

# Wheelwrights and Wheelwrighting

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# Wheelwrights and Wheelwrighting

**A wheelwright is defined as a craftsperson possessing the skills and ability to (a) make a wheel, including all wooden and metal parts and (b) make some or parts of a wagon, cart or similar vehicle. Although (b) is historically a separate craft, that of wainwright, the distinction between the two has effectively been blurred over time.**

It is beyond doubt, quantitatively if not also qualitatively, that the craft of wheelwrighting has experienced a dramatic decline since the early twentieth century. In 1911, at the apex of the horse age, wheelwrights in England and Wales, according to the Census, numbered 23,785, and apprentices 1,200. By the 1950s, numbers had fallen to fewer than 1,000. J. Geraint Jenkins summarised the situation thus:

"In the past, the wheelwright was an essential member of all village communities, but today with the disappearance of horse transport, very few remain at work. Those that still practise the craft tend to spread their activity over a much wider field and many of those who still describe themselves as wheelwrights are more often than not carpenters, joiners and undertakers. Constructing a wooden wheel is a lengthy task which demands great exactitude and craftsmanship."  
(*Traditional Country Craftsman*, 1965, pp.109–10)

Numbers of horse-drawn vehicles have declined *pari passu* with the numbers of farm and commercial horses which, at their peak in the 1910s, exceeded two million, divided more or less evenly between 'agricultural' and 'town'. The latter were fewer than 100,000 in 1939, and had largely disappeared along with the urban-based wheelwright's shop by 1950. The agricultural horse herd was more resilient, but this too contracted from about half a million pre-war to about 20,000 in 1965. The *Annual Agricultural Statistics* show a reduction of more than 85% in wagons and carts on farms in England and Wales between 1942 and 1962, from 610,000 to 50,000. Of the latter, the great majority were no longer used and were beyond repair.

The traditional market for wheelwrights' services had effectively dried up by the mid-1960s. Significantly, none of the dozen tradesmen and businesses listed in *The Directory of Small Industries in the Countryside of Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire* issued by the Rural Industries Service, c.1960, appears in current trade gazetteers used in the compilation of this report. Most of these firms would have been capable of carrying out all the work themselves, whereas the businesses in the present study will often have to subcontract out some part of it – e.g. metalworking to other firms, many miles away.

New markets began to evolve from the 1960s. Veteran vehicles, for road use or for display and demonstration purposes, owned and maintained by enthusiasts, replaced farm and trade vehicles as the primary source of income, at the same time slowing down and eventually reversing the decline of the workforce. Horse-drawn vehicles began to feature primarily in period films and outdoor events.



Tying wagon wheel with iron hoop. Maidstone Forge, Kent (1938)



Hammering ash felloes onto spokes (1941)

Upwards of 150–200 rural life museums were founded between 1950 and 1980, one museum alone assembling a collection of 42 farm wagons. Although the volume of work was far smaller than it had been before the war, these developments represented a significant boost in demand for traditional workmanship in a craft that might otherwise have virtually died out.



The following sections are derived mainly from trade and related sources and, in particular, from information supplied by the Countryside Agency and responses to a questionnaire circulated in October/November 2002 to 53 contact names and addresses of wheelwrights provided by the Worshipful Company of Wheelwrights and/or listed in the *Heavy Horse World Wheelwrighting Directory* (Winter 2001 issue). Altogether, 32 questionnaires were returned: a 58% response rate. (The original questionnaire and the summary analysis can be found on the associated website: [www.craftsintheenglishcountryside.org.uk](http://www.craftsintheenglishcountryside.org.uk))

The following areas were addressed:

- the number and distribution of wheelwrights;
- skills shortages;
- the market;
- sources of work;
- raw materials;
- training.



Staff at J. Plater's Carriageworks (1903)



## Number of Wheelwrights and Regional Distribution

The number of practising wheelwrights is estimated by the Countryside Agency at between 50 and 60, of whom a significant number are part time or irregular. Of the 32 respondents to the questionnaire, several are known to have retired or to have stopped trading because, they say, there has been a drop in demand for their work.

