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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 6. SPECIAL OCCASIONS

[Miss Rainsdon, Mrs Maltby, Mrs Brunt]

"Branch of May I brought you here
And at your door I stand,
It is but a sprout but it's well budded out,
It's the work of Our Lord's hand.

Take a Bible in your hand
And read a chapter through,
And when the Day of Judgment comes
The Lord will think of you."

Outside the door a little group of girls would be standing chanting their song for the 1st of May, wearing all kinds of finery - lace curtains fastened to their shoulders or bits of chiffon floating from pins, and on their heads wreaths of kingcups picked by the river the night before and bound together with willow. The chiffon would probably sometime or other have been begged from the **Osborne's hat factory** at the **Folly**.

Mrs C. and Mrs E. both worked at this factory, in fact Mrs C. was forelady there before she married; Mrs E., starting at the age of thirteen or fourteen was a finisher which no doubt meant that she handled the coloured chiffon used for trimming and she would have been allowed to bring home a few useless scraps. But she herself would be grown out of '**Maying**' by then and looking forward to the time when she would be going on to the bigger factory at Luton (you could be a finisher, a machinist or a hand sewer at the Folly). "Then a party of **Italians** came in to learn the trade and taught our people weaving instead of hand sewing" says Mrs C., "but it didn't take on".

"After the 'Maying' the children would start putting by their money for the '**Outing**'; so much each week marked up on a card. The 'Outing'! Dreamed of for weeks beforehand, lived over and over again afterwards. "**Yarmouth or Skegness** as a rule", Mrs E. remembers "at least that was what the Folly did - the Sunday School I mean - people didn't go for holidays to the sea as they do now; well, how could they?"

"Families were much bigger in those days and nine or ten children was quite common - one of the old folks I know never slept out of the village for fifty years till she went on her first holiday with the **Derby and Joan**; and of course money went something different. When I was a child we'd run an errand for someone and be very pleased to get a penny as a reward or even a piece of cake or a few sweets in a screw of paper. I think we were just as content with what we had as the children are now with all the things they can get - treats and toys and suchlike. And it was really an adventure to go in a train! I think we looked forward more to the train journey than to the seaside.

"Excursions were from Wheathampstead; I don't think we went to London, we went **Cambridge** way - perhaps that's why they chose **Yarmouth**, you didn't have to cross London. I remember the excitement and having our hair plaited up tight the night before to make it stand out stiff. We had two bows of ribbon and sunbonnets and our new frocks; new at Whitsuntide for the Anniversary at the Chapel (we always kept it a secret what colour they were going to be). The **skirts were starched** and frilled and embroidered, and we had **frilled petticoats** underneath, and **drawers with frills** and **black stockings** and **button boots**; we looked forward to taking those boots off on the sand and going into the sea for a paddle. Paddling in the Meadows here was alright but not half as good as the sea. "And putting our boots on again, before we came home - you didn't have to forget your button hook! We always had our best clothes on for the outing; the boys wore caps and long stockings and boots, and some of them had knickerbockers.

"At **five or six in the morning** the train would leave, and as we hadn't slept much for excitement, we'd be ready to jump up that morning. We got to **Yarmouth** about twelve; we hadn't much time there, or so it seemed, but the train was what we enjoyed most - all crowding to the window and singing and cheering at the stations: the train stopped quite often, much slower in those days. My mother used to make us up parcels of food for our lunch, **big meat pasties** and **cherry pasties**, and we'd have them when we were hungry, as like as not in the train before we got there. Some of the mothers came too because we were a lot of children and needed some looking after, and sometimes the grown-ups came back with boxes of **Yarmouth bloaters**. We were tired coming home, some of us going to sleep in the carriage, and tired next day, Sunday. We always went on a Saturday and there was no Sunday school, so we could have a rest before Monday.

"I don't think I can remember a wet day for the Outing; summers were mostly fine in those days and winters colder, with harder frosts. They stopped the Outing after a while and we had our treat in the village instead, maybe because some of the children couldn't afford the journey. But we enjoyed the day of the Treat just as much, waiting for the **Salvation Army Band** to arrive from Luton and then marching with our mugs, in all our best clothes, along the road behind the Band to the meadow behind our house at the **Folly**. There the children sat around on the grass for their tea and grown-ups went round filling our mugs and handing out bread-and-butter and special kinds of sugar cakes; after tea there'd be games, races and scrambling for sweets..."

