

The History of Richard Wheatley Fly Boxes From the Notes of Richard's Grandson- Frank Wheatley

The Wheatley family came from the small Leicestershire village of Twycross, where the family had kept the village pub back into the 1700's. Richard Wheatley, the founder of the business, was born in 1827 in Twycross. In 1844 he was apprenticed to a man named Samuel Brown who was a pocket book and fly book manufacturer. He came out of his indentures in 1848 and continued for a time with Samuel Brown.

In 1860 Wheatley started in business for himself as a pocket book and fly book manufacturer together with a partner named Willmott, who had also been an apprentice with Brown, under the name of Willmott and Wheatley. In 1862 the partnership was dissolved and the name of the firm became just simply "Richard Wheatley".

Wheatley, manufacturing fly books, was selling them in Redditch, which at that time was the center for fishing tackle manufacture and also for the production of needles. On one occasion he was in Redditch selling fly books and someone said to him, "if you are making these sort of things, could you possibly make needle cases?" From this developed the leather case side of the business, which became the largest part of the business at that time.

In 1887 Richard Wheatley's eldest son also named Richard was taken into the partnership and the name of the firm then became "Richard Wheatley & Son". Young Richard was interested in fishing and consequently that side of the business started to develop more rapidly. Somewhere about 1890 the first fly clip was introduced. Prior to that flies had been tied to gut and the simplest way of carrying them was in the old-fashioned fly book, but when eyed flies came into existence, a clip was found to be the better way of holding them. The original pattern was a single clip, which was fastened in rows to a sheet of parchment, which was then placed in the bottom of a cardboard box covered in leather, and this was the original fly box.

It was very soon found however that the cardboard box was not altogether satisfactory and somewhere back in the 1890s the first tin box was made. These were black japanned outside and white enameled inside with clips fitted in rows more or less as they are today. A few years after this, aluminum was coming into common use. Thus the first aluminum boxes were made somewhere about the turn of the century. About this time the first compartment boxes were also made which, to a large extent, were similar to what they are today except that in the early ones the latches were not operated by springs and the lids were not transparent. These points were soon added to the boxes, which as so modified are very little different from the present-day boxes.

At some unknown time another of Richard's sons (Frank Wheatley's Father-unnamed) had joined the family business. Richard Wheatley, the founder of the business, died in 1907 at the age of 80. The business was now rapidly developing in both branches and by the time of the 1914 war the fishing tackle and leather goods sides of the business were about equal, but a greater proportion of fishing tackle was being sent abroad. During the

war the business was severely restricted, but as soon as 1918 and the end of the war came, it started up again.

In 1920 another turning point occurred in the history of the company. Zip fasteners had been made during the war and had been used for tents, cockpit covers for airplanes and thing like that. When the war came to an end there seemed to be no use for this new fastener. However, Frank Wheatley's father (unnamed) brought a sample of a zip back to the works and made a tobacco pouch fitted with it, which he then took to show a customer who quickly placed an order. That was the start of the use of zip fasteners in leather goods, and Wheatley controlled this usage until the 1930s when the patents ran out. This meant of course that the leather goods side of the business developed much more rapidly than the fishing tackle side for a number of years. Richard Wheatley & Son made more than a million tobacco pouches.

More and more fishing tackle boxes were added as the years went by until 1939 when the Second World War started. From 1939 to 1945 the manufacture of leather goods and fishing tackle ceased entirely. Richard Wheatley & Son went over to war work working on Admiralty and Air Ministry contracts which kept them fully occupied until the end of the war. In 1946 the family repaired the factory, which had been seriously damaged on several occasions by bombing and then started up again in both branches of the business.

Frank Wheatley's uncle Richard died in 1940 and in 1943 the company was turned into a limited company with Frank's father, Frank's brother and Frank as Directors. The company went on producing leather goods on one side and fishing tackle on the other side and the whole thing developed very considerably during the immediate period after the war. Many new patterns were introduced in both departments. Frank's father retired in 1949 and died in 1956.

In 1960 the company celebrated its centenary as a company. In 1966 the third generation of Wheatley's in the business decided to retire and the business was sold. The leather goods business was absorbed into another company while the fishing tackle side of the business still remains to this day under the name of Richard Wheatley, Ltd. at Walsall, England.