

Ken Garrett, telephone conversation with Ruth Jeavons on 21 October 2013

Ken is now [Dec. 2013] aged 89½ years and lives in Okehampton, Devon. He grew up in Wheathampstead and was a teenager during World War II. He is the brother of Mary Wigley who used to live in East Lane in the bungalow since replaced by the three new houses. He is also a cousin to Win Deans and related to Mary Jones – all Titmuss family members. His grandfather, George Simons, had owned the stockyard at the Maltings. The butcher's business in Station Road was founded in 1840.

Ken's father, Roland Garrett, bought the bakery business at the top of Wheathampstead High Street (on the east side where Granary Close is now) early in 1928. He rented out his poultry farm, the Lea Poultry Farm in Rose Lane in order to do so. Times were hard in the thirties. It was the time of the Great Depression. He was also secretary of the Horticultural Society (then the Wheathampstead Garden and Produce Society) as it produced flowers vegetables and eggs) and judged the egg show in the late 1920s.

Wheathampstead Home Guard

As a boy during the war Ken remembered taking part in a Home Guard parade at Rothamsted. There is a photograph of him riding in a trailer behind a vintage Singer car manning a Vickers machine gun. The *Herts Advertiser* published a photograph of the group on 9th April 1998 and asked for names. Ken knew some of them as he was the boy manning the machine gun. John Leiper was the driver, with Percy Hall the co- driver. John Leiper was the son of Professor Robert Leiperⁱ of Leasey Bridge Farm – renowned for his work on agricultural parasitology, in particular nematode worms. Ken was in the Officer Training Corps at St Albans school where he had learned map reading, so they trusted him with the Vickers gun.

Captain Warren was in charge of the Local Defence Force Volunteers, later named the Home Guard. Their first HQ was in the Rectory stables. Once 'Noggy' Potter (as he was known) climbed on the roof there and pretended to be an invader. But this didn't go down too well with Captain Warren, the CO. The Rev. Baird Smith on Sundays used to read out the names of all the volunteers and men who had been called up. He had a son who was a pilot in the RAF based at De Havilland's in Hatfield who used to practise low flying over the village. In 1943 Ken was training as a navigator in an Avro Anson plane. He took the plane over Wheathampstead and flew over his parents' bungalow in Rose Lane to salute his mother in the garden there.

In 1940, Captain Warren asked Ken, then aged only sixteen, to teach map-reading to the men of the Wheathampstead Home Guard. He did his best with the points of the compass and co-ordinates but the men weren't very interested. "We don't want all that now," they told him. Many of them were more interested in when they could get to the pub. One night a week they had armoury training at the old flint school in Church Street. Ken knew how to dismantle and reassemble a gun from school, so was helpful here. There were nightly patrols of the village and environs, as well as calls to muster stations when an air raid sounded.

Harry Westwood was remembered as an 'incredible chap' – clever in his job and unique in the way he reacted to a challenge. On one occasion the firing pin on Ken's father's gun had worn and Ken was asked to take it to Harry to see if he could repair it, with the advice that if

Harry said he couldn't, he was to tell him he'd take it to Mr Lovell at Hatfield because they had thought it might be too difficult for Harry. Sure enough, Harry rose to the challenge. At first he dismissed the job with the excuse that he didn't have time – too many other jobs. But as soon as Mr Lovell was mentioned, it was, "Give it to me!". Harry's wife was an invalid. They had three sons, one of whom was a prisoner of war in the Far East. Then there were Alf and Ted who married Dulcie Pearce, daughter of Charlie Pearce the window cleaner.

Charlie Pearce was the air raid warden in charge of summoning the men to muster stations when there was an imminent threat of bombing raids. On one occasion he picked up his rifle in rather a hurry and dashed out of the house, presumably diving under his wife's washing line as he went, only to find when he rounded Collins Corner that an article of his wife's white underwear was flying from the end of his rifle. 'Wheathampstead has not surrendered', was the story that ran in the local papers that week.

Wartime action over Wheathampstead

Two particularly remembered events were a bombing raid over Vauxhall Motors in Luton and a dog fight over Kimpton. Also, a parachute drop over in East Meads. When the Home Guard men went to investigate this, all that could be seen were the tattered remains of a parachute up a tree. No sign of the airman. "We stood there mystified", said Ken. "It's a good job he wasn't there. If he had been, he'd have said, 'Why didn't you bring a ladder?'"