"And I remember" says Mrs D., "there used to be good **Flower Shows in Wright's meadow** (where the **Roman Catholic Church** is) organised by **Mr Beard**. They were good old days and many Sports we had in **Four Acres at Marford**; old **Mr Jimmy Wright** used to have a **Fair on Nomansland** where a leg of lamb was fastened on the top of a greasy pole: the one that climbed to the top got the prize - the mutton! When **Canon Davys** was Rector here the Church used to be packed and every year there were **Sports in the Rectory meadow** with merry-go-rounds for the children. And sometimes a **fancy-dress football match** in the paddock up the Lamer Road".

"There was **Statty** [?] **Fair at Harpenden** every summer" Mrs E. goes on, "we'd walk to that and think nothing of it; but we weren't allowed to go by ourselves, it was too rough. The **horse-racing on Harpenden Common** - we children didn't have much to do with that either, but I remember slipping off with some of the others to the top of **Leasey Bridge Lane (Dark Lane** they used to call it) to wait for the big coaches to come along the top road to Harpenden, with racing people in them, and we'd dare one another to run along beside and call out for coppers. We'd get an odd penny or two thrown down to us before the driver's whip flicked us off and we were left behind scrambling in the dust for the money.

"**Harvest time** we looked forward to as well because of the gleaning. You couldn't start **gleaning** till after the corn was carried and the field raked over; the farmers used to put a thorn-bush in the middle of a field as a sign that gleaning could begin. My mother was too busy to get out but I used to go along with some other women and their children - it was a woman's job - I wasn't more than six or seven but I gleaned a bit with the older ones and played around. We were out all day, gleaning where we could and taking something to eat with us and bottles of cold tea. You gathered as much as you could carry in one hand, holding your bundle close under the ears, and then all the bundles were tied with a wisp of straw and put together heads turned inwards, onto a big sacking, bundle by bundle as they were gleaned, till all the field had been covered. Then the sacking with its corners fastened together was put on the head of one of the women - no fear of getting any pieces in her hair because she'd have her husband's cap on - and that's how we'd make our way back of an evening with those **great sackfulls on the women's heads** with the ends of the straw sticking out all round, and us little ones following with the odd bundles tight in our hands.

'Wheat, wheat, wheat - harvest home,
See what big bundles we've brought home'.

"That's what we sang out, and not only in fun, because those gleanings were really useful to us; the heads were thrashed out and then go to **Titmuss at the Mill** to be ground cheaply, making some nice wholemeal flour for extra baking. My friend's mother - the name was **Lake** and he was **River-keeper** to **Lord Cavan**, they had eleven children - used to save me a loaf of the gleaning bread which she'd baked: very nice it was, kind of sweet. My grandfather had a **bakery** and I was brought up knowing all about different sorts of flour, we often slipped into the bakery when they'd boiled up the little potatoes and eat one or two when no-one was looking! Those potatoes were mashed up and mixed in with the flour to keep the bread moist; I used to watch my grandmother making penny cakes (and sawing off the little lumps of salt) which she wrapped up and sold for a penny each. My baker grandfather was a **plait-buyer** as well, taking the straw plait which the women made in their houses over to **Luton** by cart to sell - so much for a score of plaits. He'd bring back the proper plaiting straw from Luton when he returned. We all had something to do with the straw-hat trade; my brother was a 'stiffener' at **Mr Osborne's** at

the **Folly**: started as a crate-boy there, carrying and fetching crates to and from Luton twice a day, in the train".

"Old **Mrs Pearson from Marford** used to have women at her house to do **straw-plaiting**" says Mrs D., "and one day I heard her say she was expecting a caller who she didn't want to see, so she drew her blind down when she was expecting him and told us all to be quiet. After the caller had knocked several times he suddenly opened the door - imagine the surprise on all our faces, and his, to see all of us sitting around with the blinds drawn - because Mrs Pearson had never thought to lock the door".

"But the gleaning-straw", Mrs E. went on, "that wasn't for plaiting, that was for **pigs**; everyone kept a pig when I was young, there weren't the rules and regulations there are now and you could have a sty at the end of your garden without any trouble. When the pigs had done with it the straw went on to the garden; there's nothing wasted in a pig, and my father, who was a **butcher**, had his **slaughterhouse at the Folly** in the yard above my **grand-dad's bakery**; and when a pig was killed the squealing used to bring the women running out of their houses with pails for the **chittings**, sixpence a set. And very fair we had to be, judging whose turn it was to have their pail filled. I've watched them at the shop, scudding a pig many a time - to get the bristles off - and those great earthenware basins of lard standing on the shelf, gone all crinkled as it got cold, and the women used to buy it to make **Crinkling Cake** - very nice for us children but nowadays they would think it very plain."

