

Memories of my Early Life

Wheathampstead Village as it was in the
Twenties

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The 1989
HERTFORDSHIRE
Countryside
Literary
Competition
PRIZEWINNING
ARTICLE

A village should have certain features, and my birthplace had most of them, an ancient church, sparkling stream, medieval mill, an old inn, an eccentric, plus Belgic fortifications

I was born in Wheathampstead on the eighth day of August 1913, at No. 2, Rose Lane Cottages, the smaller of two eighteenth century timbered dwellings with brick infill. The house belonged to George Seabrook of Lamer Farm, who employed my father, and maternal grandfather Isaac Clark who lived next door. A feature of my grandfather's house was a huge open fireplace flanked by deep chimney corners, the one on the left containing a bread oven, approximately six feet deep with a fuel space underneath capable of holding a faggot of brushwood. This was always referred to as the Parish oven.

I remember the huge clumps of House Leeks which grew over the house doors, and the onset of summer being heralded by the arrival of the swarms of Swifts which nested under the deep eave.

One of my earliest recollections is being taken to the bedroom window, and being shown a ball of fire in the night sky. I was three at the time and later learnt that it was the falling German Airship brought down by Leefer Robinson V.C. My father was a member of the volunteer fire brigade, and a special constable, and my mother before her marriage had been a domestic servant in the employ of Canon Owen Davys, a long serving rector of St. Helens. My maternal grandmother was a Fanny Parsons of Gustard Wood, who before her marriage had been a straw plaiter for the Luton hat trade. When I started school in September 1918, the village was still deeply engrossed in the war. German prisoners were employed on the local farms, one of their escorts was a Jim Mahoney, of the Dublin Fusiliers, a veteran of Mons, who later married my mother's sister Louisa.

My infant teacher was a Mrs. Young, a kindly lady who lived opposite the school with her handicapped sister. She was assisted by a Mrs Warren, the teacher in the upper school being a Charlie Hampton, whom everybody called Hoppy, as he was

a martyr to gout, but this didn't prevent him from being a useful member of the village cricket team. Another teacher was Bob Seabrook (a brother of my father's employer). He was choirmaster and organist at St. Helens.

The other teacher was Fred Beard, a bad tempered martinet, a local sportsman, and a regular performer at local concerts, I can still hear him rendering "I wouldn't leave my Little Wooden Hut for you". I considered the village school was a wonderful place, and it was presided over by Thomas Clark an austere man, always immaculately dressed, proficient as an artist, could play violin, and piano equally well. He was always present at Sunday Matins keeping a sharp eye on erring pupils.

In those days the churchyard was in an immaculate condition, and sacrosanct, at the junction of the church footpaths was a notice which read:-

*This is Gods garden
Sacred to him
Whose bodies rest here
Speak, and act reverently
Cherish the flowers*

One of my earliest recollections connected with the church was the erection of the War Memorial. I was present when the unveiling was performed in 1921 by Field Marshal The Earl Cavan of Fifth army fame who was the local squire, and resided at Wheathampstead Place in Codicote Road. Life in the village, and at school was always varied, with everyday an adventure.

The High Street was lined by establishments presided over by old time craftsmen, and over a distance of two hundred yards you could watch a farrier shoeing horses, a saddler making a harness, a tailor making suits, a wheelwright repairing carts, and a blacksmith working iron, a miller grinding corn.

Social life was varied, of a good standard, entertainment being provided by local talent. There were three local football teams, Wheathampstead United, Folly Athletic and Gustard Wood, and rivalry was intense.

In 1920 my father was offered a better house at Lamer Farm, and

we moved. The new house was only a few years old, and compared to Rose Lane, had all the mod cons. I had an almost completely free run of the whole estate, and accompanied by my Airedale cross terrier Nip, myself wearing an Indian headdress made of chicken feathers, armed with catapult, and bow and arrows, I spent most of my spare time tracking the fox, rabbits, squirrels, weasels, and stoats etc. The Herts Hunt frequently met in the neighbourhood and my father was the local stopper. The evening before the hounds were due to meet in the vicinity I used to accompany my father on his rounds. As it was late in the evening Reynard was away hunting, Dad would cut brambles and push them in the entrance to the den, with the result that the next day the fox would be denied sanctuary. For this duty my father received two shillings, and sixpence a stop, seven shillings and sixpence if a fox was found, and a pound if they killed on the estate. It was not a great sum of money, but at that time very acceptable as my father's wages were only thirty six shillings a week with a free house.

As I got older so I obtained casual employment on the farm, my father was a skilled craftsman and under his tutelage, I became proficient at most agricultural work by the age of ten. We virtually lived on wild rabbits, and from an early age, I was proficient in setting a snare.

