

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - June 2006

Wheelwrights as a Rural Craft

When the Wargrave Local History Society met in June, a rearrangement of the officers was agreed, by the meeting. Peter Halman was appointed as the Chairman, Tony Barker as the Vice Chairman, and Richard Lloyd as the Treasurer and Membership Secretary.

Our guest speaker, Ted Fox, himself a skilled wheelwright, then gave us a most interesting talk on *Wheelwrights as a Rural Craft*. He had taken up the craft having previously been a farmer, and was taught the craft skills by a long-time Berkshire wheelwright.

Wheels, Ted explained, had been around for about 6000 years, having been developed in Mesopotamia or Egypt. The first were simple discs cut from a tree, but were not particularly strong. Next came disc wheels made from 3 planks fixed together, with a square hole to fix to the axle, which also rotated. The early Egyptians found a way to steam bend ash to form a complete circle for a rim, with bronze nails round the edge to take the wear. Their chariots had 6 spokes - the Greeks seemed to be better engineers, as their wheels had only 4. The Romans were also good wheelwrights, and introduced the turntable for the front wheels. In Britain, the Anglo-Saxons knew how to make wheels, using a metal hoop to act as a tyre (it is suggested that the word tyre comes from the Anglo-Saxon word meaning to tie together). A later development using strakes on the wheel rim tended to damage the roads, and so was banned in London by Henry VIII. The art of hoop making was then lost until about 2-300 years ago, when it was rediscovered both here and in America.

Ted then explained, showing both the tools he uses and the various parts of a wheel, how he makes a wheel using this traditional method. Each part would use the most appropriate wood - elm for the hub (as it does not split easily, oak for the spokes (for strength), and ash for the felloes (that make the rim - as it is resilient). The first task is to drill through the log to make the hub, so that it will not split, and turn it on the lathe. The holes are then marked out for the spokes, which must of course line up opposite each other. The spokes would be cut by hand - first chopped roughly to shape, then shaped with a draw knife and finished off with a spokeshave. The scalloped edges - seen finely painted on many caravan wheels - were there not for decoration, but to reduce the weight that the horse had to pull. Near the hub would be a shoulder, to throw off the water, and it would be waisted a little along its length, to give it some springiness. The spokes would be fitted to the hub with a lean, so that the wheel would be 'dished' - as it may well break up otherwise, due to the horse's gait making the wheel rock to and fro on the axle. Once all in place, the tongues would be cut at the outer ends of the spokes, and then the felloes would be cut to a pattern piece, and alternate sections fitted first, then oversize intermediate pieces trimmed to fit. They would be left with a small gap between each piece. The metal hoop, made to be smaller than the wheel rim, is heated up to expand it, fitted over the rim, and when rapidly cooled will shrink to bind the whole wheel tightly together.

The local village wheelwright would often make complete carts or wagons for local farmers or tradesmen, but there were also wagon factories that would make 100 per week. As the local man might charge £30 for a wagon, but one made in a Yorkshire factory could be made and delivered by train for £15, it was obvious which most farmers would choose!

The Society will have its local history visit to Eton College on the afternoon of Tuesday, July 11th, and will resume its programme of talks on Tuesday, September 12th, when Colin Hennell's subject will be *Metal Detectors - History Beneath Our Feet*.

To learn more about Wargrave, you may be interested in *The Book of Wargrave*, a collection of historical essays by local authors on a variety of topics - some based on research and others are personal reminiscences. This is a soft-back reprint of the first edition (published 1999) with 264 pages and more than 100 illustrations and maps. Price £10.00. *The Second Book of Wargrave* is a complementary hard-back volume in a similar format, published in 1998, with 316 pages together with over 100 illustrations and maps. Price £16.00. *Historic Wargrave Walks* is a booklet with four separate walks around the village, noting buildings of historical interest and characters from the past. Revised in 2003, this edition has 44 pages and includes 16 line drawings and 3 maps. Price £2.50. All are available from Victoria News.