Allowing for practising wheelwrights who declined to complete the questionnaire, the true figure of those occupied on a more or less regular basis is perhaps 40–50; and of specialised full-time wheelwrights fewer still. Specialised craftsmanship, it is often said, does not pay the bills. As with other rural crafts, wheelwrighting has often to be combined with other trades.

The geographical distribution of wheelwrights who were sent the questionnaire was shown to be roughly as shown in Table 1. The majority of them have a rural base – i.e. a village or smaller community; relatively few functioned in an urban environment. There was a strong sense of continuity in that most respondents had lived or worked in the same area for some considerable time. The resulting picture is of strong continuity in terms of mobility (or lack of it) within the continuing rural tradition with which this micro-trade has largely been associated.

**Table 1: Geographical distribution of wheelwrights who were sent the questionnaire**

| Area  | Number |
|---|--------|
| Midlands, including the Welsh Border counties | 19     |
| Hampshire, Sussex, Kent                       | 10     |
| Devon, Cornwall                               | 9      |
| Southern and western counties                 | 7      |
| Yorkshire and NE                              | 3      |
| Lancashire and NW                             | 2      |
| East Anglia                                   | 2      |
| Northern Ireland                              | 1      |

Businesses seem to be mostly small, with a large proportion of self-employed craftsmen. Very few had more than one or two employees. The survey did not reveal much about distinct groups of craftspeople who might provide subcontracting services such as metalworking.



© Dorothy Hollamby

*Wheelwright Douglas Andrew hammering rim into position*

Premises too are an area for research. Although some traditional working wheelwrights' shops (buildings constructed in the local vernacular with designated working spaces for the various elements of their trade) do survive – several good examples were found – this category was found to total no more than 10–20 maximum. The remainder use modern facilities, building conversions or other arrangements.

'The Old Wheelwrights Shop', 'Wheelwrights' and 'The Old Forge' are house names to be found in virtually every village. Today, these are usually private homes, their conversion from working premises having taken place at an accelerating rate over the second half of the twentieth century. While this survey was being undertaken, a village wheelwright's shop was subject to a planning application for conversion in the author's own area of the central Cotswolds. Usually, tools and equipment have long since gone, and although a number of examples of 'fossilised' workshops still survive tucked away out of sight, this is a diminishing resource which will eventually disappear entirely. It is this folk memory of a now largely vanished way of living and working that still characterises this particular trade, at least in the public perception.

# Skills Shortages

**Responses to questions concerning skills shortages and the influence of age, financial and regional factors were very mixed. Some respondents had been obliged to change course (in more than one case completely) as the flow of work proved too irregular. Others (admittedly a small number) were fully booked with work.**

The resultant picture is of a very few businesses enjoying a regular, consistent and evenly balanced flow of work. In other cases, a craftsman has to resort to other options such as part-time working (the weekly hours spent in the trade make interesting reading), other ventures (an example is making miniature wheelbarrows), temporary cessation of activity or semi-retirement. It is arguable that this pattern is little different in its basic form than previously. The quality and consistency of work produced will also be an important factor, and the traditional method of obtaining work – word of mouth and recommendation – will be one barometer of its effect.

Several respondents put as their first priority the handing on of their skills and expertise to a new generation as they themselves came up to retirement (in more than one case on health grounds), and the difficulty in making that happen. Working conditions were quoted as one reason, the discipline of learning all the processes another. More formalised training was seen as one solution, but the perceived unpopularity amongst the younger generation of 'learning with Nelly' (as it was expressed by more than one respondent) is cited as a major obstacle to recruitment.

Other disincentives cited with some force included the increase in health and safety and other regulatory requirements once additional staff are taken on; in two cases this was the principal reason why nobody other than family was involved in the business.

A significant proportion of the present generation of working wheelwrights entered the trade in their mature years. Of 23 individuals, only 6 began in their teens, a further 7 in their 20s, 4 in their 30s and the remaining 6 in their 40s or 50s. Assessed alongside the range of previous occupations, this suggests a more mature range of entrants to the trade than the targeted age range of the Modern Apprenticeship (up to 25 years of age). It is suggested that this is a trend likely to increase in future, and it is therefore critical that this issue be addressed when formulating future training options.



