

Extract from “Companion into Oxfordshire” by Ethel Carleton Williams. Methuen 1950. Ch. VIII.

All signposts in Forest Hill seem to point to Wheatley. This is a large village with many modern houses and a new church.

Wheatley has an industry which links it with the herring industry in the North Sea. Few Grimsby fishermen have ever heard of this Oxfordshire village, yet it is here that the trawl bobbins on their nets are made. If you stroll through Wheatley, you can see the bobbins being turned out by the hundred, rounded sections of elm, varying in diameter from 9” to 26” and in depth from 8” to 10”

I admired the dexterity with which one old man was threading the finished bobbins on to a metal spindle and from him I learnt how the bobbins are made.

“They are cut from those planks” he said, pointing to some great elm trunks. “I mark a circle and then cut it out with a band saw. The wood must be sound and free from knots, so the spindle can be threaded through the bobbin. Elsewhere knots do not matter as the wood wears longer and if you have ever seen bobbins after they have been trawled you will know the wear on them. Often a 20 inch bobbin is worn down to a flake.”

Then he explained that the bobbins act as tiny rollers when the nets are trawled along the sea bottom and save them from being tom to pieces on jagged splinters of rock. Elm is the best wood, because it is sufficiently buoyant, when weighted by the metal spindle, to sink without dragging on the sea bottom.

The bobbins are made in Wheatley because elms grown on the heavy soil of Oxfordshire are renowned for their soundness.

While he talked his busy fingers flashed to and fro, and this old countryman who had never seen the sea was busy forging a link with the trawlers, who brave the storms and perils of the ocean.