage. This was very exciting, as there was a build up of men with red hot iron bars in case of emergency. The lights were lowered and after one or two unsuccessful attempts, the trainer slipped into the cage with a whip in one hand, a pistol in the other, and drove the lion round the cage a time or two just before the lion sprang at the gate. The final item was always the same, i.e. Dick Turpin's ride to York. After cantering round the ring a few times Turpin in a red coat on his famous mare jumped a gate and disappeared. We had a good six pennyworth. The monthly cattle market also provided a lot of interest for the boys. This was also held in the "Crown Yard" but was discontinued in the early 1900's.

Perhaps in those early days the village was more self-contained than it is today. We had about everything necessary for a separate community; a resident doctor, church and chapel, schools, builders, bakers, grocers, farmers, blacksmiths, carpenters, a tailor and a barber and several shoemakers. Also if you weren't fussy you could have a tooth drawn for a shilling. Now all these provided services to the surrounding villages as well, and the tradespeople with a few retired and independent people gave the village a more prosperous look than a purely agricultural one could have had. On the whole I should say that it was a fairly well-balanced community and I suppose the population then was about 900. The number of public houses here then was ten, and that was not including one at Littleworth; quite a lot for the population.

Most of the men not engaged in the trades worked mainly in agriculture or at the brickworks. All wages were low, tradesmen the best off around 15/-d a week, whilst farmworkers as low as 10/- or 12/-d a week in winter and a few shillings more at the busy times. Of course rents were low and food cheap. Even so, it must have been a bare existence for many. The coming of the saw mills created a few more jobs, which grew as the time went on.

I remember one very severe winter. I think it was about 1895, when hard and prolonged frosts stopped all outdoor work. There was no unemployment pay in those days; if you didn't work you had no pay, so times were really hard then. A soup kitchen was opened at the Merry Bells, where children could get a basin of soup and bread for a penny. The river Thame was frozen over and people skated on it from Cuddesdon Mill to Holton Mill. The frost lasted eight weeks. Anyone in desperate need could apply to the "Relieving Officer" for help, but the relief given was very small; about 2/-d per week and a few loaves. Still on the subject of relief ladies attached to the Church and known as District Visitors each had a district in the parish which was regularly visited. In this way the Vicar could always be informed of illness or distress and needing help, for which he had a special fund at his disposal. Some of these same ladies ran a coal and clothing club. Small sums paid in weekly were paid out before Christmas, so that members could be sure of coal for the winter and also new materials for clothes.

Like most other villages in the last century Wheatley had its own Friendly Society. This was before the National societies like the Oddfellows and Foresters became established outside the towns. (The local societies were afterwards absorbed by them). The Club I remember was held at the Chequers (now Blakes Store). Members were entitled to sick pay and a doctor in case of illness. They also held an annual club feast. This was always in Whit week, either on Tuesday or Wednesday. On the appointed day, the members met at the Chequers in the morning and preceded by their banner carried by two men and the village band they went in procession to the church for a service. Afterwards they returned to the club house for a sumptuous meal. A few special guests would also be invited - who could be relied on to keep the glasses filled. In the afternoon those who were able to followed the band who serenaded the village and stopped at some of the larger houses and most of the pubs for further refreshment. This club day was a really big day in the village. There were usually a few stalls set up by the Chequers for toys and sweets etc. It was also a day of family reunion for many and also a public holiday for Wheatley. The Wheatley Band finally broke up early in this century, after several attempts to revive it. The last bandmaster that I can remember was Joseph Sturges who played a cornet. The Putt family were always prominent in the band. At one time five of them were members.

The Merry Bells was built in 1888 by Mrs. Miller of Shotover as a temperance hotel with club rooms for men and boys; it had a resident manager and could provide meals and refreshments and also beds for travellers. There was a concert room upstairs which could be hired for meetings etc., as well as concerts and this was much in demand. It can fairly be said that the Merry Bells was a boon to the village in the years under review.

As I spent ten of my first fourteen years at school it is natural that I should say something about them, the schools were in the same places as today. We used to call them the little school and the big school. We must have started school earlier in those days as I was only four when I started at little school. The teachers there were Miss Christian and Miss East, both capable and efficient. There were two rooms, one we called the baby room and the class room. This had a gallery at one end with four or five rows of seats. I suppose we learned to count, the alphabet and first steps in reading and writing. I have a very vivid recollection of having to make pothooks and hangers on slates of course. We also learned a few songs. The highlight of the school year was the May Day Garlanding. With the garland carried by two boys we toured the village, stopping frequently at a house to sing the May Day songs. But that wasn't all there had to be a King and Queen of the May both wearing cardboard crowns. Queens were easy to come by but Kings were more difficult. One of his duties was to kiss the Queen when requested and this happened at most of the stopping places and so at times he got tired of it all and refused to kiss. On one occasion I remember he refused to take any more part in the march and handed over his crown. The money collected provided a tea party at the school for everyone.

