

**Winifred Deans (nee Titmuss) interviewed 22 June 2012 at her home at 19 Ash Grove, Wheathampstead (also on 1 September 2012)**

**by Ruth Jeavons**

Born 30 October 1915, Win has lived in Wheathampstead all her life but for 8 years spent in St Albans where her son Andrew was in school. Her childhood home was at 4 Church Street, and she later lived at the Mill House (now the Manor Pharmacy). She had a happy childhood with her brother Peter. Her father was James Titmuss and her mother was Georgina Simons. It was a happy home and the family had a gas cooker in the kitchen. Win specially remembered her mother's lovely egg custards.

Grandfather George Titmuss had been born at Langley, then moved to Nup End Farm. Titmusses have been farmers for generations. Grandfather George learned milling at Lemsford Mill and came to Wheathampstead aged 19, where he rented the mill from the Church Commissioners, c. 1856. His uncle George Garrett was a miller at Hertford and married his aunt, Mary Titmuss.

Win's mother was a Simons and she had lived at Simons the butcher's shop in Station Road. There used to be a tennis court behind Simons and Win spent quite a lot of time there playing tennis.

*Earliest memories:*

1 The christening of the village fire engine

2 Appearing in a St Helen's school concert in a white satin dress with a red velvet cape. This was in the old flint school building. She said she "Felt like the dog's dinner". Gave a recitation: "The man in the moon I say goodnight, Your arms and legs are too long but I can see your smile" followed by a ribbon dance. Rev. Baird Smith's daughters, Frankie, Mary and ? also performed in the concert.

3 An occasion once at family dinner time when she had been rude and was threatened with either having to apologise or go to stand in the corner. She went straight to the corner, for which her father recognised her as a strong character who would "take her punishment".

4 Walking in the river which was clean then and full of fish, also cycling.

5 The bad smell from Murphy Chemicals. Her father was on the parish council and they used to get lots of complaints about this.

Until she was 11, Win used to have private tuition from Miss Young (a teacher at St Helen's in charge of the Juniors) who would come to the house after school. Win didn't go to an actual school until she was 11, then it was to a Catholic Convent girls' school in Harpenden to which she travelled by train to Batford then had quite a long walk to the school which was where the public hall is now in Arden Grove. Went together with Muriel Ball, the butcher in Church Street's daughter. Harry Ball and Win's father were friends. The rector's daughters went to St Hilda's.

Win married in 1945 when her husband returned after the war having been held as a German prisoner of war for five and a half years. He had been badly wounded in the retreat from Dunkirk and was lucky to survive a bullet going right through his shoulder. When they were first married, Win and her husband lived in a house near the Cherry Trees on the Lower Luton Road. They had one son, Andrew, born in 1946, who was not very strong. He went to the college of FE in St Albans for schooling which was why they moved to live in St Albans for 8 years. Andrew died young aged 27.

Win met her husband when aged 18. He was a school friend of her brother, from St Albans' School. They were married at St Helen's church where her father had been in the choir and her mother used to teach in the Sunday School.

Her brother had two horses. Alice Smith's uncle (a Freeman who worked for the Titmusses at the mill) had some land at Batford and used to deal in horses. Win herself had no interest in horses after a bad fall in Parson's Meadow.

During the war Win worked in the mill office, doing Ministry of Food work. She would have liked to have joined the Woman's Land Army. Remembered the Throssells at Bury Farm. Miss Parkinson, a daughter of the Throssells, was a friend. Win (or was it Pam Throssell?) used to walk through Parson's meadow on a Sunday morning to the farm to fetch cream.

Win remembered a doodlebug dropping in Bury Farm shaving off the top of a fir tree just at the back of her present house. "It was June and very hot. I was sleeping in the mill house (now the chemist's). I saw it go over Collins. Then the flame stopped, which meant it had got to the end of its fuel. I saw it coming down and shouted out "There's a balloon coming down." It was heading straight for the Folly. "Took the slates off the roof."

A land mine came down by parachute opposite Olivia Robins house that blew out windows.

Win worked with the WRVS under Mrs Cory Wright during the war – collecting clothing and placing evacuees. She remembered one "cheeky little devil" called Enoch whose family stayed in the village after the war. Also remembered Mr Clark, headmaster at St Helen's, Mr Housden (a later headmaster there) and Miss Warren.