*Wheelwright hammering felloes onto spokes, Devon*



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## The Market

The market is divided into fairly clearly defined categories, as follows.

### Private vehicle owners

This includes ownership of all forms of vehicles, particularly drays and carriages, and the various show vehicles for demonstration as well as use. Driving enthusiasts form a significant category. This group also includes private owners of traditional farm wagons and carts. Indeed, it should be noted that two of the largest collections in the country are held by private individuals (i.e. not in public ownership).

Arriving at any form of numerical breakdown for this group as a whole is not possible, although the range of ownership can be assessed in general terms from the pages of *Heavy Horse World* and similar magazines.

### Museums open to the public

These are of course both publicly and privately owned. The Rural Life Museums Action Group (RuLMAG) lists some 63 contact addresses for rural life and agricultural heritage museums/collections in the UK, of which 50 are in England. A broader and more loosely defined survey by the University of Reading's Museum of English Rural Life in the mid-1980s identified more than 300 specialist rural life museums or general museums with rural life collections, the majority of which will have owned at least one horse-drawn vehicle. But this is not a static group, as – perhaps surprisingly to some – such museums open and close, often without warning. Long a characteristic of private collections, this flexibility is increasingly apparent in the public sector too. The recent short-notice closure of the Cotswold Heritage Centre at Northleach is just one example.

Much of the work undertaken in this sector will be essentially conservation rather than restoration, involving the skills of other specialists in related fields. There are a small number of conservation specialists working on rural life collections (perhaps two or three nationwide in all). The concept of 'conserve as found' is widespread within rural life museums, militating against any significant increase in restoration of static exhibits in museums/collections. The Science Museum's Prism Fund is a principal source of grant aid for restoration work on public collections.



© Derek Middleton

*Using a spoke-dog to fit a fellow*

### Dealers, the antique trade, the pub trade, etc.

This is a more succinct group but one that is perhaps even more difficult to measure, especially as it includes the travelling community and those who service it. The periodic gathering of people involved in these trades at the Reading Carriage Sales is one obvious 'health check': several hundred attended the sale in November 2002. This is indeed a dynamic barometer of the number of dealers, agents and travellers involved in the business, but is also a showcase for the wider range of goods and vehicles on offer, and the prices fetched at any one sale.

Advice obtained specifically on the travelling community suggests that much of the horse-drawn vehicle work required by this community is done 'in-house' by fellow travellers known for these particular skills, very few of whom appear to be included in the Directory of Wheelwrights. This might prove to be too arbitrary a division, but it will serve as a warning against too pessimistic an assessment of the overall provision in the country at large.

## Ceremonial, military and public companies

This is very specific and highly prized work, which is contracted to a very few businesses/companies, and about which respondents remain circumspect. Such companies are protected from many of the other vagaries noted elsewhere, whilst at the same time being subject to tight controls as to quality, deadlines, and presentation of finished work. This category would repay further study.

## The commercial market

Useful information concerning the scale of ownership and comparative popularity of the various categories of vehicle was supplied by the firm of Thimbleby and Shorland of Reading, the country's leading auctioneers of historic horse-drawn vehicles. It sells 600–650 items per year, 80–90% of which are British. Other firms sell perhaps another 100, making a total of 700–750 in all. By projecting this proportion of vehicles disposed of by auction, as opposed to private sales, and the rates of turnover, the national inventory can be estimated at 5,000–7,000 vehicles.

Trade is currently described as 'buoyant', especially for light horse vehicles. The brewers are pulling out of heavy horses, but private owners are enthusiastic and make a good turn-out at shows. Show-ring vehicles fetch very good prices. Interest in working vehicles is greater than for those on static display. The museums market is flat, since there are few funds available for restoration, and public interest in vehicle displays is flagging.