Once when Ken was home on leave, he saw the hole made in the churchyard by the bomb that had dropped there.

"Opposite Mr Blain at Marford Farm, on the other side of the river, lived a man who travelled up to London on the train every day. No one knew anything about him. We all thought he was a spy."

Platoon organisation

There were two sections under the charge of two sergeants. One lived in the Lea Valley, the other was butler to Mr Murphy at Wheathampstead House. He was very quick witted. On one occasion a large staff car containing arrived at Wheathampstead House demanding instant access. "Let me pass!" was the order. It was declined. "If you were the Lord Gort you'd have to show me your pass." The rest of the platoon was hiding behind the wall and heard the whole conversation. Ever after the butler was called 'Lord Gort'ⁱⁱ, Chief of General Staff.

Harry Riddell once sent a bill to my father that he didn't recognise. "What's all this about?" my father asked Harry. "I had to send them to everyone as I couldn't remember who it was for" was the answer.

Bert Snelling lived at the bottom of Rose Lane. He had a garden and won prizes at the Horticultural Society for his fruit and vegetables. "I used to help my father drive the cattle that arrived by rail from the station up Station Road to the farm (off Rose Lane. Once the cattle were a fractious lot and went left up Rose Lane into Bert Snelling's garden.) I thought I'd got them all out, until Mrs Snelling ran round holding a pair of pants chewed up by the one cow I'd missed. I was eleven at the time."

My father farmed at Lea Poultry Farm, Rose Lane until he bought the bakery at Garretts.

Frank Chennells: One of the evacuees, a twelve-year old black boy, went into his shop and asked for cigarettes. You had to be fifteen to buy cigarettes. When challenged by Mr Chennells about his age, he answered, "I'm getting married tomorrow". I don't think he was believed.

An arrest and a happy occasion

During the war, Brocket Hall was turned into a maternity unit. Husbands used to celebrate the births of their children in Wheathampstead pubs. P.C. Barker (who lived at the top of the High Street and may be seen outside his house in the 1948 film of the village) once had to arrest a father who'd had one too many in a local pub celebrating the arrival of his son.

Mr Deamer was the lamp lighter and lit the gas lamps in the high street with a long pole. Once there was a knockout snooker match at the Working Men's Club. Mr Deamer was a finalist, and his opponent was Charlie Collins. Everyone was invited to watch for a small fee. Posters went up round the village: "Gas Man versus Gas Bag".

Charlie Collins and Susan were absolutely part of the village.

Fred Collins had been a keeper at London Zoo. He had a son called Mickey the same age as Ken. "When we were about 11, we arranged to do something and I called round at his house. He wasn't there. He was in hospital. We later found out that he died of peritonitis.

In 1934, my brother sister and I were all in Hertford Hospital, with diphtheria.

There was a family by the name of Dickinson who lived in Necton Road. They were very religious and had two sons and a daughter. The whole family went to church twice on a Sunday. Once the daughter disappeared for several months and came back with a baby. When someone teased her about this, and asked who her boyfriend was, she told the enquirer not to be so rude. She'd never been with a man in her life. A sad story this, as the poor girl obviously hadn't been given any sex education and didn't know how babies were made. Ever after she was known in the village as the Virgin Mary.

"Cotta" Archer used to join in the annual village fete. He was very acrobatic even as an old man and could jump off and on a float with great agility. He worked for Olivers of Wandon End who hired out threshing machines. Ken used to help with the harvests and remembered one particular lunch time when the men were eating their sandwiches. Someone found a nest of harvest mice, no doubt displaced after the threshing. "Give it here!" demanded Cotter, and to everyone's amazement he put them in his mouth and ate them all.

George Griffin (son of 'Ghandi' Griffin)

George's dad used to be a regular runner-up in the vegetable section of the village horticultural society, so worked hard on his prize winning vegetables. Ken used to play with George in their garden and, boys being boys, the play got rather boisterous and a prize marrow got broken the day before the show. George got a good telling off for spoiling his dad's chances that year.

(From our second telephone conversation on 12 November 2013)

Village characters

Alf Freeman who used to live at the bottom of Necton Road used to work at the mill. He was in charge of the mill race, getting it to flow fast enough to turn the mill wheel. This involved closing the flood gates to get up a sufficient head of water to drive the mill wheel. First he had to make sure there were no boys playing their usual prank of running under the road in the water.

