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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 7. DIFFERENT PEOPLE

[Mr C. Collins & Mr F Harding]

A conversation between two old friends, 'Wick' (Mr Harding) and 'Termino' (Mr Collins).

Wick: Now what you've got to think is, what a grand time the young people had in service; there were three or four big houses round here and that's where they went for work.

Termino: The only thing for them or the farms, was farmwork for the boys. D'you remember that old person, **Miss Kenny**? She went to work at **Bride Hall** - she was a character.

Wick: Good old girl; the first woman ever to go on the land, you might say.

Termino: And the first ever to have bobbed hair; d'you remember, Wick? Wore man's clothes and smoked a **clay pipe**. Lived in one of the cottages opposite the Doctor opposite **Four Limes**.

Wick: And she always carried a **flag basket** over her shoulder with her dinner in it. And her face was like nut from being out all weathers. She worked right up to the end, and I don't know how old she was when she died.

Termino: With this pipe in her mouth.?

Wick: She was well known coming up the village street.

Termino: I've still got the old Nurse's bicycle lamp! **Candle lamp**. Often as I was driving along Marford Road late with the van I'd see her light coming towards me

wavering about; here she is I'd think, bound to be her at this time. Going home after a maternity case, and all done for a few shillings and the love of the thing.

Wick: That was just it about those days; people were more friendly weren't they, matey. That's it.

Termino: In the Victorian age they spent their money when they got it - it's the other way round now, buy something first and then start thinking about paying for it.

Wick: But if you think about the village people and what they did, it was simple pleasures - simple pleasures we made for ourselves. The **Flower Show**; every year for the Village Flower Show the children collect wild flowers in a jam jar and the men show the flowers and vegetables that they'd grown themselves.

No wireless or pictures, and in the evenings the girls get on with their **knitting**; on Sunday evenings after church we'd all sit round the fire and have another Service: sometimes after I got married I'd tell the old Bible stories to the children in simple language - Joseph and his brethren, Samson carrying the gates of Gaza. People would say 'Wherever did you learn to tell them like that?' I'd say, 'From **Miss Robins, Delaport Bible class**'. And no **Workmen's Club**; that didn't start till **nineteen three**. After that if they got **lantern slides** the boys would go down and peep round the door or if a **smoking concert**, **Mr Hampton** would say 'If you're good boys you can come in', that pleased us, I can tell you.

Termino: I say, Wick, do you remember this - there were four boys to sit for exam at St Albans school, they'd got to take it and they'd got to walk there and back the same day; they'd got to take it if they wanted to leave and get a job, after **Standard Four**. Two of them passed and old **Canon Davys** - great old man he was but you had to mind what you said - when he heard that two had passed, he said 'I've no doubt they were Church boys'; but they weren't!.

Wick: I suppose we had our own kind of little rivalries...but, Term, you were saying about them walking...

Termino: They did; all the youngsters walked to school, from out by **Coleman Green** way, and **Nomansland**.

Wick: And those that had the toughest life were toughest in the **War**...

Termino: That's true, quite true. (We were together then in the **Hertfordshire Yeomanry**). Do you remember them coming to the school, hardly a shoe to their feet, some of them, and wet clothes; all the wet things were put round the fire, hanging on the high guard and steaming... And first thing in the morning in our family, before school, one of us boys were sent for the milk, every day. We went up to **Delaport** to fetch **skimmed milk**, for a **halfpenny a pint**.

Wick: And to **Lamer**; maybe my brother would say 'I'm going to work up at Lamer this morning (**painting**, always painters in my family) I'm going to Lamer, can I take a basin for dripping?'

Termino: There was an old woman who used to take her **straw plait** to **Harpenden**, every week, she'd sell it to a man in Harpenden, in the **Bowling Alley**; after that she'd walk from Harpenden to **St Albans** to spend the three shillings on groceries and then walk home to **Coleman Green**.

Wick: Three shillings! Can you imagine that! But it went a long way of course.

Termino: And there was **Mr Lattimore** - a shilling for bringing the ladder back. If times were bad and there was no work, in bad weather the fellows would get together and one would say, 'It's your turn to borrow the ladder today, Fred' and he'd go and say to Mr Lattimore 'Can I borrow the ladder for an hour or two?'. And he'd take it outside and lay it up somewhere, didn't use it, and then when he took it back he'd be sure to get a shilling; a shilling and a pint of beer!