The proportion of time spent on the different categories of vehicles reveals a broad spread of activity. The principal categories are: farm wagons and carts, show drays and other ceremonial vehicles and carriages, vehicles used for driving, and vehicles owned by museums or for other demonstration purposes. In addition, there is a large market for wheels in themselves, for display purposes, in antique shops and pubs, as well as private houses.

## Sources of Work

Very few wheelwrights use intermediaries, and only a small number advertise (paid advertisements in *Heavy Horse World* for examples). Indeed, there are relatively few places in which advertising is appropriate. The inclusion of an entry in directories such as the two used in this survey (the Directory of Wheelwrights compiled as a result of the questionnaire, and the *Heavy Horse World Wheelwright's Directory*) is regarded as listing, not advertising, although inclusion in any such list is in itself an implied recognition, if not recommendation. The lists of the Worshipful Company, although a little out of date, are also an important form of promotion for those included.

Personal recommendation, typically client to client, is the traditional way of gaining work. Maintaining a consistently high level of work, delivering to order and other factors come sharply into focus when this is the principal method of work creation.



Wheelwright measuring rim with traveller, Sussex

# Wheelwrights and Wheelwrighting

## Raw Materials

There was little complaint as to the supply of raw materials. One respondent reported a shortage of elm. It is probably the case that sufficient stockpiles of oak, ash and elm – the principal materials used – exist in the hands of timber merchants and wheelwrights themselves to meet immediate needs.

Imports pose a potential, if not a real, threat to the home industry. Significant numbers of wheels originate from Quebec and Pennsylvania (the Amish people). Poland, is now a major source of wheels, wheelwrights' materials and carriages.

## Training

Wheelwright training presents a special challenge.

- Wheelwrighting is an endangered craft the number of those working in the trade declined from more than 20,000 at the turn of the twentieth century to about 25 in 1980. It can be said to have been rescued by training initiatives put in place by the Worshipful Company of Wheelwrights and CoSIRA.
- The number of trainees is too small and too geographically dispersed to qualify for funding under the Modern Apprenticeship rules.
- Wheelwrighting is technically demanding, involving both joinery and ironwork, and training is both intensive and expensive.
- With the withdrawal of Countryside Agency funding, the future of training, and of the craft, hangs in the balance.

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*Using brace and bit to finish spokes*

On the question of training provision, the questionnaire returns show a very low level of attendance by working (as distinct from aspiring) wheelwrights at training courses over the previous five years, a pattern not necessarily related to considerations of cost or access. It seems that only 16 respondents had undergone any form of apprenticeship, college or other formal training in wheelwrighting, however brief. Qualifications obtained include NVQ and City & Guilds. A number had benefited from the Herefordshire College of Technology-based CoSIRA, Rural Development Commission, Countryside Agency-sponsored training programme; the remainder were self-taught in some way or another. The summary of responses reveals an indifferent attitude, not unrelated to the 'too little, too late' syndrome. This might of course be simply a reflection of lack of knowledge as to what training is actually available. There was a strong feeling that on-the-bench training was the most significant experience for a young craftsman, and that formal training courses could not in any sense replace it.

The questionnaire does not include the views of the 2002 intake of five trainees on the Herefordshire College of Technology NETS course (which had hardly begun at the time of the compilation of the survey), but does include those who had participated in previous years and who are now listed in the Working Wheelwrights Directory (see website [www.craftsintheenglishcountryside.org.uk](http://www.craftsintheenglishcountryside.org.uk)). On specific training needs, such as business management, the survey showed some demand for training in the more obvious areas of marketing, and the need to address IT skills in all their forms for business management and networking purposes.

The following section, based on a supplementary report by the Countryside Agency,<sup>1</sup> takes a more detailed look at wheelwright training.



<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Peter Evans, Head of Craft Training at the Countryside Agency for detailed advice on training matters.

## Background

In 1980, CoSIRA was under some pressure from the few remaining carriage restorers to introduce a New Entrants' Training Scheme (NETS) for wheelwrighting. At the same time, the popularity of carriage-driving was increasing as a result of the higher profile given to the sport by HRH the Duke of Edinburgh, and of tourism and leisure interests in the restoration of carriages and farm wagons for display at museums and theme parks. There was also the advertising and show potential for the craft of wheelwrighting as demonstrated by the last few breweries that still used a horse and dray, such as Fullers, Youngs and Wadworths. CoSIRA's own research suggested that there were then only about 25 working wheelwrights, raising serious concerns about the future of the craft.