Cooking during the war meant plenty of puddings to fill you up. Flour was free: sugar and butter were rationed. Sweets were the last thing to go off rationing. Andrew, (Win's son) when asked what he'd had for his school dinner once replied, "Sludge and cardboard", meaning pastry and custard.

As to village characters remembered, Win recalled Pickles Newberry. Mr Dollimore had written an article about life at Lamer, "My Village", and won a prize for it. His grandparents lived at the bottom of Rose Lane and worked at Lamer Farm. He brought up Win's youngest sister's cousin, Doug Seabrook who'd married dad's sister and had 2 boys and a girl. Angela Gifford is a daughter of George Seabrook. He built the first house in Rose Lane to retire in. Win's cousin bought Lamer Farm after his father had rented it from Cherry Garrard who had let it fall into rack and ruin, establishing plantations of spruce trees there. Cattle had barked the trees in the paddock. Win remembered Cherry Garrard. He'd come back from the Antarctic a strange man, drove a yellow Rolls Royce. He went to live in a London hotel and

gradually sold off the estate. Win also remembered Mr Woodleigh in East Lane – a good grocer, and other shopkeepers, Mrs Stapleton and Fred Collins.

Lady Ellen Lambart (daughter of Lord Cavan) once came to the mill office. She started off the Working Men's Club (in the building opposite what is now the Post Office). It was Lady Ellen's idea. She was sorry for the wives, as the men had very little pay and would spend all the money on drink. The club had a rule – no drink. It was a dominoes and smoking club to give the men a chance to relax and the women a chance to get them out of the house. Homes were cramped and full of children and it gave the men a chance to get out and socialise. Now it's a drinking club, so quite the opposite. The land belonged to Earl Cowper, as did all the land between Wheathampstead and Welwyn at one time. (The Brockets acquired their patch only relatively recently.) Earl Cowper gave the land and also permission to build the Club there. Lady Ellen asked Win's father to be treasurer. Mr Brown was Chairman of the committee. Fred Collins had a horse and wagon and took it to fetch a second-hand billiard table at Barton (beyond Luton) for the club.

The men who worked at the Dump would sometimes find silver: once fish knives, another time even a silver candelabra. One man always had a sack on his back for pickings. Win's father, who closed the mill at 5.00pm, would see them coming back from work. They'd always stop and talk to him.

Happiest memory? It was a happy childhood with the freedom to go anywhere and explore down the Meads. They'd cycle to Welwyn on their bikes. Gwen Crooks lived next door and they'd go off together.

Mr Ransome who built Necton Road was a very deaf gentleman. But he loved chess and played Win's dad at chess at 7.00 pm in the Club.

Lord Cavan built the bridge over Lamer Lane for his mother at the Dower House at Garden Court. Win recalled walking up Lamer Lane to see the wrought iron gates with the date 1881. Lord Cavan wanted to build a high wall to give Wheathampstead House some privacy. He also wanted to divert the road for some peace and quiet, as it was opposite the railway station. The church commissioners owned the land, also the mill. They wanted to do a deal, whereby Lord Cavan would buy the mill in exchange for the land to enable him to divert the road. But he didn't want the mill. So it was arranged that grandfather Titmuss would take the mill off Lord Cavan's hands. That was how the mill came to the Titmuss family.

Apparently Lady Ellen was rather manly in appearance – she rode astride the horse and had short, cropped hair. Once riding at Gustard Wood she greeted a man laying a hedge who, thinking she was a man, replied, "Good day, Sir". "You don't know who I am, do you?" Lady Ellen responded. When the old chap learned he said "Well I'll be b----d." The two sisters of Lady Cavan went into a convent in Kent. Win remembered her father going to visit them once, when the family were on a car journey in that part of the world.

Win's father told her a story about Bernard Shaw. He was once invited to come to the debating society started by the chapel parson at the Congregational church. The subject was to be capital punishment. It was a treacherous night and they all thought Shaw wouldn't make it to the meeting. They waited a bit but eventually decided to make a start. No sooner

had they begun than the door opened and Shaw walked in with a hurricane lamp, soaked through. He'd walked all the way through Lamer. Win remembered him in the village.

