

Wheathampstead 1907 to 1914

by Clare Abrahall

(from the Rodney Locks archive)

The G.W.R. train from Kings Cross would chug its way into Wheathampstead Station. Green engine, polished carriages, shining woodwork, varnished seats upholstered in red, and above them pictures to tempt passengers to other places. "Wheathampstead – Wheathampstead!" shouted the porter, eager to help passengers as they alighted. Sometimes a race down the stairs to grab any waiting conveyance. Mostly private broughams or traps awaited their owners but there was always old East with his shabby waggonette and rather aged horse. East was a man often sought after, apart from his waggonette, for he was the only man in the village willing to bite off puppy's tails. Said to be kinder than the knife!

The village consisted of four hamlets: Gustard Wood, Marford, The Folly and Batford at various distances from the main street. Each keeping themselves very much to themselves. Gustard Wood was the most picturesque and East would drive his waggonette along the very muddy mile-long road, under the iron bridge which linked Wheathampstead House and Garden House, past the entrance to Lamer under the trees where a headless horseman was said to ride. Very eerie at night. On up the hill to the common – the old gold [fold?] common. Few trees here, but heather, harebells, and numerous toadstools of every hue, not forgetting wild strawberries and violets.

After the common came the grandstand for "events": Halley's Comet, which rose magnificently over towards Herons Farm, or the first sight of Graham White as he flew for the first time round England.(1)

Gustard Wood boasted three large estates: Delaport, Lamer and Blackmore End House. The main street consisted of a number of small houses opposite Guelders, named after the huge Guelder rose bush in the front garden. Some cottages were very dilapidated like the bare-footed, ragged children living with their equally poor parents.

Opposite Guelders, the largest house owned by Mr Owen, Builders and Undertakers, named 'Owen's Corner'. Opposite the house a huge structure of two storeys. Here all the woodwork was carried out and an endless supply of sawdust for those of us who kept animals.

Mr and Mrs Owen had three sons and two daughters, all who turned out brilliantly. Dot, the youngest, became an L.R.A.M.. Jack became a well-known actor who wrote "When the Rainbow Ends". Pat was killed in the 1914 war and became well-known as a book jacket designer. The drinking water well was in the Owen's garden from which most of the houses got their drinking water. My mother who lived at Guelders paid a penny a bucket brought to us by a "dirty Mr ---" who should be nameless. The only other service Gustard Wood had was the post. Quite an event as the postman arrived every day from St Albans in a pony and trap. He would spend the day in a tin hut at the bottom of the Hill until it was time to clear the one letter box and drive back.

Up the lane to the Golf House: first the Plough Inn dominated by Mrs Straw. It was the pivot of Lower Gustard Wood. From here, Mrs Straw dispensed to the poor goodness left with her from the big houses. Woe betide any who had displeased her! She had a paralysed husband. She used to sit out in her back yard and, I blush to say it, us children used to climb onto the fence at the bottom of our garden and aim tennis balls at his bald pate, then meekly we would go round and ask for them back. How cruel can children be! The poor old man

could never explain how they came there. Opposite the pub lay the huge snowplough which a cart horse used to drag when the roads were snowbound. It was between the two ploughs that the villagers gathered during the 1914 war with flaming torches shouting "Burn Lamer down! Burn it down!" In vain, Mrs Straw wrung her hands, begging them to stop, that is until the fat old village constable arrived. Only then were they quelled, for their tempers were up. Had not Apsley Cherry-Garrard closed the hospital that Mrs Cherry-Garrard had opened then turned his mother out after his return from the Pole? After that someone put a white feather through his letterbox, for which I do not think he was liked in the village again!

Past the Plough, the Golf House, used also as the centre of entertainment and meetings. Plenty of caddies in those days and they were not permitted to play. No lighting anywhere, only endless candles and lamps until great excitement when spluttering gas arrived for those who could afford it. Then the telephone, ruled over by dear Mrs Crook at the exchange in the village; soon she was a font of information about everybody's affairs!

At the top of the 2nd hill where a house now stands, stood the school with its tinny bell rung by Miss Hazel the Head and only mistress. Very quick to wield the cane, like our local bobby who was never slow with his hand in giving offenders a hard spanking with good results! At least in those days it was safe to wander alone far afield without fear.

At the top of the common, one side the Cross Keys, Wright's Cucumber House and nurseries and one other cottage. On the other The Tin Pot where a pony trap could be hired. Also a row of cottages and amongst them the shop run by two elderly spinsters, the Miss Sibleys. Here most groceries could be purchased and huge humbugs for a penny. Vinegar came from a large wooden barrel measured into pewter pots. As it poured out it gurgled, as did the tummy of one of the Miss Sibleys!

Apart from the sometimes very poor cottages, there was the house where Ellen Terry once lived, enlarged much later.

The social life of the big houses was gay at times. Parties and much tennis to which "the county" came. Mrs Cherry Garrard had many daughters of various ages for whom she gave parties. At Delaport, reigned over by Mrs Upton Robins, something was usually going on. She had three daughters, two of whom became nuns, and Olivia, who was a member of the Hunt, and George Upton Robins, the only son killed in the war. At first in the army, he later became a partner in a firm in London and China. He brought back to England a china pony, remembered by older residents by its large head, flowing tail and sturdy legs, a great novelty. George Robins became for many years Secretary to the Hertfordshire Hunt and wrote the famous "Lays of the Hertfordshire Hunt". When the 1914 war broke out he was again in China but returned to join his old regiment. He was the last man to leave Hill 60. Crawling down he returned to see if any of his men were alive, which cost him his life. He died badly gassed, never to return to the village where he was deeply mourned, as were so many of our men from the village. At Delaport, it is reported that, under every tree planted, a golden sovereign was buried by Grandfather Robins.

