

## **Amy Coburn née Wren: Wheathampstead 1930s/40s**

To follow on from the memories of my grandparents, it seems that now I have not quite reached the age that my grandparents achieved, I should record my recollections of what Wheathampstead was like in the 1930s and 1940s when I was a child.

As in the grandparents' time there were shops that supplied the needs of village folk without the need of going on long journeys, unless one wished to buy something special like furniture or clothes.

I was born and lived, until I was married in 1949, in Necton Road, New Marford as it was known then, to distinguish it from Old Marford by the Nelson public house. At the top of 'our' road on the corner of Marford Road stood Mr Bangs' grocer's shop. It was small; today (2007) it is a private house. Mr Bangs was a tall man, he always wore a clean white apron; he was assisted by Mrs Bangs, his wife. Most items that housewives needed for cooking, cleaning and laundering were sold. There was not the variety of products on the market in those years. Mr Bangs also sold sweets, loose in jars, ready to be weighed in 'penn'orths' or 'ha'porths' according to the depth of the pockets of children. Mr Bangs also bought eggs from my father who kept poultry. The dried fruit' currants, sultanas which were sold were washed, then dried outside in the sun outside the back door of his home. Dried fruit was delivered loose and could be very dirty – my mother, from wherever she bought dried fruit, washed and dried it before use.

And so, along Marford Road to the village (we went 'down the street' if we went shopping in the village itself) round Policeman's Corner, where there were two police houses opposite 'The Swan'. The first shop was Mr Riddle, saddler, who repaired leather goods. Then came the shoe shop, who sold good strong working boots for men, shoes for ladies and children, plimsolls and slippers. When repairs were needed there was Mr Frank Newbury, a small elflike man, who sat at the bench with his hobbling foot between his knees. It was an interesting place, this wooden hut, there were 'lasts' numbers hanging on the wall, had once been used to make shoes to measure for those villagers who could afford to pay for real comfort. A pail of water with a roll of leather, box upon box of tacks, the floor was strewn with small off-cuts of leather. I liked to watch Mr Newbury work, his razor-sharp knife worn to almost nothing, cut through leather like butter. It was also fascinating to watch as he spat out tacks as he attached the new soles to the shoe and heels which he was repairing. The wooden hut was so positioned that Mr Newbury could look across the roof of the low building in front to Church Street, and see what was happening out there and he heard a lot of gossip from customers. One paid for repairs in the main shoe shop when the work was completed.

Next door to the shoe shop was Garratts the bakers – Mrs Garratt, in spotless white overall, and an assistant similarly dressed sold bread and cakes, and also sweets, and at Christmas time crackers. Mother very occasionally bought a few currant buns, and even more occasionally a choux bun oozing with cream as a special treat. Mr Garratt pushed a hand cart round the village delivering bread to households.

Lattimores was a large house, where lived Fredrick Wright, joint owner with his brother Walter of the Gustard Wood and Dyke Nurseries where tomatoes and cucumbers were grown. The destination of these was Covent Garden in London.

In the White Cottage, a timber-framed building, lived Miss Carter, who had been Secretary to Lord Cavan so I was told. Each year Miss Carter invited my mother and I to tea in February to pick snowdrops in her orchard. I took a small basket and bunched the delicate blooms as they were picked. As snowdrops were considered 'unlucky' by many people this was quite unusual.

The next shop was The Post Office – where Mr Frank Chennells reigned. Mr Chennells did not suffer fools gladly so one was very careful. In part of the shop groceries were sold by Mrs Chennells. The Chennells family also sold milk, delivering it by milk float with churns from which it was transferred to the housewife's jug at the back door of village homes with a measure, pint or ½ pint.

A house which had once been a public house came next, followed by Mr Latchford's the barber, with a row of very small buildings known as Barber's Yard behind. Mr Latchford had a shop at the front from which could be purchased an assortment of products, like Zambuk, aspirin and even some toys and my first fishing net was bought from this shop. The barber's shop was a place of wonder, pulleys and large chairs – the whole place smelled of shaving soap – I think I remember the ordeal of having my fair curls cut there once.

Then came the Bell & Crown public house – next door was Len Rowe's greengrocer's shop (Mr Rowe bought vegetables from my father for resale) a small narrow shop, where at Christmas time juicy Jaffa oranges were bought as a special treat, there was also an ice cream cabinet where Walls iced lollies could be bought on very rare occasions by me for 1d.