Another story her father liked to tell was about the night when Earl Cowper invited all his tenant farmers to a ball at Panshanger House – possibly to celebrate a silver wedding anniversary? Walter Titmuss, who farmed Samuel's Farm and was land agent for Earl Cowper, was invited, and took along his sister Charlotte, also Win's father James and his sister. So there were four of them. They all went together in a brougham specially hired for the night and driven by Mr Wren of Jessamine Cottage. There was stabling for the horses and Mr Wren had to stay til the end to bring them home. A footman came from the front door to the coach to announce their arrival as "The Titmuss Party!" The grand occasion made a big impression on the young twenty-year-old James and his eighteen-year-old sister, and he enjoyed telling his children of that special evening.

### **Follow-up interview, 1 September 2012**

#### ***Further childhood memories***

Win and her family used to keep a boat on the river Lea. They used to row in it up to New Bridge and back. The boat took four people and there was a landing stage at Bury Farm. They kept the boat on the river in the garden near their house, then the mill house, now the chemists' shop. They also kept a Shetland pony on Parson's meadow, a field rented by Win's dad. One year there was ice on the river, though Win couldn't remember which year this was. However, she could remember enjoying Mr Thrale's ice cream.

Win's parents were married on 13th July 1914. Canon Nance performed the ceremony. Her dad was a choirboy and her mum a Sunday school teacher. "We tempted fate," her mum would say, "having chosen to be married on the unlucky thirteenth".

#### **Church**

There used to be a Sunday afternoon service by the West door. We used to get a stamp for attendance to put in a little book. It was a proper little service. About 20 came, mostly girls.

Win's grandmother (nee Webb) came from farming stock at Ickleton near Duxford. Her grandmother's father had been land agent to Lord Lytton.

There is a letter in the Titmuss family's possession dated 1816 describing the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, written in rows one horizontal, the other at right angles to that in vertical lines, so that the page was criss-crossed with lines of writing, making the most efficient use of the page. It was written by her son, who'd been educated in France, to his mother, Jenny Webb (???) and sent via the Dover packet ship.

#### **Dr Smallwood**

Win had fond memories of Dr Smallwood who used to call her his Mary Ann. "When he came you felt better. 'Now what's the matter with my Mary Ann?' he'd say. 'We'll soon get you better.' He and my father were friends. 'I'm sorry I've got to send you a bill, Jim, he'd say. You've got to pay for all those poor people who can't pay. "

His first wife had died in childbirth. Elinor Smallwood [who opened the Memorial Hall] was his second wife. They lost 2 sons in the Second World War. Win didn't know Dr Parkinson, as she registered with a Harpenden doctor in order to have access to the Red House for childbirth. (???)

### **Church again**

Win particularly remembered Frankie Baird Smith, one of the Rev. Baird Smith's daughters. There were Mary, Charlotte and Frances (Frankie), also two sons, one of whom was in the RAF and was killed during the war, the other had Downs' Syndrome.

She also recollected the church fetes. They always started with a fancy dress parade which set off from the railway station to the sounds of the St Albans brass band. They marched through the village and floats were usually judged at the Old Rectory. "My mother's sister, Mrs Garrett, always did something funny." [This was Mary Wigley's mum, who kept the baker's shop where Granary Close is now.] "Once (it was a nasty day and the judging was to be in the school) she got in a pram dressed as a child in a bonnet with a dummy and got her husband to push her. He was a little man. Trouble was when they got to the steps of the school she had to get out of the pram! Once she dressed up as the Aga Khan – he'd won the Derby that year – complete with a little wooden house. Once I was the lavender lady, but I never won anything."

### **The Garretts**

They owned the Sele mills in Hertford. They were illuminated during World War One, possibly for security. They could certainly see it clearly when a zeppelin landed nearby. The only casualty was a dead horse in a field opposite the hospital.

Grandma Titmuss owned a mill at Codicote. (Win had photos) The Garretts also had a mill on Hertford Heath.

### **Sports days**

These used to take place on Wright's field, 1 Marford Road, now occupied by the Fire Station and the Catholic church.

### **Cottage Garden Society**

Win had photos of Lady Cavan giving the prizes there pre-1914 ... Also a photo and programme dated 1924 Cottage Garden Society. "Hoppy" Hampton, a teacher at St Helen's, is there in a white coat, and Tom Clark, headmaster and parish councillor, standing tall in the back row. Mr Pearce (newsagent and grocer) is there left top row, as is Mr Warren, the tailor from Necton Road, and "Weasel" Coates, 2nd from right middle row. Win's mum had made a Dundee cake for this event. Win remembered her mother anxiously asking her father, "Is it all right?" There were prizes for strawberry jam and lemon curd.