

Carol Cornell

with Patrick McNeill 28 June 2024

Thank you, Carol, for talking to me today. I'll start by asking you how long you have lived in Wheathampstead.

I was born in East Mount 86 years ago. My father was Joseph Holloway, my mother was Audrey Eugenie and there were four of us children. I lived there until I got married at 19. I married a village boy who lived at the Railway Hotel. We lived there with his Mum and Dad for a while and then we moved to Harpenden. Later, we broke up and I met Eddie.

Where did you go to school?

They used to have a Catholic School in Marford Road in a house opposite the church. The nuns were the teachers. I went there because my father was a Catholic. Godfrey Roe was not a Catholic but his Mum wanted him to have a private education so she paid sixpence a week for me to take him to a Catholic school and he stayed there until we both left aged nine. Then I went to St Helen's.

I can't really remember the nuns who were the teachers. They were quite strict. I think there was a Sister Augusta. She is the only one I can remember because she was very kind and very nice. But I don't think they really taught us much. It was all to do with sewing and bible. There was basic reading and writing but it wasn't as good as it could have been. You don't realise this until you're a bit older ... until I went to St Helen's.

Did they teach you any history? geography?

No geography. History was all about the bible. That was drummed into our heads. You had to go to Holy Communion. You had to go to Benediction. It takes over your life a bit!

Then you went on to St Helen's when you were nine?

Yes. Which broadened my horizons a bit. I went straight into the Senior School on the other side of the road from the Old School building. It was quite a new building then. We had more space than they have now because we used to have The Wick. There were no houses up there and that's where we used to do our games. Wheathampstead has changed so much. East Lane was a few houses and nothing more, but we had quite a few things in the village. Shoe shops, two bakers, two butchers at one time.

At St Helen's they taught us history and geography. But while I was there a Catholic person came to the school and said the Catholic people who came to that school "Would they be able to come into the hall and be coached?" and I wouldn't go because I had integrated into the Church of England religion by then.

Do you remember any of the teachers?

Mr Thrussell, Mr Griffiths. Miss Yashmak, she was lovely. She was the games teacher but she also taught the nine year olds. There was another one – I can't remember her name – in the next class. But all the teachers were really nice. The master, Mr Housden, was very very strict. Especially with the boys.

If you were sent out, especially the boys, if you had to stand in the corridor, they would try to nip to the loo so they weren't caught by the headmaster for a caning; but not many girls were sent out. We also had fires in some of the classrooms which was lovely. If your desk was next to the fire you were quite happy.

Was there any conflict between the Roman Catholics and the Church of England at St Helen's?

There used to be quite a lot but I was much younger then. I got in a few fights; I remember hitting Paul Dunham. He said something about Catholics, and I thought "I'm not having that" so I whacked him one. We became very good friends later.

Mr Thrussell had just come out of the RAF. He was tall and good-looking, so the girls had a bit of a crush. He talked a lot about the RAF. He was very good with geography.

I was about 11 then so that was at the end of the war.

I've read that there was a tea party for the village children at the end of the war. Do you remember that?

That was in the café in the village. Run by Mrs Darwell. Also I think the vicar Mr Roe gave one as well. I went with his daughter Philippa to that one so we did two. It was very good.

What do you remember of the wartime?

Well, I was quite young but I do remember there was a bomb dropped on Bury Farm and it blew out our windows in East Lane, the side windows. That's the only thing that made any difference to me. I suppose our parents worried but the kids didn't seem to.

Oh, and we had the army staying. The ATS was in one Nissen hut and the guys were in the other. And also there used to be a billiards room where the men used to play and there used to be lots of army men in there. I used to do a little song-and-dance act on the table for them; I must have been quite young. I was about six, I think, and I was always singing "She'll be coming round the mountain". That was the only song I knew. And I would dance for them. The men were also billeted in the Mead Hall. It used to have a beautiful yellow flower and the girls used to pick a bit.

The Italian POWs used to work at the farms a lot, probably with haymaking or milking or whatever was going on.

How has East Lane changed since then?

East Lane has completely altered. There was a lovely brick wall and over that side there were allotments that belonged to the people who lived in Bull Yard. Where Loufenway is now, that was all allotments. Aunt May and Uncle Will, Mr and Mrs Lawrence, they had greenhouses over there. And there was another bungalow down there, Mrs Potter. There were not many cars around then.

And then there was the little house, Mrs Lawrence's house, I've got a photo of it. (*shows photo*) It was a wooden cottage and Sam Collins built a brick bit on the end. The cottage is no longer there. Opposite Mead Hall. More modern houses are there now.

Where did East Lane end?

East Lane finished down where Mrs Went was, which was at the end getting towards the river. Behind our house in East Mount was all fields. The flats weren't there. Where Bocket View is now that was all fields. Mr Lamb used to plant all his corn there. Then in July and

August he'd come and cut it and everybody would come from the village with their dogs. The rabbits would come out. People don't realise what used to happen. Let the dogs off the leash to catch the rabbits. It's awful when you come to think about it but that was then and this is now.

