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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 9. SIGNS OF CHANGE

*[Mrs T. Sparrow]*

"Mind you, though, what I'm talking of is **sixty year ago** or more, when I was at school. You'd have noticed some differences in the main street then - the **Post Office was a tailor or dress-maker** or something of that sort, and **later a cycle shop**. The **first Post Office** we had here was **old Chennell's the Chemist**, where the **dairy** is; down past **Hall's the baker**, before you come to the **Red Lion** public house (which has gone now - pulled down as it was condemned, about **1919 or 1920**) just before the **Red Lion** there were some cottages stood back with a path up to them on the side. Somewhere I've got a photograph of my boy riding his bicycle. the first bicycle he ever had, given to him for his birthday, you can see the gate that went in to these houses - you see Hall's?, just like it is now - the entrance to the cottages was behind.

"Go across the road there and there's the **Workmen's Club**, and I can tell you how that originated: we boys had a **Bible Class with Lady Ellen Lambart** up at **Wheathampstead House** and when she had to leave the house (after **Lord Cavan** came back) she started up the **Club** with the boys that had been in the Class, for **smoking and talking** and that sort of thing. She used to give them packets of **Woodbines**, that was the original **Workmen's Club**. As we had no **Post Office** here all the letters and telegrams were dealt with on the **Station**, and my father - he had been a **Yeoman of Signals in the Royal Navy** and went with the **first ship that had steam** - came to **Wheathampstead as Signaller at the Station**, and he did postal duties because he'd learnt signalling: **Morse Code** and that. Supposing there was a telegram for **Gustard Wood**, the boys playing about outside the Station waited for the **bell to ring** (there was a gong which announced the trains) and then they'd run to take the message. **One and six if it was to Nomansland, sixpence to Gustard Wood**; walking, no bikes. The boys used to wait for the **10.10 from London** when **golfing gentlemen** came, and **carry their clubs up to Gustard Wood**; those that weren't generous didn't get their clubs carried.

"About the **juniper trees on Gustard Wood** common - the boys used to earn a **shilling a pint** from **Mr Lloyd of Whitegates** who came golfing from over **Symonds Hyde** way. He had them for his rheumatism; there was any amount of juniper bushes round the common then, some of them grown up to the size of trees. I fancy they were the only juniper trees this side of Scotland, mostly gone now, overgrown, stifled.

"I've always interested myself in the village; people in those days were much more interested in public affairs. I was **chairman of Overseers - Guardians of the Poor Law** - and I was **Impersonating Agent of the Liberal Party**, to keep an eye on whether the right people voted. Not everybody had a vote then, things were very different. The **first council houses** were on **Brewhouse Hill**, just above the **chapel**; built after the **first World War**. The **High Street** was much the same for a long time, with **Workhouse Chambers** (gone now) which was built about the same time as the **Bull Inn**, maybe the Bull was earlier. **Workhouse Chambers and Workhouse Yard** were where the **Bank** is; there's no record to my knowledge of it being a real Workhouse.

"**Marford** was the first part of the village to grow, long before the first **Council Houses**, the houses began to be dotted about all over the meadows and where **Necton Road** is was then just a track - **no water laid on and no sewerage**. In **Marford** you could get **building plots for thirty pound** each and houses like these cost **one hundred fifty or two hundred pound** to build. Old Marford I can remember well: there was **Mrs Dawes' cottage** before you come to the **Nelson** public house; turning down Sheepcote there were **two cottages** (**Mrs Chapman's** wasn't the first) then three cottages (the **Saunders** had one), then **Mr and Mrs Fynn's** house was the little **school**, and there was a **cedar tree** at the bottom. That tree was one of four that was planted in this neighbourhood by various people to commemorate the **battle of Waterloo**. This one (cut down long ago, about **nineteen twenty**) and there's one at **Sandridge**, near the **school house**, which was cut down only **three weeks ago** - they said it was unsafe. And there are **two** over at **Marshalswick** (the only two now standing); every year at **hay-time** we boys were asked over to **Marshalswick** by **Lady Reynolds** to the **hay-treat** - we walked there from school, just this side of St. Albans marching along two by two carrying our mugs and singing:

'To Marshalswick, to Marshalswick; To get our cakes and tea..'

We got there and me and my friend **Tom Stokes** got tired of playing in the hay and turning it over, and we went to climb this cedar: up I went, climbing and scrambling and getting very dirty - those cedars are black when you touch them - and all of a sudden there was a loud crack and before I knew it I had broken the whole top out of that tree. I got down quick and just as I was on my feet again I saw the gardener coming across towards me; walking very slowly and fixing me with his eye and rolling up first one sleeve with one hand and then the other with his other hand, and I was scared and I turned round and started to run, I ran all the way back to Sandridge as fast as I could go and in to **my grandfather's workshop** - he was making a **coffin** at the time - and he said: 'Here get in under that', and he hid me in the workshop and gave me some of his tea.

