

WHEATLEY 50 YEARS AGO

Fifty years ago I was fourteen and had for three years gone by train every day into Oxford to school. My horizon was already beyond, this village; but the nine previous years had left their mark, and on my retirement in 1952, I came back to Wheatley, changed almost out of recognition as it is, feeling I was coming home. However, when I came to write an account of the old village, I found my memory sadly at fault. For what follows I am largely indebted to Miss Gunn (who has lived in the same house in the High Street for over 70 years) to W. O. Hassall, whose lectures on the history of Wheatley I attended and who has kindly lent me an account of her childhood in Wheatley written for him by Mrs Bayley and also two accounts of Wheatley charities and activities written in 1892 and 1895 by Mr Sturges, then Vicar of this parish. In 1956 the Oxford Historical Record Society's Journal will be concerned only with the facts of Wheatley's long history. I have here copies of a pamphlet about this which you may like to read. Some members of the W. I. might like to subscribe for individual copies or perhaps the Institute might like to have one to keep in its archives, particularly since I hear that the history of the village compiled by Miss Audrey Antrobus cannot now be found.

I am greatly indebted to Mrs Sillar and to Mr Negus for the opportunity of reading letters written by Mrs Hanson (Mr Negus' grandmother) to her daughter in Australia during the years 1904-1906. I have also had help from Alderman Tombs, Mrs Fowler, Mr and Mrs Avery. Mrs G E Sheldon, Mrs Cripps, Mrs A Life and my cousin Mr Whittington have kindly told me of their memories of fifty years ago. Even if I had all the information about fifty years ago here which could be obtained by patient research and gossip it would be impossible to tell you of it all in half an hour. It is certain that I shall miss out all kinds of things that some of you may remember and think important - please forgive these omissions.

THE OLD VILLAGE.

Miss Gunn says that about 1884 the population of Wheatley was under 1000 and "not very select".

(Census figures as given in the Oxford Times" for Jan. 23 1904: 1901 873, prev census 990, prev. to that 1000)

We were both told in our childhood of the bull-baiting and cockfighting which at one time took place in the Parish Pit. Mrs Fowler's grandmother could remember these happenings quite well. They were suppressed in Mr Elton's time,

Wheatley was the largest village in the district even then and the people had the reputation of being "rather rough". This has been attributed to the absence of a fatherly squire who might have exerted a civilising influence - on the other hand, he might not.

Unemployment was rife in 1888 when, Mr F. Smith tells me sometimes as many as 30 men would be standing idle outside the old Post Office, where Barclay's Bank now stands.

Mrs Miller (Major Miller's grandmother) who built the Merry Bells started a soup kitchen there.

Mr Sturges says in his pamphlet of 1890 1891, "Excellent free dinners were provided at the 'Merry Bells' during the depth of the winter, when many parents were out of work, and it was a pleasure to see the effect produced upon the school children. Many thanks are due to all those who so kindly helped to make the dinners orderly and supplied willing hands to assist in serving out the soup etc. The "Merry Bells" has never been put to better use."

Later, matters improved and, for the greater part of my childhood, there were few if any people who were really in want, though most were poor by modern standards. As Mrs Bayley says, "Although people worked hard and did not have much money most of them were content and enjoyed their simple pleasures and their day off for feasts and fairs." My own impression of the village in 1904 is given in a school essay on 'An English Village' which has somehow survived the ravages of the years and numerous holocausts of papers).

My cousin says "Wheatley remains in my memory as a quiet Cotswold type village with its Cotswold stone houses and thatched roofs. There were a few shops but, as an example, meat would depend upon whether Mr Rose was having some animal killed when he would advertise the fact."

The Manor House had sunk from being a subsidiary manor of the Stonor family to a very tumbledown tenement house until some discerning lady (bought the house) had the dividing bricked-up partitions removed and revealed the Tudor fireplaces. We were not allowed to go to "Blenheim" and we were supposed to avoid the "pits" on account of snakes. I read a reference to these quarries a few weeks ago as being the place from which some of the stone came to build Windsor Castle.