Alf had the habit of visiting the Bull for some lunch-time refreshment. He didn't want the boss to know about this drinking while at work, so rather resented it when the lady at the Bull told on him. "I'll give her something to look at!" he vowed. Next time he saw her spying on him (he could see the sun glinting off her spectacles) he turned his back and bared his bottom. Mooning, we call it now!

"Stosh" Field and Archie Gurling were lumberjacks who used to drink at the Swan when Jim Wilkinson was landlord. They had a reputation for keeping customers amused with their arguments to the extent that they never had to buy themselves a drink. Interested customers treated them to a pint. Wilkinson was a very popular landlord and had two daughters: Jean and a younger sister.

Teddy Clarke delivered groceries for Stapletons. He lived at the bottom of Rose Lane and loved to play his wind-up gramophone. When you went past his house, you would hear the Galloping Major.

The village nurse (Sally Smith?) Remembered with much affection for being always cheerful, working very hard and being good with children. She worked all hours and cycled everywhere. A regular job was visiting St Helen's School to check the children for nits.

The boy rent collector (1930s)

George Simons was Ken's grandfather, and when he died, his widow asked Ken, then a mere boy, "Would you like to earn some pocket money?" His task was to collect the rent from twelve properties in East Lane. The lowest rent was that of Mrs Gurling who paid 3s 4½d a week. Mostly it was 6s or 7s a week. The highest rent was 11s. Westwoods and Easts occupied premises around here at the time.

On one occasion Ken was collecting rent from a widow and her maiden sister who lived in one of the cottages at Mount View, off East Lane. He knocked on the door and heard someone upstairs in distress calling out "Help! Help!" It was one of the two ladies who'd wanted to try out the mattress and got stuck under it. (The bedrooms were very small.) Ken still has a vivid recollection of her black stockinged feet sticking out from under the mattress as he helped pull her out. His reward for this brave action was a book, "*The Coming of Bill*", which he still has to this day.

Conversation on 20 November 2013

Rev. Baird Smith (nickname "Bored Stiff") once paid a visit to Ken's parents' house. In a hurry to tidy up before the visit Ken's mother hid the laundry basket with freshly laundered clothes under the table. The Rev. arrived with his dog, a terrier, and after they'd gone Ken's mum discovered the dog had "cocked his leg on the laundry"!

Children used to collect horse manure from the roads, and cowpats were also prized for their fertilising qualities. The children would follow the cows after milking from Chennells yard off the High Street along the Hatfield (now Marford) Road to the field where Conqueror's Hill is now.

There were five football teams in the village and there used to be a club pavilion on that same field where the estate now is. They were: the Gustard Wood team, the Folly team, Wheathampstead United, The Wheathampstead Crusaders (under 18s), and Elvesco, all in the Mid Herts League.

Poverty was more visible in the village in the 30s and 40s and some Wheathampstead women were excellent at "make do and mend", ensuring that clothes could be passed on to those less fortunate or in need. Mrs Metcalfe was a lady Ken's mother helped when she could. She was a widow bringing up two boys on her own. Children went about ragged, with trousers out at the seats and in clothes they'd grown out of. Those whose parents couldn't afford to have their children's shoes repaired would secure them by some other means, tying flapping uppers to the soles with string.

Aged 8, Ken left Garretts bakery shop at the top of the High Street every morning to take the bus (a threepenny ride) to Garden Fields School in St Albans. His father had noticed that boys from St Helen's didn't get scholarships to St Albans School, so on advice from friends he removed Ken from St Helen's and sent him to Garden Fields school in St Albans. It all worked out well as Ken did get the scholarship in the end and eventually went to St Albans School. His father had bought the bakery business in 1929, renting out his poultry farm, the Lea Poultry Farm, in Rose Lane as times were hard. **(Not confirmed to be correct.)**

Poverty and illness

Mabel Bracey remembered as a child in the thirties going to buy bread at Garretts for her mother and being frightened of the queues of derelict men outside. Ken explained that these were down-and-outs from the St Albans workhouse sent out with vouchers for tea and bread. They tramped everywhere on foot. John Matthews too remembered unemployed men hanging about the village in the thirties, trying to get work on the farms. He would allow one particular man to sleep in a shed on his allotment at night.

