

Wheathampstead

(Extract from Cussans, John Edwin, *History of Hertfordshire* Vol. 3, 1870-1881)

Wheathampstead is a parish and small town on the River Lee, five miles north-east of St Albans and four miles south-west of Welwyn. It is bounded on the north by Kimpton and Ayot St Lawrence; on the north-west by Bedfordshire; on the south and east by Sandridge; and on the west by Harpenden. The area of the parish is 5033 acres and the population at the last census of 1871 was returned as 2188.

The derivation of the name of this parish has generally been accepted as Wheat-Ham-Stede = The Stede, or dwelling, in the wheat village. I am, however, by no means satisfied that this parish derives its name from its being celebrated in Saxon times for its production of wheat. I am inclined to think that Wheat has no more to do with Wheathampstead than has Maize or Mangold Wurzel, but that the first syllable is simply Wet. In Domesday Book the parish is called Wathamstede, and in the extracts of deeds given on a subsequent page, it will be seen that in no instance does the prefix approach to the sound of Wheat. It is sometimes Wat, or What, and at other times Whet. As late as 1640, when Lewis Wemys was appointed by the king to the rectory, the name of the parish was written Whatamstede. Even at the present day, the meadows in the valley of the Lee, throughout the whole parish are, for the most part, but rush-grown fields, and decidedly Wet. The whole valley was one vast lake, or mere, hence the name of the manor Lamer, or Lee-mere. At certain places this mere was fordable, as at Batford, Pickford and Mereford, now called Marford. At its narrowest part, between the comparatively high ground on which the Railway Station now stands on the north, and the church to the south, it was spanned by a bridge, over which passed, and still passes, the road from St Albans to the north.

About three-quarters of a mile east of Batford was an elevated piece of ground, probably an island in the mere, now called Castle Farm. This was undoubtedly a fortified place, and the home of John de Laycestria, or Lee Castle, person of the church, who in 1277 claimed and was allowed the right of Franc-pledge in Wathamstede, which his ancestors had enjoyed from time immemorial. There was another island in the mere, about a mile west of the church, over which island passed a roadway, with a bridge on either side, as appears by the present name Leasey Bridge Farm, signifying the Farm by the bridge of the Lee island. The Lee-Mere at length terminated at Water End, in the adjoining parish of Sandridge.

Note: Cussans continues with short descriptions of the Manor of Wheathampstead, the Manor of Lamer and the Manor of the Rectory, a detailed description of St Helen's Church and its inscriptions, and a short description of the Rectory.

It is fair to say that Cussans is not now regarded as a reliable source in every detail.