

## A HOUSE THROUGH TIME



Near the bottom of The Hill in Wheathampstead stands a late seventeenth or early eighteenth-century timber-framed house. It was first identified as 'The Laurels' in the 1881 census, although it could have been named prior to that. The original building was extended sometime between 1800 and the turn of the twentieth century, and the 1911 census showed it had a total of 12 rooms.

All the census records suggest that it stood adjacent to Town Farm, a notable historic building in the village that was demolished in scandalous circumstances in 1971. This demolition was partly responsible for a change in the law, allowing for emergency listing of buildings. The Laurels and several other properties on The Hill were Grade II Listed by the National Heritage that year.

The earliest occupants of the house who can be identified with certainty are George and Hephzibah Wynter from Eversholt in Bedfordshire, who moved there in the mid-1840s. George Jacob Wynter, a Major in the Bedfordshire Local Militia, a reserve force, was appointed Deputy Lieutenant of Bedfordshire in 1813, so was a gentleman of considerable social standing in his community and was of independent means. He and his wife, Hephzibah, had seven sons and two daughters. The 1841 census for Eversholt shows George and Hephzibah, prior to their move to Wheathampstead, with their twin sons,

Philip and Henry, two unmarried daughters and their youngest son, Mark, who were all still living at home.

Hephzibah died in Wheathampstead in 1850 at the age of 69 and was buried in the churchyard at St Helen's. She had been married to George for 45 years. The 1851 census shows George Wynter, a widowed 'annuitant', living on The Hill in Wheathampstead with his two daughters, Hephzibah and Jane, who both gave their profession as 'governess'. Also listed are two 'scholars' aged nine and seven from London and a domestic servant. A governess was an acceptable occupation for a single woman at this time, but no training or formal qualifications were required.

The Post Office and Trade Directories published until 1882 show Hephzibah and Jane running a 'ladies boarding school'. Several private day and boarding schools are recorded in Wheathampstead during the nineteenth-century but most were short-lived. In general for small family businesses of this kind, the chance of any detailed records surviving is very low, particularly if the family died out, so the story of this school at The Laurels is significant in our village history.

By 1861, George Wynter was 79 and Hephzibah and Jane were teaching six scholars, including their two nieces and a nephew, and they employed two servants. The school gradually expanded and ten years later, when George Wynter was 89, Hephzibah and Jane had 17 pupils between the ages of seven and seventeen, still including their two nieces. Eight pupils came from London and others lived locally.

George Wynter died in 1873, at the impressive age of 92, having outlived five of his seven sons. His death allowed more room at The Laurels for boarders, so by 1881 pupil numbers rose to a peak. Hephzibah's two nieces, Jane C and Emily J Wynter, aged 24 and 23, were by then also teachers. The 25 pupils, aged between 6 and 14 were mostly girls, and would have been the children of well-to-do tradesmen and farmers. The increased numbers compared with the size of The Laurels, even with its extension, suggest that there must have been both boarders and day pupils at this time. Thirteen came from London, while others were from Wheathampstead, Harpenden and Kimpton.

Chris Reynolds, the local history researcher of *Herts Genealogy*, recognised two of the pupils listed in the census return, Ellen Francis and Fanny Mabel Smith, as the daughters of the Wheathampstead landowner, Dolphin Smith (1838-1902), who was Chris's great-great uncle and lived at Mackerye End Farm. The three Barker children from Kimpton, Chris concluded, were almost certainly John, Percy and Ethel Barker of Bury Farm, Kimpton, who had an indirect link to his family tree.



**The Laurels School, 1886**

Jane Wynter died in 1884, aged 62, and by 1891 Hephzibah was 75. Her two nieces were still teaching but had only two pupils. Hephzibah died in 1897 and at the time of the 1901 census, Jane Charlotte Wynter, one of her nieces, was still running a 'ladies' boarding school' at The Laurels with four pupils. There is no Wynter entry in the 1902 Kelly's Directory and the school seems to have closed around this time. The 1911 census shows Jane Charlotte Wynter staying as a guest with friends in Lewisham, in south-east London, but thereafter she disappears from the records.

Private boarding schools emerged in response to the growing demand for education, particularly for middle-class girls. A typical curriculum for a school like The Laurels would have been reading, drawing and needlework, letter writing, polite conversation and possibly geography, history or French. The boarding accommodation at The Laurels must have been cramped when numbers were greatest, but arrangements seem to have satisfied parents from London keen for their daughters to receive an education.