The other baker in the village, Cobb in Station Road, had a son, Paul, the same age as Ken. Les Hall took over the Cobb's business before the 1939-45 war, and when Les joined up as a catering officer, he left his brother-in-law in charge.

Ken remembered an outbreak of diphtheria in the village and how the Congregational minister, the Reverend Rugsden, was unafraid to enter the houses where children were ill, his religion giving him strength to do so. He was a genuine man and rather saintly by the

sound of it. Other visitors were made to stay outside and not allowed to enter a home where there was diphtheria.

The only petrol pump in the village during the war was at Fred Collins place. In 1949, the Jessamine Garage was opened next to the Bull Inn. It caused chaos, people sauntering down East Lane would find cars blocking the lane at the end near the high street.

East Lane

Judd the chemist was a character who could have come out of a Dickens novel. He had a funny narrow little wooden shop opposite Woodley's in East Lane. He developed films. You had to wait a month for them to be developed. The shop was full of little boxes of pills and peculiar jars of potions, all different colours. If Mr Judd was ill he simply closed up shop, so you had a wasted journey.

In East Lane there were, Woodleys the grocer, Judd the chemist, Harry Westwood, Alf Westwood who did car repairs, and at the end of the lane, Mr Wren at the sewerage works and Cyril Wren the wheelwright.

When still a small boy Ken was once sent to Woodleys on an errand for his mother. She rehearsed him to make sure he said the right words before he left. Twice he had to repeat after her, "Caster sugar, not granulated." He kept saying this all the way there until he arrived and had to wait in a long queue to be served. When it came to his turn Mr Woodley asked, "And what can I get for you, sonny?" "Castrated sugar", was the answer that came out. Must have brought the house down!

People and places remembered

When Ken was growing up there were three non-conformist chapels in the village: the Folly Methodists on the Lower Luton Road, the Congregational Church on Brewhouse Hill and the Wesleyan Methodists on the Hill. Now all either going or gone for housing or offices.

Miss Parfitt was a great friend of Ken's mother. She was secretary to the director of a big company (in London?) and had quite an authority about her. She once hired a youngster who was prone to using bad language. The youngster once swore in front of the Director. He called her into his office and told her, "You'll have to leave if you can't stop swearing. However, I'll give you one more chance!" Her response was earnest. "Sir, I'll try my bloody hardest!"

Ken remembers Beach-Thomas at Place Farm, also Reg Russell who played cricket and worked for Murphy the Brewers' analysts. Others who worked there included Miss Plummer, Gladys Seabrook, and the youngest daughter of the Wilkinsons who ran the Swan Hotel. They used to play tennis on the tennis court behind Uncle Robert Simons' butchers, between the river and the shop.

He remembered Joyce Canning, the Cunningtons, and the Kerrisons. Charlie Kerrison was a very good footballer. He married Miss Bangs and they were a lovely couple.

The butler at Mr Murphy's house was a Mr Sayward who had a beautiful daughter, Daphne, who was courted by the lads in the village. After the war she married a boy she'd known since she was 14 or 15, who became an electrician.

A raffle at the Swan

Jack Thrale was a gamekeeper at Lamer. He had a stutter and used to enjoy winding people up. On one occasion he was asked to supply a "long tail" (a pheasant) for a raffle. He and Charlie Collins took it up to the Swan Hotel. Charlie had the book of raffle tickets and announced that the last ticket was still for sale. Harold Rowe the grocer bought it, giving himself two chances of winning as he'd already bought a ticket. They drew the raffle and Harold was the winner. Jack Thrale gave him the bag with the long tail which on inspection turned out to be a rat! It was all a joke. Don't think Harold Rowe saw the humour of it though.

The village liked raffles. They used to raffle a pig at the village fete.

Quoits were all the rage when Ken was a boy growing up in the thirties. The quoits were made of metal (not horseshoes, but specially manufactured?) and thrown at a clay oblong. Once, before the war, there was an international quoits match at the Swan. "The whole village came to life", said Ken. There were three teams. Local police officer, PC Jack Hunt, was on the national team.