I had a rabbit when I was young and I would always check the rabbit was there when I got home from school. One day it wasn't, and I said "Where's my rabbit?" and they said "Oh we've moved it into the other hutch" so I knew there'd be rabbit for dinner. I would never eat the meat but my rabbit was safe.

When you were children aged, say, three or four up to about 13, what did you do at weekends and in the holidays?

Yes, playing in the Meads. Or up the dump. Blackbridge. And the sandpits in Codicote Road.

How big was the river in the Meads at that time?

Some parts were quite high and some parts were lower. But there was never a bridge. If you wanted to cross the river you had to paddle. There were certain places you could paddle but up near where the Forge is it was very deep there, very deep, and the boys would have rafts. Dennis Toyer had Sammy Collins' canoe I think it was. The boys had this raft because they had Murphy's drums. You can imagine it. Boys were boys. The Meads was beautiful. They used to have cattle in the Meads. Cows grazing, and lots of molehills on the other side which Mr Wren used to have. You know where the orchard is now. There used to be a spinney there where the girls used to make little houses. But mostly it was just boys and girls playing.

There were cows on both sides; they could cross over. But they seemed to stay on the far side. John Matthews had a little holding there.

The river is much wider now. There used to be a little channel where Mr Wren who ran the sewage plant used to let his sewage into the river. It was definitely high at one end and then it would get narrow and then at the other end near Marford Farm it would get quite high.

Where else did you play?

At the dump. Yes. And we went cycling everywhere then, Ayot, Welwyn, not to shops or anything, we were still children. We'd be meeting other people, in other parks, especially in Welwyn, and ask about what was going in the village.

Did you say there were two bakers and two butchers in the village?

Mr Simons was the butcher's; that's where Marley's is now. The other one was in Church Street. And there were two fruit and veg shops, run by Miss Lorna Rowe and Mrs Pateman. Mr Amos was the shoe man. He used to live in East Lane and his shop was in the High Street where the plumbers' shop is now. The other shoe shop was Blindell's at the top of the High Street where the flats are now. And a little cobbler man there. He used to like the young girls coming in so he could chase them. We used to tease him. You know what young girls are, they will try anything. He never put his hands on you but he would like to chase you. If he got his hand on you it would be your fault. It was a game; there was really no harm in it. Mr Garrett's baker's shop was next door to Blindell's.

Mr Wren had a little shop where the dentist's is now. He sold petrol and paraffin and bits and pieces in his shop. And then we had the wheelwrights. There used to be a newsagent and Davies the wheelwright was in the middle. On the same side as the dentist's. And right near there was an air raid shelter.

Where was that?

You know where the old post office was? There used to be a bus shelter. Next to that was an air raid shelter more or less where King Edward Place is now.

How long did that stay there after the war?

Quite a while actually. About a year. And there was one at the Catholic school as well. On the church side of the road near where the church is now. There was a house there as well. The boys used to go in the house and the girls went in the church. There was also an air raid shelter on the field.

Moving up the High Street from there, there is now the little gift shop on the other side of what is now King Edward Place. It was once a pub but how do you remember it?

It was a newsagent's owned by Mrs Pearce. My brother used to deliver the morning papers. And Mr Hall who owned the bakers gave him a doughnut every morning on his rounds. We acquired a jackdaw on his rounds as well. We kept this jackdaw for a long time and every time we had a thunderstorm it would run down our path, knock on our back door to come indoors. It would come indoors and when it was all clear it would want to go out again but in the end it got killed by one of our chickens. It was a rooster that killed it and we never got another jackdaw.

Now, moving on in time ... How old were you when you left St Helen's School?

I was 15. I went to the basket factory in Harpenden for one day. I didn't like it and I left. My mother said "You're not staying at home, you go and get another job". So I went to Helmets and I stayed there for nine months. But my sister and my brother worked at Murphy's and I wanted to work at Murphy's so I went to see Mr Hickson ... he lived up Rose Lane ... I went to see him and he said "No, you can't come here until you are 16 because it's dangerous. But you can work in the office." I said "I don't want to work in the office, I want to be in the factory." "Well, you can't. Come back to me when you're 16 and we'll see about it." Which I did but in the meantime somebody told Lena Odell, my manager at Helmets, that I'd been for another job and she called me in the office and she said "I hear you've been looking for another job" and I said "Only enquiring". "Well," she said "I'm not wasting my time training you at Helmets if you're going to leave." "OK, fair enough. I'm not leaving at the moment." So she kept me on but when it was time I did go.

So she kept you on until your 16th birthday?

Yes. She obviously didn't teach me but the other girls taught me. We were making helmets for the miners and other sorts of people but mostly the miners. My particular job was doing the webbing inside the helmet. Stitching on a machine. You'd get this webbing this way and that way and you put it on the machine and bang bang bang and that was it. The webbing made it more comfortable to wear the helmet.

Did the helmets come in different sizes?

