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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

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CHAPTER 10. JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS

Many voices are speaking now, some saying one thing, some another. Voices grow stronger as memories revive, falter over the difficulty of being accurate and trying to give pleasure. When it is all put together it goes something like this:

"I don't know what we should have done if it had been wet, but it wasn't, it was lovely and sunny and there was this feast for the **whole village**; all laid out on **long tables with white cloths**, and I shall never forget the great **joints of cold beef** and the **beer**, and all of us in our best clothes. I had a red dress and the lady where I was in service at St. Albans had given me as a present a red ribbon to tie round my hair, round the bun. I was only a girl, thirteen or fourteen, but I'd had to **put my hair up** because I was in service. A **tight waist**, of course, **full skirt** and this little black **jacket** just covering my waist and all braided. And a **black and white speckled straw hat**, sailor hat, with a red ribbon. She'd given me the day off and I'd walked out from St. Albans and then down from the top of the Hill, next door to where **Mrs Skeggs** lived who used to do **straw-plaiting** such a lot with her cousin, and had the **plaiting mill** fixed up at the bottom of the stairs. My mother and father and nine of us children (three brothers, six sisters). Everyone walked in families, all very smart, down into the **Rectory meadow** and there were the tables: we all stood up to **sing our grace before the meal**, the same grace that we all learnt in the school:

'Be present at our table, Lord,
Be here and everywhere adored,
These creatures bless, and grant that we
May feast in Paradise with Thee'

"It sounds a bit old-fashioned now, somehow; we sang it to the tune of the **Doxology**. There was another verse for the **Thanksgiving** after but I don't recollect it. **The Rector, Canon Davys**, was standing there saying it with us; he was a wonderful man, 'noble' I've heard people say of him - a big man with white hair and side-whiskers (that doesn't sound respectful). He was a very strong personality and he really taught people the fear of God. Only the other day I was remarking about

those seats by the churchyard wall in the High Street that some little boys were knocking about, and I said to them 'You wouldn't have dared do that in Canon Davys time', but they didn't take a bit of notice. He was a great man and the church was full every Sunday and we children had **special low seats at the back**; they're gone now. We couldn't see much and no going out before the sermon - if any of us talked or didn't attend, **Mrs Davys** used to tap us on the top of the head with the end of her walking stick. **Canon Davys** and the other gentry were standing on the lawn in front of the **Rectory** and there was a speech and all the folks came up close to the fence so they could hear."

"That's quite right", someone else adds, "everyone was marshalled up to the fence - I don't remember who organised it, **Miss Davys** I daresay, and the people who usually saw to such things. All the ladies were on the lawn, **founced skirts, feathers and flowers in their hats, parasols**. To my mind the ladies dressed better than they do now. It was a lovely day and **mugs** were given out at the **school**; there was **tea, cold beef, cakes** and that, the old Canon mixing in and out with us children. I remember better a **Jubilee** treat given by **Sir John Blundell-Maple** for all the children from all the villages around; we went from Wheathampstead to **Clarence Park, St. Albans**. We went by **train via Hatfield**, and there were **sideshow, Punch and Judy**, and each of us was given **one bag with sweets and one bag with pork pie, cake and biscuit**; and a **bottle of stone lemonade** and a **newly minted sixpence**".

"**Thrippence** if you were under seven , or under five, I forget."

"Yes she's right; and another mug which the school gave out as well, and **three-cornered paper bags** for our lunch, half-pound sugar bags"

Another voice joins in, "The party at **Clarence Park** - Mrs R. and me can remember that well, we were both there - she was **six years old, me nine** - we can recall that better than the feast here, I suppose we were more used to goings-on in the **Rectory meadow**. But at **Clarence Park Diamond Jubilee party**, all the children from the different schools around congregated at the station here at about nine o'clock - they came along walking by twos. When we got there, in the centre was a big **circular stage with divisions** similar to the spokes of a wheel, **one division for each school**. All the gentry stood round the stage. We ate our lunch standing up, out of the paper bags; sausage roll, jam puff each, maybe it was a pork pie. Later there was a **sit-down tea in a marquee**, we each had our mug issued to us at the station and a new sixpenny piece for the older children; the young ones three new pennies, and every child **took flowers for the hospital**".