Tennis, meets and hunting were the chief attractions at Delaport. Mrs Robins had a fast-stepping pony which drew a governess trap driven by a groom. The pony had a bell on his harness warning the "poor", whom R visited, of her advent. One day the bell failed to give enough warning. The cottagers failed to greet her and she was found seated, her skirts spread, but alas not wide enough. From under them peeped a number of pheasants' tails. Her son had not had time at Delaport Farm to conceal his poaching results quickly enough!

Delaport Farm and Herons were the only two farms. Delaport Farm was beautifully overseen by Olivia Robins who also started one of the first Scout troops in Hertfordshire. Herons was

quite the dirtiest farm possible. Dirt used to pile up five or six foot high in front of the house, the fields full of weeds, but a wonderful spot for children searching for eggs.

Back to the village dominated by Wheathampstead House, the seat of the Earl and Countess of Cavan. Lord Cavan was away a great deal, but Lady Cavan took great interest in everything to do with the village and was much loved. Garden fetes, flower shows, dog shows – all were welcome in her lovely gardens. Talking of fetes, there was one which made history! Someone had thought of having a “sleeping beauty” in a tent. Charge sixpence to view. The prettiest girl in the village was chosen – decked out in white, her long hair loose, she lay on a bed surrounded by flowers. All went well, until, alas, the publican of the Bull Inn (very spit and sawdust in those days) paid his sixpence. Once in, he elected to stay, and nothing would get him to leave. Again, the local bobby had to be called and remove him by force!

Apart from fetes, Lady Cavan would often hold Drawing Room concerts in which professional musicians would come and take part. At weekends during the summer many famous tennis stars would come to make use of the tennis courts. The squash court up the Codicote Road was also much in demand by visitors.

Walking to the few shops, the first thing to catch the eye was George Simons’ fleet of fast-trotting, beautifully groomed ponies and shining carts. Then onto the Bridge, vibrating slightly by the huge water wheel in the mill which turned for many, many years. On the other side the river was crystal clear, where fish could be seen and, higher up, large crawfish caught. There were also good bathing facilities in the river, just past the railway bridge, about six foot deep a good opportunity for swimming and diving. Again at the fish Ponds in the Folly for the privileged. It was mostly the Folly women who used to walk to the station to catch the early train to Luton to make hats.

At one period children used to be a little nervous to cross the bridge in the village. For one thing Lady Cavan’s bloodhound used to like standing as if on guard. With his large bulk and bloodshot eyes he looked fierce, which indeed was not the case. Not only that, a mongol lived in one of the Bull cottages. Seeing anyone approach she would rush out, peer in their face and shout “silly idiot”, truly an unnerving experience.

A row of lovely old cottages with a courtyard stood where Barclays Bank and other shops now stand. The villagers would sit happily in the courtyard in their white aprons. Pulled down for progress as were many old houses, they were really part of old Wheathampstead. Other families linked in the village and domiciled over the years are Simons, Chennells, Titmuss, Westwood and Collins.

The church was really the showplace. Always full on Sundays, the congregation resigned to listen to old Canon Davys preach on as it seemed for eternity! Not for nothing was he nicknamed “Bumble Bee” for he mumbled, hardly a word could be heard. It was his daughter Blanche who gave the Church Room to the village, a much-needed hall. But it was the old St Helen’s School, now pulled down, that was used for all gatherings.

Concerts were the only real form of entertainment. Bert Cobb and his Nigger Minstrels being a great draw, as well as many other local lights. In fact, any other form of entertainment was for many years always referred to as “a concert”, due no doubt to habit.

Saddest of all, Town Farm at the corner of Marford Road. Just a little way up Wheathampstead Hill two cottages stood where a very strange woman, Mamie Pring, not unlike a very old gargoyle, lived. She was very eccentric and kept her donkeys in her living room. Not only that, she chased away with a stick anyone who came to look at them! Later a

young doctor named Smallwood took over the cottages and converted them into the present house. Building up his practice, he rode his bicycle tending to the sick night and day.

Two blacksmiths, one the Westwood family in the Bull Yard and secondly Matthews in the Swan Yard were kept busy with a constant stream of horses and ponies of all description. The peace of the village and all around was disturbed only by the clobber of horses until gradually the odd car would venture along the roads splashing up mud and the peace of the village began to vanish and so-called 'progress' stepped in.

Yet there are some still who can catch the atmosphere from the River Lea and Devil's Dyke when Wheathampstead was marked as Wetamstead on very old maps or when the Romans were in command and Boadicea is said to have sailed up the Lea.

Notes

1 Claude 'Claudie' Grahame-White (1879 - 1959)

See <https://www.ctie.monash.edu/hargrave/grahame-white.html>

During July/August 1912. J.L. Travers and Claude Graeme-White on their 'Wake Up England' campaign, flew a Henri Farman HF.22 covered in bright blue fabric with the 'Wake Up England' slogan across the wings in bright yellow. He was the first English pilot to carry mail in Britain and was the first to fly by night. By now White had made a fortune and he invested it wisely in 220 acres of pasture at Hendon, turning it into London's first aerodrome. For three years up to the outbreak of WW1 the weekend flying displays there were the greatest attraction in London. Claude Grahame-White, born at Southampton on 31 August 1879 and educated at Bedford Grammar School, had been a yachtsman, a motoring enthusiast, and a dealer in automobiles before he was converted to aviation at the Rheims meeting in 1909.