In 1983, the Worshipful Company of Wheelwrights established a Crafts Liaison Committee to further the activities on behalf of the Livery. The Committee's main task was to work with CoSIRA to raise both the profile of the craft and the NETS in wheelwrighting being developed by CoSIRA.

## Identification of training need

As with CoSIRA's other NETSs, the first task was to visit as many wheelwrights as possible, both those still in business, especially any who had taken apprentices, and those who had retired. From discussion, observation and practice, the range of wheelwrighting skills was mapped together with the accepted quality standards for materials, construction, tolerances and production times. The skills identified had to provide a practical and productive training course that would assist firms to train any new apprentices. The workshop was then fully equipped with specialised wheelwrighting tools, which were either donated by retiring wheelwrights or bought at auction.



# Wheelwrights and Wheelwrighting



The wheelwrighting NETS was based on 14 weekly modules of 'off-the-job' training to supplement 'on-the-job' training and working practice. As most wheelwrights were rurally located micro-businesses, this model was felt to be the most appropriate and effective way of providing a structured training programme. The use of a 'thin' sandwich training course based on weekly modules minimised the disruption to the wheelwright business and maximised the training opportunity for the apprentice. The NETS had effectively identified the core competencies of today's NVQs.

As CoSIRA was targeting small rural wheelwrighting businesses, other elements of the NETS were also included, in the form of assistance with the cost of tuition, materials, assessment and the cost of travel and accommodation. It was very much a traditional work-based apprenticeship, but it was delivered and funded to meet the needs of small rural wheelwrighting businesses.

During the 1980s the demand for NETS Wheelwrighting courses gradually grew. At first there was only one intake a year of five or six trainees; by 1995 this had grown to two intakes a year in order to meet the demand of a sector that had risen to nearly 60 working wheelwrights compared with the 25 identified in 1980.

In 1996 an external review was undertaken by ECOTEC of the Rural Development Commission's training programme (CoSIRA having been merged with the

Development Commission in 1988 to form the Rural Development Commission). The review concluded that whilst the quality of training was very high, efforts should be made to identify other sources of training and alternative funding. At the same time the budget was reduced, and despite the demand for wheelwright training, funding only allowed one intake to be run at any one time. As with the other NETSs, trainee numbers fell as a result of the uncertainty over the future of the craft training programme.

The search for other wheelwrighting training providers proved to be difficult, as the potential number of trainees was too low to interest any technical colleges. The Modern Apprenticeship was also considered as a way of attracting alternative funding. While the Rural Development Commission had concerns over the suitability of the Modern Apprenticeship to meet the special training needs of the rural craft-based micro-business sector, it did offer a potential lifeline. However, the scheme had an age limit of 25 to be eligible for funding. This caused – and still does cause – a serious problem for wheelwrights, who have a high age profile. Most of the NETS wheelwrighting apprentices would not be eligible for Modern Apprenticeship funding: as a survey of the ages of NETS wheelwrighting apprentices trained since 2000 showed, there is an age range of 20–54, with an average age of 38. A rural crafts apprenticeship based on the NETS model is desperately needed – one that reflects not only the needs of such micro-businesses but also their age profile.

## Training today

In 1999 the Rural Development Commission's functions were divided between the Regional Development Agencies and the Countryside Agency. The government agreed with the Countryside Agency Board at that time that the direct provision of practical national training should not be a function of the new Agency. The Agency therefore had to follow an exit strategy that would lead to a successor to the NETS, but with mainstream funding from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

The key task for wheelwrighting was to find a training provider who could maintain the wheelwrighting NETS programme to honour commitments and allow time for a successor to NETS to be developed which would be eligible for LSC funding. As part of this transition, the Agency

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*Completed wheel ready for fitting*

provided financial support to Herefordshire College of Technology for delivering the NETS. In parallel, the Agency has been working to secure national funding for all the rural crafts and trades, both through a national rural crafts apprenticeship working party and through its influence at national and local level.