"And" asks Mrs D., "Do you remember **Harvest Festival** one year at the **Congregational Chapel**? **Mr Morgan the Minister** (whom everybody liked) asked **Mr Titmuss** at the Mill if he'd give him something for the Festival, and he said 'Yes, I'll give you a sackful of flour if you'll carry it to the Chapel yourself'. He didn't think the Minister would do it, but Mr Morgan said 'Alright, if you'll help me lift it up on my back': and being a small man he had a hard job to carry it, but he managed and he put it into quartern bags and sold it at the Harvest Sale. **Mr. and Mrs. Lane-Claypon** used to come round visiting us and every Christmas they brought us presents - many times we old ones have talked of what we used to get given us years ago; in those days we seemed more united together."

"**Christmas?** Well, Christmas was always the same" says Mrs E., "except I don't remember a lot of carol-singing round the houses as they do nowadays; **handbells**, yes but no singing. I remember the snow and the long frosts when the **river froze over** and we used to go **skating and sliding by moonlight** all the way from the Mill through to the meadows at the Folly. My other grand-parents from **Kings Langley** used to come over and stop with us for Christmas, and a hired brougham went to meet them at Wheathampstead station and the two of us, my brother and I, went along and came back in the brougham sitting on the spindle at the back - that's what I remember of Christmas in the old days - holding on tight and bowling along at what seemed a great rate in the dark.

"Young madcaps we were, I suppose, and up to all sorts of tricks; at School we got into trouble for chasing the Rector's (**Canon Davys**) two peacocks to make them spread out their tails. People would say 'It's those Folly children again' just as they do today. I remember my brother falling on a broken bottle when he was playing **Hounds and Hares** with the other boys one night, and having to go to the hospital to be stitched up. We used to be out playing after dark often, summer and winter, but especially moonlight nights; there wasn't the danger of traffic then and not much room indoors, with the big families. We girls played our own games - there was one where we'd make a long line across the road, and joining hands, one of us was the Monkey and

had to go and hide; we swung backwards and forwards singing '**Moonlight, starlight, the monkey won't come out tonight**', and then all of a sudden the monkey would jump out and we'd scatter, anywhere, and the one that was caught was monkey next time.

"There were different games for different times of the year - in the spring, **Whipping Tops** (about the time of **Lent**) when the roads began to dry up, in the summer **Hop Scotch**. We chalked the lines and squares on the road and go round on one leg kicking a piece of platter into each square on the way. **Conkers** in the autumn, a boys game mostly, they got their chestnuts baked to make them hard and stop them cracking; in the winter we had **hoops** to keep us warm - **wooden** ones for the girls and **iron** ones for the boys who had **iron hoop-sticks with a hook** on the end to fasten onto their hoops; they got the blacksmith to put the stick into a wooden handle to make it warmer to hold. **Marbles** were played at any time when it was dry, in frosty weather we'd find some icy ruts in the road to roll them along. Another game that we girls played was **Five Stones**, five nicely rounded stones on the back of your hand and then turn your hand over quickly and try and catch all five in the same hand.

"Wednesdays were **sewing afternoons** and we'd very often be in trouble for having dirty fingers from playing marbles. You couldn't wash at the school and **Miss Dawes**, the sewing teacher, we liked her but she was strict - **Miss Sarah Dawes** lived in **East Lane** and she and her sister, **Miss Ellen**, kept the **coffee shop** (where the **Stores** is now, where you could get tallow candles) - they lived at the **Stag** too, after its licence was taken. Miss Dawes was very neat and proper with her hair up in a little bun and gold rings in her ears, with a neat tight waist and whale-bone collar; she really taught us how to sew but you had to watch that you got your patches right. We'd buy our sweets from the **coffee-shop** sometimes but mostly we went to **Mrs Neal**, at the bottom of **Brewhouse Hill** which was very handy after school. **Vinegar-flats** and different coloured sugar sticks called **Yanky-Pankies**, all for a halfpenny or a farthing each. She was a very big person, and stout.