Wheatley was definitely a real country village before the first world war. It was, as I have said, even then the largest village in the district: but it was small enough for us all to know each other and to feel part of a single rather family-like community, reft on occasion as families so often are by fierce disputations and quarrels but also held together by loyalty and affection. I have no doubt that Mr Sturges, vicar from 1890-1900 and beloved by everybody contributed much to this family feeling. It is curious that we had an Urban District Council in those days.

The High Street has not changed much since 1904 although I think the Misses Gunn are the only people left (in the same house) of the original inhabitants. I have put on the wall a map of the street drawn by W, Tombs from information supplied by his grandfather Alderman Tombs, with a list of the inhabitants of the houses in about 1900.

There were no Council Houses. Roman Road was called, most appropriately Muddy Lane. The Crown was still an inn, though no longer a coaching inn. Mulberry Court was called "The Elms" and Dr Barns lived there from 1888 until he died in 1929. Rectory Farm and Wayside were there but the other Houses (except Ambrose and Gardencroft then both much smaller) had not been built. What is now the Doctors House was a cottage called 'The Tap' it had previously been an offshoot of the Crown. Dr McCausland enlarged it in 1926 when he took over Dr Barns' practice. Ambrose Farm House was a much smaller place when Mr Charles Shepherd lived in his later years (he built the houses beyond the Crown for his sons).

The old cattle market, now part of Dr Orchard's garden was in use in the 1890s. It was paved and there was a right of way through it and Crown yard from Church Road to Crown Road. I found a reference to the market in the Oxford Times for January 23 1897.

When Bryn was built in 1925 it was the last house in the village and the old London Road was the main road. In my childhood the latter was still called the 'Turnpike Road' although there were no longer any turnpikes on it. Stories were told of a 'headless horseman' who rode along it on dark nights: the ghost at Holton Park is mentioned in Mr Cecil Tyndale-Biscoe's autobiography published a few years ago. I can still feel the thrill of hearing the owls in the park at night: there was no hospital and no school - just the House and the Park - and peace - that peace which is so clearly evoked in Flora' Thompson's account of her Oxfordshire childhood in 'Lark Rise to Candleford'.

There were fewer houses in Church Road; the school playground had not been extended to take in the allotments between it and the Churchyard. The Parish Pit was part of a stone quarry owned and worked by Mr Frampton, No-one in my young days was locked up in the Round House before being taken to Oxford Jail, but Mrs Fowler tells me the last man who suffered this fate escaped by scooping out the earth from under the door anticipating the methods of so many prisoners of war later.

The houses on Park Hill were built during the 1890's by Mr Joseph Cooper, the owner of the brick kilns, then very much in use. Mr and Mrs Cooper and their eleven children lived in the Old House. Mrs Martha Cooper, his mother, had kept a school some years earlier. No 4 Park Hill was a convalescent Home, matron Miss Parker, a very jolly person, much loved by her patients and her friends of whom I was one from the age of two onwards. One of her patients, Mrs Hewlett, aged about 90 and always dressed in black with white lace and a white cap gave me my first hymn-book.

The Averys came here in 1893. Miss Gunn remembers rough meadows for cattle where the saw-mills now are and there were picturesque cottages near the old Post Office . She remembers the building of Wheatley House, then called 'The Lawn' by Mr Richard Rose (one of the Rose Bros Butchers, who had had their shop (the only Wheatley butcher's shop) opposite Jessamine Cottage. The houses above the Station bridge were all built within my memory. There were no houses on the road from Wheatley to Littleworth: the little brook (in which children like myself liked to paddle illicitly) still ran above ground across the bottom of Shotover Road, which had no houses on it except the Barrett's which I remember being built.

There were no main services: drains water or electricity. Houses were lit by the gentle yellow light of paraffin lamps and candles were carried to the bedrooms, often unheated in the severest winter except in case of illness when the flickering light of a coal fire illumined the patterned wallpaper. Few houses had bathrooms, but baths were luxurious affairs in what were sometimes described as 'canary flutters' (low round metal tubs) before a roaring fire. I remember enjoying these as late as 1914 in my rooms in Bristol. In the early days there were no fires other than coal, fires but oil stoves came into use in the 1900's. My father and I set up the first radio receiver in Wheatley in 1922, before British broad casting began. I remember seeing extreme 'flickery' moving pictures" in a tent at St Giles's Fair before .the 1914 - 8 war; television was a scientists' dream.