Wick: I'm thinking of some more of the people here that were well known; do you remember **Old Zulu**?, he lived down **East Lane**. They called him that because they said he never washed; he was really dirty and some days he'd go to the **River Hole**, a bathing hole place along **East Lane**; it had **canvasses round it and a diving board**, it was about **twelve feet deep**. It was reserved on some days for old **Lady Cavan**, who'd had it made. Old Zulu would go there sometimes for a wash and when he came out he was as pleased as anything and he'd say 'Take a look at me; don't I look clean!'

Termino: Then there's my father - here's a story about him. He was always frightened of little animals and insects, and it happened that we had the tap-room smothered in **cockroaches**, all over the floor. My mother put tins down to catch 'em but that didn't do it; one day a man came in and said there's nothing like a **hedgehog** for keeping cockroaches down, would my mother like him to give her one? My father said 'Don't you bring any hedgehog in here'. My mother put the hedgehog down in the taproom and one night when the flap in the floor was up, someone gave the hedgehog a kick by mistake and it fell down the flap; it was about closing time and we all went upstairs, except my father who wouldn't stay in the house. He went outside and slept in the brougham to keep out of the way (we hired out a waggonette or brougham) and this hedgehog got up the cellar stairs somehow and ran along and came up to the bedrooms - mother thought it was burglars, she'd forgotten all about the hedgehog and got all us children up and one of the boys said he'd go downstairs and see; the story is he slipped on the stairs and sat right down on the hedgehog!

Wick: There were a lot of stories about your father Term, with all proper respect to him

Termino: There were; he always said he kept on the right side of the law but only just. On **Sunday mornings - no pubs** open then - he'd walk across the yard with a bucket in each hand, six pints in the bottom of each bucket, and make out he was watering the horses. In the stables the men had come for their papers - we sold **newspapers** too - and they'd stand there and have their beer while all the folks went by along the road to church. And my father would sell more beer on Sunday mornings than he'd sell all the week!

Wick: And **Jimmy Wright**, the **town-crier**: everybody knew Jimmy Wright. a great little old man: he lived till he was **ninety-one** and died in **1940**. Remember the saying we had? "Too late, too late, you hear the cry, Jim Wright the Ragman has passed by."

He was our town-crier: "Oh-yes, oh-yes, oh-yes" you'd hear him. Sometimes it was for **cheapjacks**, down in the **Bull yard**; they'd come along with whole loads of stuff - **china, saucepans, hardware**, Friday nights generally.

Termino: Because that's when the **money is about**. Still is.

Wick: The place was all lit up with flares and you could get a **tea-set for sixpence** - kind of **tinkers** you could call them. And old Jimmy Wright would cry for them: "Oh-yes, oh-yes", and we boys would go dashing home all excited: "**Cheapjacks in the Bull yard**, cheapjacks in the Bull yard!" It was a rare night when the cheapjacks came, and it was the only way the women had of getting their pots and pans without walking out from **St Albans** with them.

Termino: Do you remember **Jimmy Wright** and the **pheasants**? We've often had a laugh about that; but you have to remember that poaching was a regular trade in those days. If you could find a nest full of china - (eggs, that is) - big 'uns which means pheasants or little 'uns - partridges, you could get **sixpence each** from a man at **Luton**, and that was something. The magistrates used to charge so much for birds, so much for eggs; and Jimmy Wright got a box full of eggs which he'd taken to the Station. He was just coming back from there when he caught sight of a plainclothes man and he ran back and opened the box and jumped on all the eggs so they couldn't be counted, and broke the whole lot and got himself covered with egg. And another time he made as if he was seeing off his uncle at the station, and he had the portmanteau with him and if they'd only known it, it was full of pheasants!.

Wick: That's **Jimmy Wright**, good old boy and I had great respect for him. If the **Circus** came to **Skovard's Orchard** he used to shout that out for the circus people.

Termino: **Circus in the Orchard!** Or **greasy pole at Nomansland** - umbrella at the top, ten feet high, and **five bob** if you got the umbrella. You'd see the lads rub their hands in the dirt...