The Agency is concerned that the Modern Apprenticeship scheme is not entirely appropriate for meeting the training needs of those working in the crafts and rural trades. Nevertheless, the Agency, CITB and the Worshipful Company of Wheelwrights all feel that it is worth pursuing a Modern Apprenticeship route for wheelwrights. Since the skills of the wheelwright cover blacksmithing, joinery and finishing, a Modern Apprenticeship framework based on bench Joinery affords a good starting point, and a foundation on which the craft of wheelwrighting could be now be developed.

## Overview

It is the view of the Countryside Agency that the New Entrants' Training Scheme should be nationally funded as a 'rural' Modern Apprenticeship aimed specifically at meeting the training needs of the craft-based micro-business sector. This would act as a stepping-stone to the Advanced Modern Apprenticeship if required. It would also ensure that new employees, regardless of age, would have access to suitable and appropriate training that will help develop the wide range of skills and techniques needed by wheelwrights to run a productive business.

The Worshipful Company of Wheelwrights would be keen to see the present arrangement continue, whereby Herefordshire College of Technology delivers the NETS Wheelwrighting course, but with funding from the region's LSC. Herefordshire College has already secured interim funding from the Herefordshire and Worcestershire LSC up to August 2005. This will allow all existing trainees to complete their NETS courses.

Discussions between the college and the Herefordshire and Worcestershire LSC over the future funding of NETS apprentices have taken place. It may allow a new intake of wheelwrights to start a NETS at Herefordshire College of Technology, but under the category of 'other provision' rather than Modern Apprenticeship funding. 'Other provision' would remove the age limit, but employers/trainees are expected to make a 25% contribution to the cost of training. Payment in kind could perhaps be considered, given the high level of on-the-job training needed in the typical wheelwright micro-business. Moreover, 'other provision' does not normally include any travel or accommodation assistance to offset the higher costs that result from the fact that most wheelwrights are rurally based.

It is clear from discussions with working wheelwrights, their apprentices and the Worshipful Company of Wheelwrights that they want the NETS to continue and provide them with the skills they need for business growth and the survival of their ancient craft.



## Summary and Conclusions

**Only 40–50 people are estimated to be in business as wheelwrights in England. This number is falling all the time, and many carry on this craft only as part of a wider range of wood-working activity. In addition, this micro-trade remains overwhelmingly male.**

The trade is now largely rurally based. Many practitioners are self-taught, with little formal training. Some question the benefits of formal training, at least as a stand-alone experience. The size of most businesses remains small: most being single, self-employed craftsmen.

The traditional versus modern nature of working premises is an area for further investigation. Issues include the effect on traditional structures of meeting the health and safety requirements (quite apart from other difficulties involved in continuing to work 'in the traditional manner'), and the ever-increasing potential of many rural premises, situated in 'desirable' locations, to be sold for residential and other development.

A number of respondents to the Shire questionnaire came into the trade through the Hereford-based training scheme, effectively the only such programme of any significance in the country. We await confirmation of funding support from the Learning and Skills Council for the Herefordshire course to Spring 2005.

Although shortages of work have been identified, the reasons for this are complex, including a genuine falling-off in orders, a lack of continuity in the flow of work (and cash flow) and the reliance on personal recommendation (or otherwise) as the principal means of client access to the trade. There is little evidence that geographical location is a factor.

Regulatory requirements (such as health and safety) add to the burden of taking on new staff or apprentices. The apparent lack of financial support to address these issues, as part of a genuine desire to hand on skills to the next generation, needs to be addressed. The typical new entrant is aged over 25 and so is ineligible for financial support under the current Modern Apprenticeship schemes. Funding to deal specifically with this issue, (which will become even more significant in future), should be addressed.