Mr Stapleton's was a double-fronted shop, a bit up-market, sold groceries and wines. Once a year my mother bought a bottle of port to dispense to favoured tradespeople at Xmas time.

#### **Next door**

Those who did their own painting and paper-hanging could purchase their requirements from Mrs Tom Westwood's small shop – or ask for an estimate for Mr Westwood's firm to carry out the work. Now came the wheelwright Mr Cyril Wren. The Wren family (same name but no relation to my family) were long time family friends. I spent many happy and interesting hours there over the years. I saw Mr Wren making wheels for farm carts, the careful work he had executed in lettering milk floats, butcher's, baker's and other trade vehicles. Ruth, his daughter, and I were friends and we knew where and what we could and could not go or do in the workshop; there was a forge and a pit for tiring.

Then one came to East Lane. Here the blacksmith, Mr Harry Westwood, shod horses, repaired farm machinery, and did elaborate wrought-iron work, like gates. There was a lovely smell, undefinable but very noticeable. The fire engine was housed in the building next door to the forge which was backing onto Bull Yard. The fire engine didn't get called out very often, chimney fires or hay stacks being most common. The fire bell hung on the wall, to be rung to summon the firemen when needed. Across the Lane was the small shop of Mr Woodley and Mrs Woodley – two very large people, with an even larger son. As a child I used to wonder how these large people managed in so small a space as the shop.

Back into the High Street, past the Bull Hotel and over Mill Bridge and so onwards to the railway station – but more of that later.

Crossing to the other side of the road to enter Cobb's – later Hall's the Bakers – a timber-framed building with low ceilings. The smell of baking bread wafting into the small shop – doughnuts (better than Garratt's in our estimation) could be bought there once in a while.

Simons the butcher's was next, a large shop – white tiled with a cashier in the desk to take money and orders to be delivered. One could watch mince come out like red worms, bacon being sliced and Mr Simons as he sharpened his knives from a steel which hung from his belt. Meat was kept in a large cold room and slaughtered in the slaughterhouse in the yard behind the house and shop.

A walk along Tylers Gutter brought one to the wooden bridge under which the water from the River Lee kept the mill wheel turning. There was a lovely smell from grain being ground and water tumbling over the wheel. I would have liked to have seen inside of the mill but that was something I did not achieve.

Now to the shops on the west side of the High Street. The first building, I believe had been the telephone exchange where a Mrs Cook was the telephonist. Later after various ..... it became the post office when Mr Chennells relinquished the position as postmaster.

The newsagent's, Denis Peace, was another timber-framed building – city businessmen on their way to catch the train collected their papers. It was to this shop that accumulators for the wireless were taken to be recharged for, I think, about 1/6d.

A week or so before Guy Fawkes Day fireworks could also be bought – sparklers, Mount Vesuvius, roman candles, bangers and rockets – a shilling was carefully spent to the best advantage in order to obtain a reasonable show.

A solicitor, Mr de Mornay Davies, had an office between the 'paper shop' and Mrs (Fred) Collins who sold a variety of household goods, small carpets, mats, china and glass, saucepans and baking trays – polish and brooms. And, there was a petrol pump outside as well.

Then came Bank Chambers, built in about 1936, on the site of Workhouse Yard. I can just remember, I must have been about four years old, seeing a boy sitting on a doorstep of the old building eating a large slice of bread and jam – I felt rather jealous – I didn't have a big doorstep to sit on, neither would my mother ever have allowed me to eat such a desirable delicacy publicly.

The new building housed a café, a greengrocer's Pateman's, The Wool Shop, and a Chemist's, with Barclays Bank on the corner of a road leading into the churchyard and Helmets. The next shop was the fishmonger's – where on Saturday evenings Fish and Chips could be bought. Mr Stubbs' supply of fish arrived by train to be collected by him in a small handcart.

Next door in the same row, Mr and Mrs Jenner's shop who sold haberdashery – from ladies' dresses to pillowcases, long woollen pants for men, voluminous knickers for ladies – suits to order, clothes for children. All were provided for. And, at Xmas time, upstairs there was to be found a selection of toys for children's stockings. Once, I cannot think why, I received from this store a tin steamroller which had very sharp edges – it was not a great favourite of my childhood days or one I remember with pleasure.

