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# Talking to the old inhabitants of Wheathampstead in 1956

by Daphne Grierson (1909 - 1994)

Transcribed by **John Wilson**, Lamer Lodge, between 1987 and 2002

Updated 24 August 2007

## CHAPTER 1. COTTAGE CHILDHOOD

*(Mr & Mrs Rolfe, The Slype)*

Two of the oldest inhabitants of the parish of Wheathampstead look back seventy years:

"Remember it? Why, we were born here, both of us, indeed we were - him up the Common and me in Workhouse Yard, where the Bank is. Yes, and running across there after school to see if my mother had remembered to put salt on my bread. She'd be still out at work most likely when we came out of school, but she'd have made a pot of tea before she went out and left it with the tea-cosy over it, and some bread as well with lard on it and salt. 'Don't forget the salt' I used to say to her... But you ought to get him to tell you some of those pranks! Real madcap he was, playing truant from school. You remember when you walked into school in the line with the others, holding your arms up like this so they could see your sleeves all torn? This is how he came in, and Mr Clark, the Headmaster, he says..."

"Yes, well leave off, and let me say. Now look here; you know those fir trees? There used to be fir trees from this side of the Common down to Hogsland. How long ago? Oh, I couldn't say. Can you remember?" He turns to Mrs H. but she can't be sure either, some twenty or thirty years ago.

"Anyway, it was like this; we were a-playing football on the Common and I ricked my ankle. When I got home my mother went down to fetch Doctor and I thought to myself 'If you're going to do that, I'm off'. And I got the piece off the pram..."

"You know the sort of perambulator we had then" Mrs H put in, "three wheels and one handle across the end of a bar kind of thing. Oh, and that puts me in mind of something..."

"Yes, well wait a minute; I got that off, to use as a crutch. And I hopped off with this thing right across to those trees and climbed up and hid in one of them. But the boys found me and I

had to go back. Oh, nine years old I should think. And the Doctor, he put a cloth on my foot soaked in vinegar. It was alright next day."

"But you should have seen him. This is how he marched into school" says Mrs H. "Arms held up like this, and all his sleeves torn underneath and hanging down. 'Alfred Hopkins' the master said, 'where you been?' 'Been nutting', all innocent. 'Well go back home and get another jacket'. Just what he wanted them to say! Yes, on purpose; of course he did it on purpose!"

"What d'you make of that? Oh, a wild one. It makes you laugh though doesn't it? Six weeks once I played truant - you paid twopence each time you went to school those days, but you could stop at home when you liked. They used to send the boys after me, but I got up in the tree; there was a tree down in that field below Delaport where you could see the school from, right down to the school. And if I saw them coming I got down and ran a bit further off and got up another tree. And one time, listen to this..."

"Yes, you tell her. What'll they think of this!"

"Well, there were two other lads and me, all of us playing truant. And when it got dark I daren't go home and I went with those boys to their house. People called Jackson, down Poll Parrot now (that's what it was called) just along the Common. And this house had a big stair-hole, with one of those baths in it, old fashioned sort with two handles. Well, I got in under this thing and I hid there. And after a bit I heard their mother say - both of the parents were as deaf as beetles - she said 'I'm going to get half-pint of porter' and I thought to myself, I know where she's going, she's gone to tell my father'. And sure enough next thing I heard my brother at the door; 'have you seen Alf?' 'Just gone across the Common' the boys told him"

"Would you believe it!" (Mrs H.)

"And I stopped under that bath the whole night. And next morning they gave me something to drink and we all went up to **Turners Hall farm** to play about and do anything we could. And the man there had someone come to see him and he called to me 'go and get the horses ready, he's just leaving'. So I got the horse out and stood there like this holding the horse's head with my back turned and all of a sudden I felt two hands on my shoulders and there was my brother! They got me in the end."

"Yes but they didn't keep him" Mrs H. goes on, "Do you know the school sent him home in the end, 'Don't want him any more' they said, 'Can't do anything with him.'"