Wick: Yes, roughcast their hands you might say; all the toughest lads of the village.

Termino: I'll tell you something about the **Fair at Gustard Wood**: there was always a Fair there, **roundabouts and swinging boats and rocks**. They used to make the **rocks** while the people stood there, **with rain-water and a bit of ginger**. I've seen the **horse drawing the roundabout round** and in those days the roundabouts had very elaborate carving, animals and scrolls and something like ship's bulkheads. Not so long back, in the **War**, my pal came along with a lot of things, he said they were antiques; he'd burnt the gold off them. I was over at **Welwyn Statty** and I saw a man there with the roundabout and I said, "Guvnor, what about these?" "Roundabout heads", he said "that's what they are". So I sold them to the **Cross Keys** and he had them round the **Tap Room** at one time.

Wick: Do you recollect the time there was a **circus in Swan yard?** - **Reuben Dunham and the baboon?** Not a real baboon but a man got up like one in a cage, and a **shilling a time to see it** and a **sovereign** for he who dared to open the cage door and go inside. Nobody dared, because this baboon-man would growl and make out it was really fierce. But **Reuben Dunham** came across - I fancy he had been in the Swan for his glass of beer

- and he went straight up to the cage door and terrifies the life out of this baboon; in the end they had to give him the sovereign to get him to go away!

Termino: And someone else you used to know; somebody quite different - **Miss Pring** ,and her donkeys.

Wick: Of course I remember **Miss Pring**, **Mamie** some called her; she was a very familiar figure whose parents had worked for the **Olive family** over at **Ayot**, and then she became a **governess**; she retired and came to live here. I fancy she had a small pension - she was **eighty-nine** when she died. She drove a **donkey in a small cart**, and the young lads - naughty boys after school - when she stopped for something up the street - tied the wheel of the cart to a lamp post. When she came out she went "Get up there, get up there now" to the donkey, and when she found out she was after those boys with her whip; they were all hiding one behind the other up the alley but seeing her coming they took to their heels!

Termino: Oh dear me...

Wick: But there's someone else we must mention - **Doctor Smallwood**. You can't talk about the village people in those days without remembering him. He was a chummy sort of man, never sent a bill if he knew people couldn't pay.

Termino: Nor he did, never. One night he said to my brother **Jack**, "Come on, get up, I've got a job over at.. - some place right across the fields, it was snowing and blizzarding. Jack gets out the brougham and when they got as far as they could he said, "I'll walk the rest, and you're not to wait; there's no knowing how long I'll be and you'd better not send me any bill. This is the eleventh child and not a penny for one of them!". Joking, of course, he was like that. Many's the time I've driven that brougham myself for my brother, fetching ladies in the morning for the **five-to-nine**, and Jack would say "Take the new horse **Charlie**, he's alright." But I often had a lot of trouble with them coming down that Hill first thing in the morning. Do you know who had **the first motorcar that came to Wheathampstead**? **Mr Harmsworth**, **Lord Northcliffe**, used to drive down to **Fishponds** which was a fishing lodge down there, and long before he came we'd get to hear it and everybody would stand out along the road and watch - he had a **French chauffeur**.

Wick: Then **Lord Cavan** got a car, and **Dr Smallwood - AR 240** was Dr Smallwood's number.

Termino: You asked me about my starting with **furniture - my brother was a carpenter to Sir Blundell Maple**, in **1911**. No, for eleven years starting in nineteen hundred and four. Then he began at the **Maltings** but before that in the **coach house** when we had the **hotel**.

Wick: He took over your father's position as head of the family; but about trade in the village, you know the place to look? In the advertisements in the old **Parish Magazines**..

Tremino: **Antiques** - how did I learn about them? I stood with young **Peter Titmuss** and watched his **pigeons flying** and he said: 'That's my father, that's my grandmother', however does he know?...It's the same with me and furniture; I was always interested in

furniture; and horses. Now my boy, he's all for books and learning and he picks me up sometimes - we have great old arguments.

Wick: There wasn't the learning in the old days; but are people happier with it? We'd say No, but the younger ones would doubtless say Yes, they are. No, there wasn't the learning.

Termino: But there was more wisdom.