Ken remembered PC Hunt's visits to St Helen's school warning the children to watch their Ps and Qs and keep on the right side of the law. Specially recollected from St Helen's school were Miss Young, Miss Betty Warren for her singing voice, and Miss Prior, a nice young teacher who gave him a cuddle to cheer him up when he was upset about the death of his grandma.

The Bell and Crown

The proprietor, Mr Sweeney, remembered by the young Ken as being always immaculately turned out, even rather "high and mighty", ran a very smart restaurant at the Bell and Crown in the 1940s (*date to be confirmed*). His wife was very popular, but Mr Sweeney could be very particular on etiquette and couldn't tolerate untidiness in his customers. A coat left on the back of a chair was always swiftly removed to the proper place in the cloakroom. Charlie Collins, always a bit of a tease, used to put Sid Sweeney to the test by going in at lunchtime straight from work in his apron to ask for a box of matches, thus managing to outrage poor Sid Sweeney's sense of propriety. One heated discussion broke out about matches and legs. Fred Kelvey ran a riding school and did show jumping all over the county. He had some stabling at the back of the Bell and Crown

The Red Lion

When Ken was young there were several pubs in the high street, many of which have now disappeared. When the Red Lion was pulled down in 1936, Ken was not best pleased.

They were building the new estates in Wheathampstead along the Marford Road, and the Red Lion had been empty for some time. The population was growing and more housing was needed. Ken thought the population in the late 1930s was about 1,900. This particular demolition happened around the same time that the workhouse was being knocked down. It was all part of a local government slum clearance strategy.

From Ken's letter dated 30 November 2013

“Picture the village as it was:

How the villagers were relatively contented with their lot, proud of their village life and comradeship in spite of seasonal lay-offs in the building industry spoiling almost full employment – and diphtheria and scarlet fever and tuberculosis causing many families severe stress. The village was very well served by local business and self-employed tradesmen. It had regular visitors to enjoy the recreational facilities – golf at Gustard Wood, cricket on Nomansland (with charity matches bringing test match players as a special attraction), fishing on the River Lea, and free swimming in a deep part of the Lea river between the village and New Bridge (known as “the pond”). The landowners on either side of the river never seemed to mind – they were the opposite of killjoys!

I will endeavour to describe scenes in the centre of the village pre-war. Imagine you alight from the bus travelling from Whitwell via Kimpton and Wheathampstead to St Albans. The bus unloads most of its passengers at Wheathampstead station which is a busy area already at 8.00 am. The passenger platforms teeming with workers heading for Luton, or Welwyn Garden City, Hatfield and King's Cross. The large goods yard opposite was busy with in and out freight – chemicals for Murphy Chemical Company – seed oats and potatoes for the mill, products from Helmets and often incoming cattle in the holding pens for the butchers. Already the chief porter, “Feathers” (because of his large waxed moustache) Cooper was announcing a train's arrival – “WEMPSTEAD”. This was Jack Cooper who lived at the Cherry Trees level crossing. Shops were opening – traffic was steadily giving the high street interest – another bus from Batford en route to St Albans - Jock Miller riding and leading two of Cory Wright's hunters for exercise – the Tizer van delivering soft drinks by the crate – the fish man from Luton with his wares on a pony-drawn cart – perhaps a flock of sheep being driven from Bury Farm to fresh grazing at the Folly – Jimmy Wright with his pony and cart And his vocal advert of “Rag-a'- bone” – Rowe's fruit and vegetable cart, small boys with shovel and hand cart collecting the evidence of cattle, sheep and horses having passed that way . In the summer two deadly rivals on tricycle carts extolling the virtues of Walls and Eldorado ice creams (1 penny cornets and three halfpenny wafers) and once per week the unique sight of Mamie Pring driving her donkey and cart from her home at Amwell to do her weekly shopping.

Mamie was eccentric but no fool. She wore flamboyant hats and her companions were several donkeys and an abundance of cats. She had a habit of tethering her donkey to the vertical railings adjacent to Simons the butcher's shop. One day cousin “Bob” arranged an enigma for passers-by. Mamie's donkey was taken out of the shafts to the other side of the railings – the cart was pushed forward so that the shafts passed between the upright railings and the donkey was then reinstated between the shafts. Unfazed, Mamie re-entered the shop. “Mr Simons – are you thinking that people will suspect me of doing that? Could you please arrange for someone to give me a hand?”

This dear lady's house was bought by local builder “Fen” Harding and named “Old Mamie's”.