"And do you know what I did?" says Mr H., "I went straight up to **Bride Hall farm** and got a job there. Twelve year old and I used to mind the sheep along the sides of the roads - and one day there was a cart coming back from spreading manure and I asked if I could take it back, and the man said 'Yes you can, but don't ride the horse's back', but I did as soon as we got started, and that horse ran away with me, cart and all. It begun walking fast and it got faster and faster and there we were tearing along the lanes and round all those narrow corners, back and in at the gate, and there a man jumped out of the hedge and stopped it. And the man called to me - I'd slipped down, and I'd been going along one leg over the shaft and the other pinched up between shaft and horse's side, very dangerous - he says to me 'Can you get off?' 'No' I said, 'I can't' 'Are you hurt?' and I said 'No. But ain't I had a good ride?' Frightened? never, I weren't frightened of anything."

"Not he, he wasn't frightened."

"Out in **South Africa** once, right in the wilds you know - **Boer War**. One night we saw something moving over there in the dark; couldn't make it out. 'D'you see that?' I said to the sergeant. He didn't know; 'And you're not to go and find out', he said. Soon as he'd gone I went across and had a look and it was a bush going like this in the wind."

"And him only sixteen years of age when he went, yes, sixteen. Well, they said he should be eighteen but he made out he was older to get in the Army. There now".

"That's right, sixteen going on seventeen. Day I finished school I went to Bride Hall and I was there till I was fifteen; three years. Then one day I said to the others 'I'm a-going in the Army' 'You're not tall enough' they said. I always wanted the Army. Well, time come for the **South African War**, it had just started; **fourth of December eighteen hundred and ninety nine**. We were walking along that lane off the Common and they said, 'I bet you daren't enlist'. Well, we went straight off and I had my tea and we went down Kimpton Green. It was Sunday and the Sergeant there said 'Can't enlist you today, meet you twelve o'clock tomorrow in the Tin Pot' - so we did, three of us, up to Lamer to **General Cherry-Garrard** but he weren't at home. He was to be back seven o'clock that night. Well, meantime we went along to fetch the other boy (him who didn't come with us at first) and he was just finishing work, and he put his horses up and came straight away and we got the train to Luton that night and on to Bedford same night".

"And tell her how you got to the War. 'I hope you're all twenty' the officer said at the Inspection, and he never said a word".

"Wait a bit... that was in **Ireland**. Six months in barracks we were, then we went off to Ireland, and it was when I come back on furlough I got this letter to go to Colchester. One of the boys had the same. And when we got there they asked for volunteers for a job; there was an old soldier back at barracks put in charge of twelve of us in one room and he'd said to me 'Look here, youngster', he says, 'when they asks for volunteers for anything, you go'. So I did and it was for washing down the floors of the barracks, so I thought to myself 'I'm going to volunteer for South Africa', but they wouldn't let me go.

But the sergeant went off on leave and I put in again as he wasn't there and there was an officer who wanted a groom and he said to me 'Ever had anything to do with horses?' 'Been with them all my life' I said. And here's a funny thing, we went to Aldershot and then we came on leave and when I got back I found myself on draft for **Southampton**, and **Dr Smallwood** was the **Doctor** on the troopship. Wasn't that a strange thing? I didn't know him then of course, but afterwards when I got home here - long afterwards - I got an abscess and I went down to the Doctor and there he was, and he asked me where I'd been and what I'd done and when he heard I'd been out to South Africa he got out some photographs of officers. 'D'you know any of these?' he said, and of course we found out we'd been on the same draft; and if ever I went down to the Surgery after that he'd get out these pictures 'Come on, we'll have a look at these, shall we...' "

"Yes" says Mrs H., "and he'd have a chat about them all, didn't matter if the waiting room was full of people. He was like that, you know. Lovely, he was."

"Ah yes, wonderful man. But you know, I've grumbled at myself often for coming out the Army. I wish I were still a soldier, I do. You get everything. Can you guess what we were paid?"

When I first enlisted I got **fourpence-halfpenny a week**. Fourpence-halfpenny. But - canteen at night, theatres and that. You got every mortal thing".

