

Individuality Of Wheatley

By ANTHONY STEVEN

THE motorist speeding from Oxford to London or from London to Oxford may see the roofs of Wheatley without pausing to consider whether there is here a village any different from a hundred others on the route. Wheatley lies below and away from the main road, so that the passer-by is more likely to gaze over its chimneys towards the ancient windmill on the distant hill-top.

But I drove down into its heart, and mixed my gears badly as I hovered undecidedly about its maze of narrow streets.

Nevertheless, I discovered Wheatley—a village invisible to the casual observer; a place of growing prosperity, of fierce feuds and, as someone explained to me, of "terrible independence." And Wheatley has individuality. It is the second healthiest village in the British Isles.

This is a curious fact, and it is one of which Mr. William Tombs, the chairman of the Parish Council, is justly proud.

RESIDENTIAL CENTRE

"I could prove it to you with statistics," he told me, "but they're unnecessary. I think it is more satisfactory proof that Wheatley is becoming a popular residential centre. Many Oxford business men have settled here, and I think that many more will follow them."

The population has nearly doubled within the last 20 years, and to-day there are between 1,400 and 1,500 people living in Wheatley. And it is the new element which has caused the discord. Employed in Oxford shops, the Morris Works or the Pressed Steel Works, they missed the facilities available in the City and sought to bring them to Wheatley. At this the natives roused themselves and declared with a fine conservative vigour that they wanted no change. They were content with the old conditions.

But although the feud still exists, it seems that the natives are fighting a losing battle. The shops in the village are unexpected both in their number and the quality of their goods.

New houses have been built for the industrial workers, but I learnt from Mr. Tombs that there are very few slums. Some of the older cottages could do with repairs, but they are not in a bad way.

ARTIST'S ADVENTURE

Indeed, many of them are so charming that artists visit Wheatley on their account. "One day," Mr. Tombs told me, laughing, "I saw a bloke running all along the vegetable gardens, hopping the walls, getting down on his knees and squinting this way and that with a really mad look in his eye. I knew what that meant. One of the chappies from Littlemore Asylum had escaped, so I rang up the police without more ado, and up they comes and arrests him. And what d'you think? He wasn't from Littlemore at all, son. He was an Oxford professor, no looney, but a gentleman come sketching."

Although many of the inhabitants are employed in Oxford and Cowley, there are tall chimneys to show you that Wheatley is not without its own industries.

Coopers (Wheatley) Brickworks, Ltd., is a flourishing concern, employing some 67 men, and turning out between 150,000 and 160,000 bricks a week. These go as far as London, Brighton and Southampton, and are remarkable for their fine quality. For although some are machine-made, over two-thirds of the facing bricks are hand made.

HOW BRICKS ARE MADE

I was shown over the works by Herr Habla, a charming Austrian, who will shortly reorganise the whole process, modernising it and so improving the

quality of the products. Together we explored the pit face and the giant machinery, and I was shown how bricks are hand-made.

"It is worth our while to make hand-made bricks. The price they fetch is excellent," Herr Habla explained. "I saw men busy working raw clay with their hands, pressing it into moulds and cutting it with wires. Exactly as they made them 4,000 years ago," said Herr Habla.

Outside in the sunlight the scene was busy and the effect magnificently pictorial. Men in gaily coloured shirts trundled past with barrow-loads of golden bricks, their background the huge kilns and the great chimney-stacks with their rolling streamers of black smoke.

As Herr Habla pointed out, Belgium sold something like 500,000,000 bricks in this country last year. It is a golden age for English brickworks, and the products of Wheatley, whether they be common wire-cut bricks or bullnose, squinns or special shapes, find a ready market.

TIMBER MILL

Not far away beyond the railway station lies the timber mill of William Avery and Sons, Ltd. Here I saw splendid elms and splendid oaks, once standing proudly in the fields and woods of Oxfordshire, now lying in giant piles, waiting for the crane to place them within reach of the ravenous saws.

The wood is cut to suitable sizes and sent to the High Wycombe furniture factories, whence it eventually emerges as a polished product for the bedroom, dining room or lounge.

Thus Wheatley finds employment for all its men who are worthy of the name, and thus it establishes its right to think and act independently.

No stranger may rule the roost in this village. Wheatley may be led, but it will never be driven. I began to realise this when I heard the tale of one unfortunate vicar. Some 23 years ago he diverted, perhaps unintentionally, the proceeds of a local charity. The entire village rose in arms. His effigy, clad in parson's clothes, was paraded through the village, headed by a boys' band, carried through his own house, and finally burnt at the stake.

STOCKS PRESERVED

It was a strong lesson, administered by a people with a spirit of "terrible independence."

Perhaps this fierce insistence on justice is one of Wheatley's many attractions. An attraction of a more material character is provided by the many public-houses; but drunkenness has never been a popular pastime in Wheatley, and the 18th century Roundhouse contains a pair of stocks where many a merry fellow was left to cool his aching brow.

But for real comfort and excellent food Wheatley can boast the presence near at hand of Brompton Grange Hotel. It is a fine old building set in pleasant gardens, and Capt. Bruford has done a great deal to make this place an ideal "pause" for the traveller crossing England.