Little enthusiasm emerged from the questionnaire for past or present training programmes amongst working (as

distinct from aspiring) wheelwrights, which suggests that issues of credibility and relevance may be more significant than cost or accessibility. Business skills training should be investigated, with specific reference to marketing and IT skills. The development of some form of coordinated website should be considered, sponsored by one or other of the umbrella bodies. The teaching skills of a small number of carefully selected experienced wheelwrights, themselves properly trained, might usefully be added to the training provision, to provide a 'panel of skills' – principally bench-based skills – for incorporation in any future training programme.

Although the various categories of actual and potential markets have been analysed in outline only, this summary is useful in indicating the need for craftsmen to work flexibly between client groups and so address some of the main issues of concern raised by the wheelwrights themselves. Too great a reliance upon one category, e.g. museum exhibits, exposes any one business to risk.

A number of other useful pointers can be picked up from the responses to the question, 'What most worries you about the future of wheelwrighting?' They include the threat to business stability and to the flow of work caused by the growing importation of vehicles and wheels from abroad; the use of all-metal rather than wooden wheels; the unwillingness of some vehicle owners to pay the going rate for the job.

Client-to-client recommendation remains the principal means of promotion within the craft. This is a factor in keeping up quality, consistency and delivery standards throughout the trade as a whole. By comparison, direct advertising seems to play a relatively minor (although for some, significant) part.

The survey failed to reveal any shortages of specific materials, although it might generally be assumed that good-quality, well-seasoned woods of the right type will always have a premium value.



As a general conclusion on current training provision, the survey suggests that this should be comprehensively reviewed (this is in progress) to take account of a number of key issues, specifically:

- the range of skills required: including woodwork, machinery, ironmongery and painting, using both traditional and modern techniques as appropriate;
- the mature age of entry of potential new entrants and the implication for training needs;
- the balance to be struck between providing on-the-job experience and college/theory-based learning;
- the urgent need to benefit from the skills of existing practitioners while these are still available;
- the range of funding issues confronting employers considering taking on apprentices or other workers.

J. Geraint Jenkins implied in 1965 (in his *Traditional Country Craftsman*) that the full range of skills required by a competent wheelwright may be lacking in certain practitioners, and doubtless the same remains true today. This is of course a subjective issue, but it can be seen that the craft has exponents who drift in and out of it, as well as those other, long-term adherents, relatively few of whom have been trained in the traditional family or workshop manner. No training programme can eradicate the more ephemeral elements of this trade (or indeed many other micro-trades) but it can and should address the key issue of passing on traditional, time-honoured skills carried on by a very few individuals, many of whom

are approaching retirement age. This may not be a new phenomenon, but from the evidence gathered in the brief survey that forms the basis of this report, this task must now be regarded as one of priority and urgency.

## Sources and acknowledgements

Two principal sources were used as the basis for this study and to create the Directory of Wheelwrights. First, the Worshipful Company of Wheelwrights, whose Register of names and addresses for Wheelwrights and Allied Trades was kindly made available, together with information on the current training programme at Herefordshire College of Technology and contacts with current and recent apprentices on this course. Peter Bridges, Chairman of the Craft Liaison Committee of the Worshipful Company, and John Wright, in charge of the Company's training liaison, are especially thanked for all their help and advice. Diana Zeuner, editor and proprietor of *Heavy Horse World*, gave full access to the magazine's annual *Wheelwrights' Directory* listings, and Terry Keegan, who compiles this Directory, kindly added further details and guidance. Both have been and remain enthusiastic supporters of any attempt to identify how many wheelwrights remain at work in the UK.

An appeal for information as part of this study appeared as 'Wheelwrighting skills – who will inherit?' in *Heavy Horse World*, autumn issue, September 2002, p. 11.

David Smith of Cosby in Leicestershire, an authority on gypsy life and culture, gave sound advice on how the travelling community repairs and maintains its stock of caravans and horse-drawn vehicles, and on the making and restoration of gypsy caravans.

Amongst working wheelwrights, I am particularly grateful to the following for sharing the benefits of their experience over many years of working practice: J. P. Brownlees, Michael Collishaw, Michael Horler, Robert Hurford and Greg Rowland.

# Wheelwrights and Wheelwrighting

## Publications consulted

For the survey:

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