Past the lychgate, War Memorial and churchyard one arrived at Church Street. Just across the road, on the corner was Charles Collins antique shop – a glass building which had come from the Baxendales' home, Blackmore End House at Gustard Wood, being part of the Orangery there. The building housed a miscellany of furniture, mostly antique, being offered for sale. Then onwards into Church Street, a hairdresser, both ladies and gentlemen. Private houses, Ball's another butcher, with a slaughterhouse at the rear. Then came Walnut Tree public house, there was a small shop who supplied sweets for children on their way to school, if they were fortunate to have a penny to spend. Across the road was the flint-built school – then becoming known as the Old School. There was a brand-new school which housed the senior children up to 14 years of age.

Greengrocers – two – delivered fruit and vegetables twice weekly. Mother had no need to buy veg – Father grew them and sold them to greengrocers, one of whom, Jack Almond,

came from Harpenden. Mr Rowe had a shop in the High Street. A fishmonger, Mr Olney, from Luton came with his fish each Friday.

Coal was delivered in 1 cwt sacks, by Mr Herbert Hawkins who had a 'coal yard' in Necton Road. Coal for delivery came by train by the truckload to Wheathampstead station where there were sidings for trucks to await unloading. Milk was delivered by milk float, Chennells, Thrussells and Blains – with churns from which milk dispensed into large cans from which it was ladled into jugs at the door of the village homes. The day of the milk bottle eventually arrived with its cardboard disk, which if pressed carelessly caused ..... Two bakers also delivered bread to the door, Mr Garratt and Mr Cobb.

There were two callers at door who came from further away. Mr Sykes was a man with a large case in which was most carefully packed all types of drapery. Pillow and bolster cases, tablecloths, tea towels, tablecloths with red, green and blue designs round the edges, ladies' underwear, knickers and slippers. How he managed to pack so many goods into his case was a mystery, and how he managed to carry it around another. He would have come from Luton by train.

As, I presume, did another caller, a man whose name I never knew, who was a sort of walking chemist shop. Zambuk, Zubes, Vaseline, combs, hairnets, shampoos and no doubt other items of which I had no knowledge. All was conveyed in two brown carrier bags.

In spite of shops, there seemed to be no end of these travellers who called at the door hoping for a sale or to deliver goods already ordered.

Simons the butcher delivered meat by means of a horse and trap.

### **The Cottage Home**

Furnishing – food – laundry – housework

After he was demobbed from the army in 1919 Father had bought a pair of semi-detached cottages in Necton Road for £600 with aged tenants living in them. He and mother then waited for a cottage to become vacant on the death of the occupants to get married which they did in 1922. They called their home Cosy Cottages – a rather twee name, but which suited their new dwelling admirably. The cottage home was very cosy – always clean and spotless – Mother was very house proud – curtains, net for the summer months, heavier cretonne ones for the winter. Furniture was polished – brass cleaned. Housework had a regular pattern – washing Monday, Tuesday ironing, Wednesday bedrooms, Thursday the downstairs rooms, Friday baking, Saturday – a day to make sure everything was in order for Sunday – a day when there was no housework, minimal cooking – life was routine. The garden was kept in order – Mother did that, Father had his own work to do and long hours they were too.

The house was comfortably furnished. Three bedrooms upstairs, the smallest (mine) leading out of the 'middle' bedroom and a front bedroom, kept for visitors.

Downstairs, there was a 'front' room – rarely used – with a three-piece suite, piano (mine), china cabinet, a nice carpet on the floor with polished surround. The 'middle' room where we ate and sat in the evenings, a wireless, we had one of the first, comfy chairs and sideboard. The kitchen had a gas cooker and sink and once had a large brick copper but that was removed to give more space as the years went by. There was no bathroom. As all our neighbours did, we had a bath using a large tin bath, which was kept in the barn which adjoined the kitchen. The flush lavatory was a little further on, not everyone had a flush lav. Some people still flushed using a bucket of water. Mother had a well-constructed and

ventilated shed with a brick floor opposite the back door where extra kitchen equipment was housed – eggs in waterglass against winter shortages, meat safe, extra large pans and crockery. A great space saver / jam, pickles and chutney / laundry basket.

As I was an only child, we were not exactly overcrowded. Some cottage homes like ours where there was a large family must have been less comfortable from what I saw when calling at other homes.