And every Saturday evening, in the comfortable superiority of white tie and tails or evening gown, you may wear the itch out of your feet on the fine floor in the "Barn." There is a good band and Ken Vokins, the pianist, has wizardry in his fingertips.

This, then, is the last but not least reason why the tired Oxford business man finds Wheatley a welcome escape from the migraine of office life.

Wheatley has a lot to offer besides health. I was immensely surprised.

ANTHONY STEVEN

The engagement of Lieut. George Dudley Pound, R.N., to Miss Elizabeth (Biddy) Margetson, youngest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Margetson, of Delbridge House, Wingham, near Canterbury, is announced. Lieut. Pound is the elder son of Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Station.

OXFORDSHIRE ODYSSEY

WHEATLEY

By an "OXFORD MAIL" STAFF REPORTER

THE village of Wheatley lies some six miles east of Oxford and is built on terraces descending from the High Wycombe road into a hollow immediately to the south.

Leaving the high road the visitor descends steeply towards the two main streets of the village running parallel with it.

To view the village as a whole he must climb the hill beyond the hollow up to Garsington-road, and from the summit he can look back at the terraced village facing him.

It has several old buildings, notable among them being the manor house, dating back to Jacobean times, and a cottage said to have been given by Cromwell as a wedding present to his daughter.

There is also the "old round house" where you may see the "stocks" still well preserved, and "Wayside," once visited, it is believed, by Dr. Johnson.

No longer an inn, but once prosperous and hospitable, is "The Crown," which Mr. F. Cullum, aged 83, and one of the oldest men in the village, remembers in the days when it could stable 60 horses.

One of Wheatley's most active residents is Mr. William Tombs, who has been connected with local government in Wheatley for 35 years and whose championship of the Parish Council has been interrupted only once in the past 14 years.

Thus Wheatley, shovelling coal from a railway wagon in a station yard. He told me he had no need to work, but if there was work to be done he believed in doing it.

THE SAME STORY

I asked him what changes the war had wrought in Wheatley, and his comment was "People are not putting the same energy into these first years of peace as they did into the seven years of war."

Here again is the echo of the cry we heard at Bampton and at Eynsham—that people to-day are lazy.

There cannot be anything congenial about this laziness, for these are the same folk that won the war.

What is it then? What stimulus is lacking? Are the old people right in their criticism of the young?

Where is a spokesman for the defence of youth? The Rev. F. L. Wheeler, Vicar of Wheatley, told me he did not find it easy to arouse the enthusiasm of the young for collective effort of any kind, or to persuade boys to subordinate their individual preferences to the interests of the team. (Note the T.U.C. succeed where the Vicar has failed?)

A large proportion of Wheatley's inhabitants are employed by Morris Motors and the Pressed Steel Company. A small timber industry occupies a few, and until the beginning of the war there was a brickyard employing some 40 people.

This was taken over by the Ministry of Supply for storage purposes and now employs only about a dozen workers as watchmen.

Of course housing is Wheatley's chief problem, as it is everywhere else. During the period between the two wars 61 Council houses were built in the parish. For the next five years Bullingdon R.D.C. plans 25 more houses. So far two are almost completed and two more are expected to be finished by the New Year.

Incidentally in Blenheim-lane, Wheatley, where the chairman of the Parish Council was born, more children were brought up during his childhood, he tells me, than there are now living in all 61 Council houses put together.

Mr. Tombs calculates that the present average number of occupants per house in Wheatley is seven people to three houses.

"People live so much longer these days," he observed, "that there are more old folk living alone."

Wheatley was reckoned the



healthiest village in the country, he added, until recent statistics awarded the record to a village in Yorkshire.

GOOD PROGRESS, BUT

Mr. Tombs feels that progress in Wheatley has been, for a village, very good. For many years Wheatley has had its own electric light, water and sewerage.

He emphasised, however, that there was room for improvement, remarking with his usual candour that senior local authorities would be well advised to consult parish councils fully before making plans.

Wheatley people, like the inhabitants of other villages close to Oxford, tend more and more to find their entertainment in the big City.

Though the "Merry Bells," built in 1887 as a temperance hotel by Mrs. Miller, of Shotover House, now serves as a community centre for concerts, dinners and other communal activities, it has generally to be hired for these occasions and is not within the financial reach of every gathering.

There is at present a good football ground, but it is understood that part of it at least will be required as a

site for the new school to be built by the Oxfordshire Education Committee.

However, the Parish Council is confident that when the details of the scheme are fully known, Major Miller, the owner of the site, will do all he can to help the village find another ground.

The new school is to be a secondary school to serve Wheatley and the surrounding districts.

At present there are two schools (ages 7-14) and an infant school. A new junior school is also projected.

There are plans for the future. For the present Wheatley's needs are a good village hall and for more and better houses.

And if villages which are no longer predominantly agricultural owing to the proximity of industrial Oxford, are to preserve their sense of community, they must acquire those amenities which the industrial worker enjoys.

Otherwise they will become dormitories, with little life of their own.

This fate is still distant from Wheatley, but there is little time

Next Week: HANBOROUGH.