"But think of fourpence-halfpenny" Mrs H. puts in, "wouldn't go far these days would it? What'd they think of fourpence-halfpenny these days? Look here...(now it is her turn to talk). "Eight in the family we were, and I used to be sent with sevenpence to the butcher - Simons of course, this one's grandfather. Many and many's the time I've gone. Three pennorth of pieces - pork that is - three pennorth of liver, one pennorth of suet, then one potato and one onion. That was our dinner. **Suet dumplings** in the broth with the meat and vegetables, and the meat was for my father, we children had the gravy and the dumplings; or we'd manage sometimes with just the two pennorth of liver. Or if there were **herrings** - one herring between four children and we'd take it in turns to have the head. And my brother got hold of the tail part and he'd get it like this and lay it on the bars over the fire - different sort of grates we had then - 'be careful, don't anybody touch the fire' he'd say, and then he'd take it and break off all the little bits when they got crisp, backbone and all, and eat it between two pieces of bread."

"I say she's done better since she got married, that's what I tell her" says Mr H.

"But mind you, I don't regret it one bit! I always say ever since then I've been able to make a dinner out of a bone. And clean! There never was anyone like my mother that way - if she told me to make a pork dumpling for my father, I'd get it all nice and rolled up and then I'd get the cloth and the string - the beautiful cloth all washed and ironed and white every time it was used. 'Where's your mother?' he used to say when he came in. 'Gone over to Harpenden with some work,' I'd say to him, 'never mind Dad, I've made you a lovely pork dumpling, here you are.'

"And when we came out of school there she'd be with the baby in the pram: 'Don't you come back till six o'clock' she'd say, 'and I've left you some bread and lard'. 'Did you remember the salt?' I'd say, 'did you put the salt on?' And there we'd be, the baby and all us other children, and we'd go along the Meads, **Skovers Orchard**. By the river, by where the factory is. What did we wear? Well, we had our hair plaited and tied up on top of our heads with a bootlace with the tags cut off. And **coloured pinafores** and **sailor hats** and if it was cold weather we'd have **short coats**; all made by my mother. Short coats were made out of long coats. **Black boots** of course and stockings... Oh, and there was the time the baby wandered off into a bed of **stinging nettles** - that was just by where the bungalows stand. He was crying in agony and covered with marks and we get some **dock leaves** and put them over the places and walked the pram all the way to No Man's Land and back to give them time to fade before I dared take him home, and I never told my mother."

"And about the handle off the perambulator: I'll tell you something. One day the people next door to us got a pram with four wheels, a modern one. Yes, sometimes they were made of wickerwork and ours had the **three wheels**, and a high handle up to here, and I'd just set my heart on pushing this new four-wheeler but the girl gave me a shove and we had a fight and I scratched her face, great long scratches on her face, and the next day I was called out of my place in school and I had to stand in front of the whole school and I had to apologise. 'Yes' I said, 'I made the scratches on her face and I'm very sorry', and I never said she pushed me first, no I didn't."

"Sometimes we'd go up the **Common** after school and then we came to live up at Gustard Wood. I suppose I was twelve years old. Oh and wasn't the Common much prettier then! We always say it were prettier in those days - there were more trees, not so much bushes and there were geese, and I can remember as many as **nine flocks of sheep** with shepherds to mind them,

and the gypsies horses - no, not caravans - they weren't allowed to stop a night on the Common. But we used to go **gathering acorns** there and sell them to people for their pigs; or we'd go collecting the **sheep manure** for the nursery, for those greenhouses. When they made the golf-course - nine holes it was to start with - I used to earn a sixpence by **carrying clubs** around. Many and many's the time I did that, quite a little thing. And sometimes they used to say 'Fourpence extra, there you are little girl' they'd say 'sixpence and fourpence extra for yourself'.

"Another thing - whenever we went up the Lamer Road we used to look and see if we could see the old lady up the tree. And one day we were standing by the wall by that bridge you know that used to cross the road between the two gardens, and I was peeping up like this and I really did see her, leastways I saw something move up there and I didn't know if it was a blackbird or something, and the voice called down 'I see you, children, I see you', and I curtsayed and begged her pardon, we always curtsayed, you know. Picked up the front of our apron like this and curtsayed to all the gentry; and someone's apron fell off one day as she was curtsaying and the lady says 'There now, you've lost your apron', and she came round and tied it on again for her, yes indeed. Well, I gave my curtsy and she called out 'I'll bring some sweets next time and throw them down to you'. They say she used to read the Bible up there and had the place specially made.

