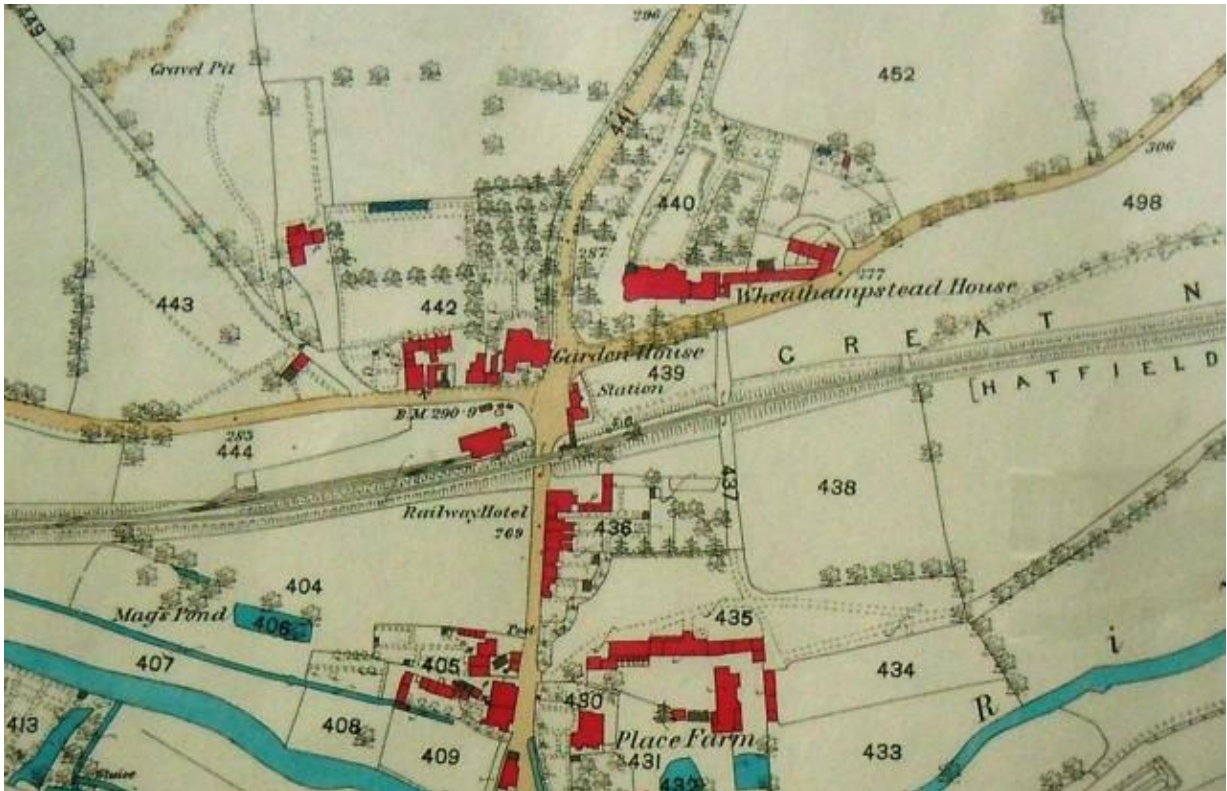


Wheathampstead Station



Wheathampstead Station and surrounds in 1879

Wheathampstead Station was opened in 1860 as a station stop on the Hatfield, Luton and Dunstable Railway. The sidings and goods yard were on the far (west) side of Station Road with a bridge across the road. There was another bridge across Waddling Lane on the east side.



Station Road railway bridge
in about 1905



Bridge over Waddling Lane

During the construction of the station a rare 7th century bronze ewer was found; originally from the eastern Mediterranean, it is now in the British Museum. In 1884/85 at least one rich Anglo-Saxon inhumation burial was found near the station, including several human skulls. A cast bronze 'Frankish Alemannic' closed vessel (6th or 7th century) and a glass palm cup were also recovered.

When the station was opened, for both goods and passengers, villagers held a fete in Rectory Meadow. The innkeeper of *The Swan* supplied dinner and refreshments "at a moderate price" and there were sports and amusements. Music was provided by the brass band of the Herts Yeomanry.



The station master was an important figure in the village and his house was suitably impressive. Note the back of the platform shelter and covered steps leading up to it behind the ticket office.

In the early days, when the train was still a novelty, people would walk to Ayot Station for a ride back to Wheathampstead – just to say they'd "done it".



Wheathampstead Station in about 1905

For more than 100 years the railway was the economic lifeblood of the village. Straw and straw plait was sent to Luton for the hat trade, watercress was despatched to London and washing arrived from London so that it could dry in the clear country air. The Dyke Nurseries and those at Gustard Wood sent fresh salad to London and in return received elephant dung from London Zoo. The residents in Rose Lane lived close to the goods yard and would frequently complain of the smell.

Live cattle were transported, pleasure trips to the coast in Norfolk started from here, fresh fish came from the east coast, and visitors arrived for the fishing and golf. In later years, Mr Lee the stationmaster organised Sunday School treats with a train leaving Wheathampstead at around 5.00am for Yarmouth, arriving there at noon and returning that evening. George Bernard Shaw, who lived in nearby Ayot St Lawrence, was the most famous passenger and sometimes cycled to the station.

The line brought both business and pleasure to the village. Local boys would waylay the well-off gentlemen who came to play golf at Gustard Wood, hoping to caddy for them and earn a "few bob". Wheathampstead was quite a little resort. People came to fish at The Fisheries along the Lower Luton Road and to visit significant families such as the Garrards at Lamer, the Shaws at Ayot St Lawrence and Earl Cavan at Wheathampstead House.

The railway also supported local industry. Murphy Chemicals opened in 1932 and, among other things, produced chemicals for the war effort. They had a supply pipe leading directly from the platform to their neighbouring works. Smart's, who owned several local gravel pits, used the railway for shipping their product from the pit at the top of Rose Lane. Trucks filled with gravel came down a narrow gauge rail track that crossed the Lower Luton Road into the station yard. The gravel was tipped from a raised platform into railway waggons and the empty trucks were towed back to the pit by ponies. Much of this gravel was used as hoggin in the cut-and-cover construction of the London underground railway. The gravel pit closed at the end of the 19th century.

On the 23rd January 1875 an "alarming accident" was reported in the press; a passenger train leaving Wheathampstead collided with a coal train. The accident occurred as the line rises steeply near a bend near Ayot Station. The goods train was unable to pull its heavy load up the incline and had reversed back to have a second attempt. In doing so, it ran over the warning signal the driver had placed on the line to warn following trains. A passenger train rounding the bend at full steam had thus been unaware of the problem and ran into the back of the coal train. The driver of the passenger train managed to jump clear but the fireman couldn't escape as the engine left the track and rolled over several times and down an embankment. Terry Pankhurst, one of the leading members of the team who have restored the platform (see 2010 in the Timeline), is the great-great-grandson of the driver of the passenger train, who lived to tell the tale.

Wheathampstead Station flourished until well into the 20th century but, following the 1963 Beeching Report, was closed to passenger traffic on 26th April 1965; it remained open for freight until the 26th July 1967.



The bridges across Station Road and Waddling Lane were demolished in August 1967.

The tracks, surrounding embankments and station buildings were all removed to make way for new developments and road improvements. All that was left was just over half of the platform, high and dry on an isolated embankment raised four metres above the surrounding roads and buildings.

To read about the restoration of the derelict platform, go to '2010' on this Timeline.