"He's right", smiles Mrs R., "and I had sweet peas and it was such a hot day they wilted in my hand. I got this out to show you - the very dress I wore, bought at **Anscombe's**. Thick **strong cotton with a deep yoke and great big collar**, no sparing of material; just look at the tucks and lace edge. You wouldn't believe it but I had very fine golden hair hanging down my back; hat quite plain, plain straw with a ribbon, **black stockings, and boots!** And the **barouche** came over from **Lamer** to **Clarence Park** with the ladies, and **my father being the coachman** stood me up in the back of it where it was waiting so I could see better. Ooh it was a hot day!

"It was a beautiful day, but I reckon that was a different day to the goings-on here but about the same time, **June** time. I remember something about the do in **Parson's meadow**: there was **meat and beer in plenty** and some of the men over-ate themselves..."

"I remember up at **Lamer**", says Mrs R., "at one **Primrose League sports**, mother was helping with the tea with **Mrs Straw**, and I sat down on a wasps' nest and got wasps in all my clothes - oh, the screams and crying!"

"But you see what it was", another voice begins (someone who remembers well the **Jubilee Day** party in the **Rectory meadow**), "**Mr Lattimore the brewer** had provided **three or four barrels of beer** and every village was invited, and all the school children had a **holiday**. These barrels were set up by the iron railings and anyone could help themselves. I don't know about sitting at tables but I recollect pretty clearly that there was a **huge great side of beef hung up**, and anyone who wanted some took a **slice of bread and laid their piece of beef** on it and walked round eating it, and **Jimmy Westwood** was in charge of the carving. We had the **greasy pole** that day - **Jimmy Wright's** - and children's sports and **donkey racing**. The men with their beer swinging round, swinging round, waving their hats and saying 'God Save the Queen'. All the old people had a **Jubilee shilling** and what a racket went on, trying to bribe the old ladies to **sell their shillings for one and sixpence**; some did and their shillings were **gilded over and sold as sovereigns**, a dirty trick. The old boys wouldn't leave the barrels till they were empty, they went on till dark, and the children got tired and their mothers packed them into the perambulators with pieces of beef and other remains on top."

"And one old person put some in her apron", laughs Mrs H., "doubles it up and off she goes home like that; beautiful beef and home-baked bread, you couldn't see it wasted".

"I was not there", said **Mr Harry Westwood**, "couldn't have been; I was standing on **Westminster Bridge**, stood from four a.m. till four p.m., **Hertfordshire Volunteers**. And it was a hot day, a boiler; and we were all given our **tea in Hyde Park**."

"But I was there", says Mr T. softly, "**twentieth of June eighteen hundred and ninety seven**; a nice fine summer's day, a regular day of enjoyment for everyone. Lovely feast in **Parson's meadow**, set out with forms and tables and meat and **home-baked bread**; and **home-made pickles, meat puddings, apple pies and jam rollers** eighteen inches long. Tea to drink mostly, and beer for the men; I remember it well. **Lady Garrard** gave everyone a present, some useful thing for everyone and everyone was there - the whole village took part. Quite a crowd, and it finished with the **village band and dancing; barn dance** and some people wore **fancy dress** making themselves look silly to walk through the village. And the gentry went about between the tables and at speech time we all drew up to the fence to be near enough to hear - **gentry on the lawn, us people in the meadow**".

"Well I don't know, but I would say we've told you just about all there is; it was a long time ago now... You've managed to write down all you wanted? Don't go throwing it away or burning it like you did last time, and then we had to go all over it again Well, I never!"

As the shadows of the elm trees start across the Rectory meadow, a happy tired replete people try and pay attention to the voice from the other side of the fence. Every now and then a child has to be silenced; eyes look round, at other people perhaps or over the field to the **oldest dwelling-house** in the village, by **Bury Farm**, or the **boat-house** and willow trees, gentle and peaceful in the afternoon light.

Everybody there, either on the lawn or in the field is hoping for something from the future. Some for a great deal, some for only a little; but of course the children are the only ones who are to know what really happens.