Yes. Two sizes. Probably large and small or maybe large and larger! And they made some other kinds of helmets too. But I was only involved in the coalminers' helmets.

So now you're 16 and at Murphy's. What did you do there?

Well, I worked in the big factory and then they said "We'll put you on the post" so I became the postwoman. I did all the post and I had to take it to the post office to send off. I did that until I got married. And I really really enjoyed it. I enjoyed the people; they were all good fun.

There was a mix of people. We had some Italians – Camilla Backhouse. She didn't like the fresh air coming in. We were on a sort of belt; the things were coming along on a belt and you had to put the bottle top on and she said "I'm going to close the window" and I said "No you're not, I want it open, we all want it open." So between us we were closing and opening the window and we got told off. I don't know if she still lives in Wheathampstead but she married one of the boys from Wheathampstead. I don't think any of us won that particular game but it was so funny.

What other work did you do there?

When I did the post office it was my fulltime job and I was on my own. I really had to fight my way through that with some of the guys. You're on your own. It was like a big Nissen hut in an all-male atmosphere. I was still young but I knew what I had to do because my mother had already warned me. "Don't bring trouble home here my girl!" So I was always wary but I still had a good time.

Did you move away from Wheathampstead when you got married?

No, I stayed in Wheathampstead and carried on at work. I was 21. Doing the same job.

You've given us a snapshot of what the village was like when you were a child and in your teens. Can we talk about how the village has developed over that time?

When we were at school the estate was just starting. We had to name all the roads like Conquerors Hill, Caesars Road. That was all before it was actually built. I must have been about 14 or 15 then.

What was the next development after the 1950s?

I'm trying to think what East Lane was like then. Opposite where Murphy's was, there was four old cottages there.

They were lovely. They only had one living room and a kind of barn. There were four; Mrs Phillips, Mrs Sims and Mrs Gurney. The one in the middle I can never remember but I know there were four. I was friendly with them all except this particular one and they must have moved around ... because Shirley moved to the council houses in Marford Road. Those houses were all going to be pulled down. I must have been about 16, about that age or maybe a bit less. But I can remember all that. I can see it so vividly and I can see the bank and the tin what-do-you-call-them that was on the bank. And Mrs Gurney. If you went down the road Mrs Gurney would call out of her window and say "Would you like a cake, darling?" I don't know what happened to Mrs Gurney. What happened to those people? Where did they come from? And what happened to them? I know Mrs and Mrs Sims are now gone because they were quite old then but they were lovely.

We haven't yet talked about the railway station and the railway.

Right. Well, the railway station was great. When I was courting, we could go to the railway station, go to the waiting room where they had a lovely fire. You could sit there all night with the fire you know. But you had to be home by half past nine. If you weren't home by half past nine there'd be trouble. I mean, if you're going to get up to mischief you could get up to it before half past nine but my mother, I'd walk indoors she'd say "Why is your skirt creased?" "Well, I've been sitting down." Even when I'd been to the cinema, she'd say "Your skirt's creased." She did call me a rebel.

And then there was the stationmaster's house ... right in the middle of the road and a lovely garden. He had a beautiful garden behind the house going down into Codicote Road. And

then they had that beautiful bridge over Waddling Lane. Beautiful brick bridge. That was the courting couples' bridge.

Did you ever go on the train?

Yes. Mostly to Welwyn but I did go to London one day. But my brother used to go often because he liked the escalators. He'd spend all day going up and down the escalators. That's my younger brother – there was four of us in the family. If he got into any trouble I would have to bail him out. I looked after him really when it should have been the other way round.

To get to London from Wheathampstead, did you have to change at Hatfield or were there some through trains?

We didn't have to change, no. There were some through trains. I only went to London once and I didn't have to change.

It was very busy that train station. Because people used to work at Welwyn and Welwyn Garden City so they'd all go on the train. At six o'clock all the village people would be getting off the train coming home. Mr Lee was the stationmaster. He had connections with the nursery down in East Lane. There used to be the boys' club there. They used to do things down there and he was part of that. Like a youth club but focused on the garden, the nursery.

A few minutes ago, you mentioned Bury Farm. What do you remember of Bury Farm?

Yes, I remember when it was an active farm. That was Titmuss again, wasn't it? Opposite where the old houses are. If you go through the rectory field, you get those nice old houses there that go through to the river. Opposite there was a stables with the cows and then Mr Titmuss sold off all the farm and they turned it into houses. My father worked for him: "Did you bring the milk?" With the horse and cart up Rose Lane when he would have a pint or some butter and that was all Titmuss.

Was Bury Farm an arable or a cattle farm?

Bit of both. But it was the animals we associated with because I used to love the calves. They were so beautiful. And I used to like going down to Lamb's farm at Marford. He was lovely, Mr Lamb. Tim's father.

Thank you again, Carol, for talking to me today.

I've enjoyed it. I don't think I've incriminated anyone have I? I could do but I'm not going to. They were good times and good people. And I still love Wheathampstead.