During the harvest of 1924, the farm workers received a welcome surprise. In the spring several deer had escaped from Tewin House, and as they soon became a nuisance permission was given to shoot them. Subsequently during the reaping of a field of rats, I noticed antlers protruding from the corn, I was riding a binder behind a tractor at the time, I gave the alarm, and the farmer soon despatched the deer with his twelve bore. After the carcass was dressed lots were drawn and the meat divided. My father drew a shoulder and we lived on venison

for a time. It was an aquired taste, not to my liking.

It was during this year I suffered what at the time was a great disappointment. It was the year of the Empire Exhibition, and for months I had been paying in a few coppers for the forthcoming excursion. Alas just before the day fixed for the visit I contracted measles, and was quarantined, but I had my reward later.

The County authorities were conducting a competition among the schools for an essay on the British Empire. Some months later at school assembly, the result was announced, I was awarded the winning boys medal. I was really proud, and still have the medal in my possession.

Though not strictly living in the village our eccentric could be seen most days walking the lanes in his Norfolk jacket and knee breeches, I am referring to George Bernard Shaw who was never backward in expressing his views on all local matters.

I remember with affection two of the best loved people in the village, one was Dr. Smallwood, a family doctor who believed the rich should help support the less well off, and the other was Nurse Amy Hawkins who helped bring me into the world, a tablet to her memory is in St. Helens.

The chief attraction in the summer months was the River Lea, in those days a clear running stream, in which happy hours were spent swimming, and catching Crawmees (Crayfish). Holidays away were unheard of, but I was perfectly content with my annual Sunday School treat to the funfair of Grays at Bricket Wood journeying by horsedrawn brake, or opened topped charabane.

The highlight of my year was without doubt the Herts Agricultural Show, which in those days was held in Hatfield Park, a truly magnificent setting. A visit to this show was a must for the farming fraternity.

My summer vacation was spent working from dawn till dusk on the farm, I was a big lad, and thoroughly enjoyed working with the big farm horses. Alas in 1927 the farm was sold, and it was a tearful time for me as I watched the animals I loved being led away by their new owners.

In late November, we left the farm when my father obtained employment the other side of the county. I occasionally visit the village nowadays. The old magic has gone. The place is full of motor cars, but the mill race still runs though decidedly murky.

WHEATHAMPSTEAD
A BOYHOOD REMEMBERED

An ancient church, a very old inn, a clear running stream, and a medieval working mill, are some of the attributes an English village should have, and my village Wheathampstead had them all, plus Belgic earthworks.

There are differing opinions as to what the name of the village really means. Some say it means wet homestead because of the low lying meadows that border the Lea, and some say it means wheat homestead because of the fertile grainbearing fields which used to surround the area. I favour the latter view, as in my boyhood an ear of wheat was considered to be the village emblem. In fact it is portrayed on the tomb of Abbot John of Wheathampstead which is in St. Albans Abbey. As far as I am aware the first record of the name is on the charter dated 1060, by which Edward the Confessor granted the living to Westminster Abbey. On this the spelling is given as Rathamstede. The original charter is in the Herts Record Office.

I was born in Wheathampstead on the 8th, of August 1913, at No 2 Rose Lane Cottages, the smaller of two 18th, century dwellings built of timbered crutch frames, with red brick infillings. I feel certain that nowadays they would be listed as protected buildings.

The houses belonged to George Seabrook of Lamer Farm, for whom my father, and maternal grandfather who lived next door worked as head horsekeeper, and coalman waggoner respectively.

A feature of my grandfathers house was an huge open fireplace, which was flanked by deep chimney corners, in one of which was situated a deep bread oven, approximately six feet deep from front to rear, with a fuel space underneath capable of holding a faggot of brushwood. I was given to understand that it was a parish oven, to which at one time the villagers brought their bread dough, and Sunday joints to be cooked.

I remember the huge clumps of house leeks which grew on the cottage roofs, ostensibly as a precaution against being struck by lightning, and the onset of summer each year being heralded by the arrival of myriads of swifts, who built their nests underneath the deep overhanging eaves. These birds were tolerated, and never interfered with, though very noisy especially in the early dawn. In fact it was an old superstition that a calamity would befall the house occupants if at any year the swifts failed to put in an appearance.

The houses were demolished in 1928, when Mr. Seabrook retired from farming, and erected a house for himself in the allotments at the rear of the cottages.

One of my earliest faint recollections, is of being taken to the bedroom window, and being shown a ball of fire falling from the night sky. I was three at the time, and later learnt that it was a German Airship brought down by Lt. Leefe Robinson. V.C. I could hear the people cheering in the village street.

My father was a member of the village volunteer Fire Brigade which at that time had its headquarters at the rear of the "Bull" hotel. I well remember the special chair in my parents bedroom, on which was neatly stowed my fathers uniform, surmounted by his gleaming brass helmet. He was also a Special Constable.

Both my parents were born locally, my paternal grandmother being a Humphrey of Wheathampstead Hill, where my father had been born in 1863, and lived prior to marrying my mother in 1906.