The inscriptions on the Wynter gravestone in St Helens' churchyard are now almost illegible but Jane and Hephzibah were buried with their parents. A footstone mentions their brother, Philip Wynter, who died in 1846, aged 28, and Henry, his twin brother, who died in 1852, aged 33. Alongside their names is the inscription, 'The last tribute of parental affection. Forget not the departed'. The eldest son, Abraham Farley Wynter, was a clergyman in churches in the Home Counties and in Suffolk, while the youngest son, Mark, became a chemist and photographer in Seaford, Sussex. Photographs dated between 1862 and 67, when he was the only active photographer in Seaford, show he had a studio at his chemist's shop in the High Street, where he sold his images.



Therefore by the beginning of the twentieth century the Wynter name had disappeared from Wheathampstead and the story of the school at The Laurels and its pupils was a vanishing memory.

By 1911 The Laurels was occupied by Matthew Smallwood, aged 37, a surgeon and physician, his wife, Margaret, and their two small children, Joan and Edmund. They employed two servants and a room in the house was used as Dr Smallwood's surgery. He was the village doctor for nearly 50 years and was one of the first residents in the village to drive an early-style motor car.

His wife died in 1918, and two years later, at the age of 53, Dr Smallwood married Elinor Drage, who was 30. They had three children together. The family is recorded at The Laurels in the 1921 census, in the 1939 Register, and Dr Smallwood served the village throughout the Second World War.

He got to know all about his patients and they came to know and love him. 'If you were ill,' they said, 'he just had to come into the room and you felt better.' With extraordinary sympathy and humour he dealt with rich and poor, not only their aches and pains but their joys and sorrows, not as case histories but as an intimate part of his own life. Apart from scarlet fever, diphtheria was the dreaded disease and more than once, in order to stop a child choking, Dr Smallwood performed a tracheotomy on a kitchen table. On another occasion an emergency appendix operation had to be done in a farmhouse.

During the Second World War Dr Smallwood and his wife suffered the tragic loss of their two sons on active service. Sub-Lieutenant David Lovell Smallwood died in 1944, aged 24 and Major Patrick Smallwood the following year, aged 21.



**David Lovell Smallwood**  
**1st Bn. 16th Punjab Regiment**  
**Jakarta War Cemetery**



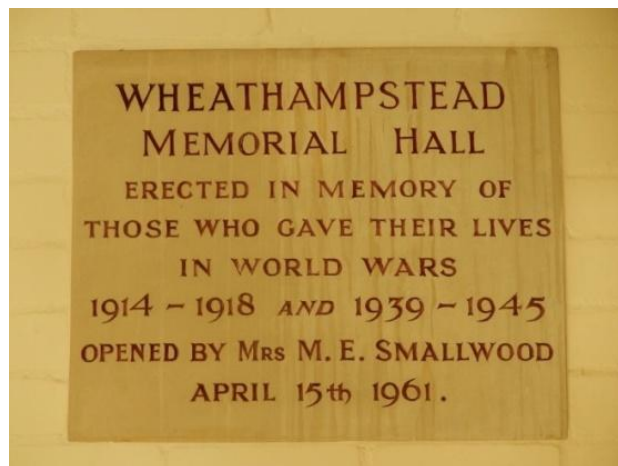
**Patrick Smallwood.**  
**Haslar Royal Naval Cemetery, Gosport**

Dr Smallwood died in 1951 at the age of 78. A plaque records the donation of a clock in his memory and that of his sons, given by his family, patients and friends.



Smallwood Close, on the Beech Hyde estate, was also named after him.

The Memorial Hall in the village, first conceived soon after the war, but not built until 1961, was opened by Mrs Elinor Smallwood.



She died at Dolphins, 11 The Hill, in 1986.



**Dolphins, 11 The Hill**

**'The Hill at Wheathampstead' by Stanley Orchard (1920 –2005)**

Dr Smallwood must have been a hard act to follow but his successor was Dr Charles Parkinson. During the Second World War he was a Royal Naval Volunteer Officer and then a Surgeon Lieutenant. He was a GP in Wheathampstead for about 20 years and lived with his wife at The Laurels. He died in 1973 and a seat was placed in his memory in the churchyard. He is also commemorated in Parkinson Close, a turning off Marford Road, near Town Farm.

Over the past 50 years The Laurels has continued to be a private home and in recent years it has been divided into a 4 bedroom house and a 3 bedroom apartment. The interior has exposed framing and chamfered beams and it remains an attractive property with a significant history as a boarding school and as a home to two village doctors.

## Sources

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Photograph of The Laurels, June 2024, Helen C-F

My thanks to Patrick McNeill, who found the photograph, 'The Laurels School, 1886', labelled on the back, in the WHS archive.

Dianne Payne 2026