

Wooden wheel



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EDEV:1342

In the late 1940s, milk was delivered by horse and cart and wooden trailers were still used on farms. So, there was plenty of work for the local wheelwright. In Edenbridge, Wallis the Coachbuilders and Signwriters were kept busy with repair work and continued to make gates, wheels and shafts. They also made solid elm wheelbarrows for carrying heavy loads of wet flesh at the tannery across the yard. Cutting the timber at Wallis's was no mean task, as a former employee describes,

at the rear ... was a corrugated iron-roofed lean-to which housed a very large belt-driven saw, probably 48 inches in diameter which was fed by a moving frame carrying a tree trunk. When the saw got up to speed (a fearsome sight!) yours truly had to feed the trunk into the saw by winding a large handle with your ear only inches from the blade!

Wheelwrighting requires a great deal of accuracy as joints of a wooden wheel must be very tight. The hub or 'wheelstock' is made of elm and chopped down to size with an axe and turned on a lathe. A hole is bored in the centre of the wheelstock to take the box and axle. Holes are also bored for the spokes using a bit and brace and chiselled out with a 'wheelwrights bruzz'. Spokes are fashioned with a drawknife and spokeshave and then driven into the wheelstock with a sledgehammer. Each spoke is tongue and grooved and fixed to the rim of the wheel at an angle to create a 'dish' shape. Dishing allows the wheels to tilt outwards on a cart to prevent strain on the working parts as the horse is moving. The rim of the wheel is made up of curved sections of timber called 'felloes' (pronounced fellies in Kent) which are also jointed and finished with a plane. A blacksmith is employed to heat a circular strip of metal until it is red hot. It is then fitted over the rim of the wheel and drenched in cold water to shrink the metal tyre into place. A smaller ring with a slight taper is pushed onto the hub when cold to prevent the wood of the wheelstock charring.

According to the Heritage Craft Association, there are only eight working wheelwrights in Britain today and two are in Kent. Work continues for the tourism and heritage sector but skills aren't always passed on. Most wheelwrights work in pairs and find it difficult to find time to train an apprentice as well as running a business successfully.



Spokeshave (top) and drawknife (bottom) used for shaping the spokes of a wheel. Spokes are generally made of oak.



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Staff at Wallis's, c.1940s/50s
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Wooden plane c.1890
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