I was only six when I arrived at the big school so I had at least one term under Mr. Wooldridge's headship. I remember the first year I was there that we all paid a penny a week towards our schooling. Mr. Wooldridge was a great believer in the cane, and if possible always got in first. Mr. Leyshon who succeeded him was very different and the cane was kept out of sight. Until my last year at school there was only the original building, L shaped with one long end, one shorter end and one class room. The attendance numbers were variable between 110 and 120 so we were pretty crowded. Not a very big staff - headmaster, two teachers and two pupil teachers.

The playground was very small. By common consent the girls had the front part and the boys the small space at the back. However each year after the hay was cut the vicar allowed us to use the vicarage meadow for a playground and we appreciated and used it to the full. I do not remember much of my early years at this school. I suppose I moved to a higher class each year, but it was not until I came under the direct rule of the headmaster that I have any clear picture. Mr. Leyshon was a wonderful teacher. A complete master of every subject he taught and able to put it over simply and clearly. It is interesting to me to recall that in the mid-1890's he was teaching and advocating the metric system. He also forecast that it would one day be adopted in this country. The big day at the school in those days was the annual inspection; we looked forward to this with dread. The chief inspector was the Reverend Mr. Pickard. He was tall and enormously fat, with a long beard and an unpleasant face. We regarded him with awe and were in fear and trembling whenever he came near us. He had two assistants Mr. Key and Mr. Crouch, but we didn't fear them, they were human, he was not. I'm sure everyone, teachers and pupils were relieved when the ordeal was over.

Incredible as it must sound today, there was in force then a rule that when a boy was ten years old, had reached standard four and was fairly proficient in that standard, his parents could apply for what was known as a labour certificate. If granted, and I never knew one refused, the boy could leave school and go to a job, generally on a farm. There were usually two or three applications each year. Compared with this inspection the Scripture exam was almost light-hearted. The Inspector was generally a local and friendly clergyman, and we had been well coached beforehand on what questions to expect. Also we knew that there would be a half-holiday afterwards.

The annual school concert and prize-giving was a big occasion. Mr. Leyshon was very keen on attendance, and everyone going the full year without missing once received a medal. These were awarded at the concert as well as the usual class prizes. There was always a crowded audience, mostly of parents to watch their children perform. Again we were all well drilled and rehearsed beforehand so everything went well.

I don't think we had so many fixed holidays as today. We had a fortnight as Christmas holiday, one week at Easter and Whitsuntide and as a rule five weeks in summer. The timing of the summer holiday varied with the state of the harvest. If it was an early harvest we might break up in July; if a late one then not until August.

Much of the corn harvest was still cut by hand so whole families would move into the cornfield. Father would cut the corn, Mother would make bands and tie up the sheaves. The children would glean in the fields as they were cleared. The work they did was paid for at so much an acre, so that a family working together could earn more than the usual weekly wage. But by the end of the century many farms were using a mechanical reaper and only on small farms and holdings was the corn reaped by hand. Still talking about corn, I can remember clearly as a schoolboy seeing Cripps Windmill working - a very pleasant sight.

In the early days of this century the horses were still almost the only means of transport. I say almost because bicycles were becoming very popular as a means of personal transport. But the horse was necessary for our carriers who played an important part in our lives. Using a covered van they carried goods to and from Oxford on four days a week. They would carry out almost any commission for a very small charge. About this time too the steam engine began to be used for road haulage. Coopers of the brickworks had the first one about here. This was a source of wonder at first. Then it was compulsory to have a man walking ahead with a red flag, warning the traffic of the monster's approach.

Early in 1904 we were all very alarmed to hear that there was a suspected case of smallpox in the village which was afterwards confirmed. A man "on the road" who called at the Chequers for refreshment was the carrier. Other men who came in contact with him there also became victims. There was such a rush for vaccination not only in Wheatley but in the nearby villages that Dr. Barns had to get an assistant to cope with the demand. Fortunately there were no cases other than the original ones and the scare died down.

In the early years of the century social conditions in the village had taken an upwards turn, chiefly in employment. The sawmills had expanded considerably and also the building trade and a few more houses were being built. The bicycle boom was on so people could go further afield for work, as roads were gradually improved. Also there were more jobs available, in the towns and at higher wages. Fewer boys went to work on the farms. A few more people were taking to market gardening mostly in the Littleworth area so most ablebodied men had a regular job. A great improvement on the last century when there was nearly always a number of unemployed men standing idle all day. Of course having a good railway service was a great advantage and was the means of bringing more trade to the village shops etc.