Wick: And there were no worries - there's more responsibility these days - everybody's different. We had more fun in our way, but it was the sort of fun town people couldn't understand; the same way that young people can't understand it nowadays. When people came to see us at **Ayot** when we lived over there, they'd say "Whatever do you do with yourselves sitting around the fire all evening?" - today, amusements are all ready-made for you.

Termino: I don't think the youngsters are so content - so much rushing about.

Wick: And people don't trust each other; if I was needing twenty pound I'd ask old Termino here for it - people don't do that sort of thing now. Once, during the **War**, Mrs Term wanted some money to pay for some tyres: a man had brought them to the door and she ran over to me and asked me to lend her the money. Of course I did. And the man said "Why, that's unbelievable". And when I walk down the village and I meet someone, I say "Hullo Florrie" or "Hullo Maud"...

Termino: And if someone speaks to me, as likely as not I never notice, and after they've gone past my wife says "That was so-and-so who has just spoken to you" "Oh was it? - Oo-oo" I call out when they're halfway down the road; I'm in a dream, I fancy.

Wick: Take the **Clothing Club** we had, and the **Penny Bank** at school - **threepence a week** from the school children, **thirteen shillings** a year, and at Christmas **Mrs Davys** would make it up to **nineteen shillings** - a ton of coal. I don't call that charity, I call that Christian. She had more money than us and she thought the rich should help the poor.

Termino: Yes, and if the Doctor said "You must have **ice**", where did it come from? **Lamer or Brocket**; they each had an **ice-hole**, a kind of **brick-built hole in the ground**. It was in the **grotto at Lamer** where the snowdrops are.

Wick: There was another unusual person, a character called **Jo Fowler**; he lived in a little hut down the bottom of **Rose Lane**. His brother was **butler at Mountstephens**'. He was always begging for boots, and if somebody gave him a new pair he'd slit the leather in two or three places and stuff bits of rag in the holes. But what a fine-looking chap, a man **Augustus John** would make a lovely painting of. Sort of odd-job man for anyone, he'd just earn enough for a **latch-lifter**

Termino: **Penny for a latch-lifter; half a pint of bitter**. And **Dod Boon**, he used to take the dogs **sheening**. By the old dust-blower, the **threshing machine**. He'd catch rats alive in a bag and take them to the **Ship** for dogs to chase - he'd put his hand in the sack and take out all

the rats till the last one, and then he daren't do it. And **Waddy East**, he used to bite pigeons' necks to kill them - he said it was more humane.

Wick: But **Dod Boon**: there was something rather terrifying about him, for a boy. But the way people say things nowadays; that's always interested me, it's quite different. "**Wethampstead**" I say when I talk to Term here, but on the phone "**Wheat-hamp-stead**" - the other day I said "Wittle", what I've always said for Whitwell, and the operator said "What did you say?" I said "I didn't say Whitehall 1212, I said Wittle" "Will you say that again" he says "I like the way you said that".

Termino: Education broadens the mind, I suppose, but it's made classes.

Wick: **Dr Smallwood** would never say "What's your name?", always "How's your mother?". I know we have more people here now but where we used to have rich and poor now we've got class-distinction. People aren't close together; I've worked in Mansions and Castles and been glad to go home to my cottage.

Termino: We haven't talked about the **servants' balls** - it was a wonderful thing to get asked to one of them. **Quadrilles, Lancers, Valetas**: we're living in funny times now, we're getting educated, and it's a good thing I suppose, it's got to come.

Wick: But there's no enjoyment these days; everything is for money.

Termino: If you've got money you can be miserable in comfort, that's all.

Wick: Now Termino-boy, it makes me sad to hear you talk that way. You've got to get contentment with the job you like - you were just as happy with a bike as a car.

Termino: Ah yes, too much rush these days.

Wick: I'd say it was a happier existence at the turn of the century.

Termino: But not for many people; I'm not so sure about 'the good old days', there were lots of things we don't want repeated.

Wick: 'No boots on your feet makes you tough', don't forget.

Termino: Yes...But before the **school** was built at **Bury Green** - pretty that must have been, eighty years ago. Those old cottages standing around, and the **old walnut trees** in the **Rectory grounds** - that's how the pub got its name. I'll tell you about a refectory table but you are not to write it down...