"My mother went out sewing. **Temple the tailor**, that's who she worked for - you remember - where **Miss Rowe** is now. Always sewing she was. It was Agnes Temple - she used to be at Delaport, parlourmaid - she gave me scarlatina, I caught it off her. We were walking across the churchyard and she showed me her wrist where the skin was peeling and I touched it, and that gave it to me. And my Mum and Dad were sitting in front of the fire one night and I came out of bed and sat down on the little stool beside them; I was all shivering and my head was aching. 'What's the matter with you, child?' 'I can't go to sleep' I said 'the little dwarfs are jumping all round me'. Delirious, that's what I was. So Dad went for the Doctor, walking to Harpenden, and the cat went after him and she never came back, we never knew what became of her. That was the start of it; they put me on a bed made up on two chairs at the bottom of my mother's bed, and the window was left open because of the infection, and **Miss Davys**, the Rector's daughter, she came down the Churchyard with milk puddings and enquired after me through the open window. I don't remember any of the other children getting it, nor my mother and she was expecting my youngest sister then.

"Temple the tailor was where Miss Rowe is now, and **Nash** was the grocer, and across the road where Mrs Collins is and the **petrol pump**, was **Parfitt the china shop**. And next door to Temple's where we had the **shoe shop**, was our **sweet shop - Mrs Howard's**. It was a coffee stall at the back with dominoes and that, but sweets in the shop part, where you went in. You could get **vinegar flats**, little round slabs of treacle and vinegar, very crisp; and **candy drops**, they were made of sugar candy but the best ones were the **sugar balls**, that's what we called them. Kind of lollipops really only not on a stick, coloured pink and **one farthing** each, and sometimes (not often but every now and then) if you were lucky, your sugar ball had a real farthing hidden inside, wrapped in tissue-paper, and you sucked it down and got it out and then you could go in again and buy another; only of course my mother made me give the farthing to one of my sisters because I'd already had one.

"Then on Sundays, we all went to **Sunday school** and sat on hassocks in the **Octagon**, and we had to behave very correct and sedate because it was Sunday. I shall never forget the day I did a few skips going across the churchyard; somehow my mother got to hear of it. She stood up in front of me, 'Amelia' she says (that's what she calls me when she was serious) 'Amelia, did you dare go skipping in the churchyard?' and she gets the skipping rope and doubles it up and flicks

it all round my legs. Oh yes, Sundays were Sundays, that's a sure thing. We all had our **baths Saturday nights** and then all our clothes washed in the bathwater and dried and aired round the kitchen ready to put on again on Mondays, and we wore old underclothes with our Sunday things. It was the same every week of our lives. There was the story about that man up at Gustard Wood who fell down a well - that was on a Sunday. He held onto the lid with his fingers and called and called for help till someone came to get him out. They said it was all because he'd gone wooding on a Sunday. And he'd been to Church. But he shouldn't have gone wooding and the Lord sent him that punishment.

"Ah, but one Sunday - I didn't skip that Sunday; I was very correct. I was older, you see, maybe about the time I went to Kimpton, temporary parlourmaid and to learn dress-making. Yes, I was very upright, walking like this, stately, just turning my shoulders a little. You see, I had a **new little mantle**, a cloak that come down all over my dress, made for me specially by Miss Lattimore, from Lattimores in the High Street. She was the one who looked after me when I cut my hand with my father's pocket knife, as I was cutting a piece of bread. It was very deep; they said I cut a vein (there's the scar). I'd put on what we always used - **wetted tobacco** pressed over the place, but Miss Lattimore knew first-aid and she tied a bandage up my arm and laid **lily leaves soaked in brandy** on the cut and it healed like that. Yes, it was the same Miss Lattimore who made me my cloak, and I felt so proud as I went down the path after Church. And Miss Lattimore spoke to me herself, she said 'You look so nice, Amelia'. It was a green mantle trimmed with black braid and with it I wore my blue sailor hat with the white ribbon. And I walked along like this, you know, very upright, a step at a time, not moving my head."