Part of my father's property at the top of the High Street was linked with the Home Guard. Muster Station no. 2 was created in the area behind the newsagent's shop and the boot

repairer's workshop with the installation of a wooden shed. It held six men covering a 180 degree scan of Wheathampstead Hill, Church Street, and part of the High Street. Disguised slots for observation and rifle fire were a feature. Muster stations were manned when the siren located at Wheathampstead Hill was sounded. I recall my mother threatening to discontinue the supply of tea unless her cups were returned.

John Leiper's Singer sports car was a unique addition to Wheathampstead's defence – I was flattered to be nominated in the roaming brief to maintain contact with the patrols at night which covered all areas of the village. Tom Sparrow, the head Air Raid Warden felt undermined as he tried to cover the village on his bicycle. The BBC's 'Dad's Army' might have drawn its material from Tom's fierce encounters with Captain Warren (Mainwaring). There are other characters I can identify from the TV series with real life models with several who might contest the role of "stupid boy"!

Foot patrols in pairs were nightly, the lengths of shifts varying according to the hours of darkness. Zooming around in John's Singer was an exciting experience with very restricted headlights and the blackout of houses and street lighting.

Pre-war

Pre-war winters witnessed great fun provided by Charlie Collins who made a mammoth steerable toboggan. Launched from the top of Ash Grove it thundered down through the gates onto Church Street. Children queued up for their turn. The Collins van provided skaters with transport to Kimpton Mill where a stretch of frozen water was excellent for skating – including ice hockey with a Canadian, Dave Hibbs who was living in the village, proving to be an excellent tutor. (Dave married a village beauty and high jump champion who lived in the old schoolhouse.)

Charlie often took us further afield to skate and play ice hockey at Knebworth Park where Lord Lytton was our host and tutor. He was a fantastic skater. I remember a demonstration he gave which included jumping over a fence of barrels at speed!

I often went with Charlie to auction sales and recall his sharp wit on several occasions. At one sale a military gentleman bought several lots, each time ostentatiously calling out his name, Captain Fotheringay-Smythe. When Charlie made his first purchase, he casually called his name – Lance Corporal Collins!

The High Street

Bell Hotel proprietor, Sidney Sweeney (I think he had been a high-ranking civil servant abroad). Charlie Collins used to enjoy teasing him (see above).

Chennells shop (Chemist) and Post Office under Mrs Nash, also the residence of Frank Chennells and his greyhounds. At the back door by special arrangement you could collect milk and cream from his dairy herd based at Brewhouse Hill.

The earliest postman I can remember was Arthur Wright who efficiently delivered the post to the wonderment of those who saw his ultra-thick glasses.

Miss Carter's residence with large garden. Her gardener was "Dommer" Pearce, brother of Charlie Pearce. She had two servants, and when one of them needed a new bed she went

to Charlie Collins for a “cheap” bed. Charlie expressed his sorrow that a servant was leaving her employ to which she replied that she was not aware that a servant was leaving. “Well,” said Charlie, “if she has to have a cheap bed you can count on her going.”

Wheatsheaf House

Part-time bank entrance to the top yard belonging to George Simons – for stock lairage (?) and the Old Maltings immediately before Garretts Bakers was Fred Wright and daughter Marjorie (owner of the Gustard Wood Nurseries and those on Wheathampstead Hill, i.e. the Dyke Nurseries).

Attached to the Baker’s shop was a shoe shop (Blindells) and in the same curtilage a shoe repairer’s (SNOB) run by a skilled Mr Newbury and a small detached building (Newsagents) later a dental workshop.

A large residence was next after the baker’s yard - occupied by Mr Seabrook – my school master at Garden Fields (the primary school Ken went to in St Albans).

Two police houses – Jack Hunt and ? Sainsby were on the corner with Marford Road.

ⁱ R.T. Leiper based for most of that time at the Institute of Agricultural Parasitology, Winches Farm, St. Albans, England. He was author, or co-author, of 125 publications, which included the proposal of 9 new genera, 37 new species and 49 detailed redescrptions of nematodes. In 1947 he was made head of the newly formed Nematology Department at Rothamsted Experimental Station, where he stayed until his retirement in 1952

ⁱⁱ Lord Gort was Commander in Chief of the British Expeditionary Force.