"**Brewhouse Hill** began to be developed about **nineteen nineteen**; **Barton House** was the **brewhouse** and belonged to **Lattimores** who had pubs all round the neighbourhood. **Percy Smith's** brother was drayman for **Lattimores** - **Smith the blacksmith** - (there were any amount of blacksmiths about then) the one whose father was the **wheelwright** on Brewhouse Hill, next to **Georgie Nash's smithy**. And **Charlie Collins' corner shop** was an **oil shop** and was burnt to

the ground; I'll never forget that night. I'd walked home from Harpenden, back to Necton Road, a bit further down from this house we're in now - that was my father's house, the one we were brought up in - it was a beautiful night: sky clear and stars shining, twelve o'clock at night. All too perfect. I came in and had a bit of supper and sat down for a minute, and my mother called out from her bedroom: 'Look at the window, isn't that a fire?' I got up and looked out and saw the red glow; I started to run and I ran down to the **Fire Engine** to get her out. That was the last of the **Oil shop - Wootton's** that was. But he still went on going round the houses with **paraffin oil on a cart**.

"About the **Fire Engine**. This one, the first we had, we called the old **Manual**, and it used to stand outside the **Bull** near the river. It was a **hand-pump** with a suction pipe into the water; it threw the water up better than any pump today. A **dozen men each side**, anyone would help to take a turn - there was a different spirit then, a **village fire was everyone's fire**: we've had a **Fire Brigade** here for **over a hundred years**. We kept the old Manual in use till **nineteen twenty**, then we knew a better fire-fighting machine was needed and the **Merryweather** was got - a **steamer, with two horses**. Usually it was the two horses from **Place Farm**, next the river, but anybody's horses could be **commandeered**. If there was a fire the men used to run and get a horse out of a field and put it in the shafts of the engine and trot off to the fire; and then they'd stand each side of the **Merryweather** and pump. '**Joyce**' we called her, but she really wasn't fast enough, with the horses, so we had her **mounted on a chassis and a motor attached**: she was re-christened '**Angela**' (after **Lady Brocket** who came and inaugurated her) and Angela did a wonderful job of work.

"Bought out of **Parish Accounts** she was. And talking of accounts I'll show you this piece of old paper that I keep in my wallet to show people - here, it is a demand note, dated **nineteen nineteen, St Albans Union, Parish of Wheathampstead** which says: '**For relief of Poor - 1/6, R.R.C. - 7/0 (that was for Surveyors), County Council = 2/10, Parish Council = -/-0d**. And that was the rating for that date for every ratepayer!

"Things have changed since then; all our **street lighting was paraffin oil**, lit by the **lamplighter** with a ladder and put out at **eleven o'clock** - opposite **Mrs Beard's** there is still the old lamp-post with the **arm for resting the ladder on**. The **Gas** came about **nineteen nineteen** at the time of the first **World War**; **electric came about nineteen thirty**. I would say we were better lit, or just as well lit, in the old days with paraffin lamps. Would I want to go back to those days? I don't know; the Missus and I have always been independent in what we thought, and we've seen a good deal.

"That **winter of eighteen ninety four - Russell of Town Farm** (before **Chennells**) used to send **hay and straw up to London** by road, and the loads **came back with soot, or manure** from the stables in the **London mews** and it was spread on the fields where those **Marford** council houses stand. Being soft and the ground under it hard with frost, it got covered with little birds settling on it and the men used **bat-folding nets** to catch them for **bird-pie**. The posts are still standing along there where the carts and wagons used to turn round. In the same winter **Peter Reed's dray** and horses turned right over into the snow drift at **Dirty Bottom corner** on the **Hatfield** road and the whole lot of them were killed. (And the old man **Floyd** who lived back of the **Nelson** - him being a temperance man! - used to shout out when he saw that dray 'Here comes that ragged man's cart'). That was a winter alright; it was the time the **Cavans** had **terraces made at the House out of gravel** from the gravel pits and **paid 2/6 a day** to those who liked to do it: and **Mounstephens** over at **Brocket** had men to **sweep the ice for skating - 2/6 a day**, to keep the wolf from the door. And people waiting at **soup-kitchens** with tickets from the **Rector** -

old **Canon Davys** - but I doubt you got a ticket if you didn't appear in Church on a Sunday!. I said to myself then 'My children shall not have to go through this kind of thing'. And then there was a wrong spirit in the **New Rich**, something quite different; with the **old Gentry** you could talk to them man-to-man, but you couldn't with these others.

"The **first sewer was laid eighty-five years ago** and is still in service, down the main street starting from **Sunny Cottage** up there by the **station**, and going along the **High Street and down East Lane** to the **sewerage beds**. Old **Mr George Wren** used to pump the sewerage with his **horse walking round with a long-arm pump**, twice a day; it was pumped into trenches - 'open irrigation' it was called: then he'd let his horse free 'you go home' he'd say and the horse would go off by itself, back to **Necton Road**.

"**All our water we got from wells**; every house had a well or a pump and there was a **communal well** at the top of **Wheathampstead Hill**. My **Mrs S.'s father** was a **well-sinker** and his brother the same; she can tell you when she went down a well - over Harpenden way, near to her home, top of **Cravell's Road** on the common by **St. John's Church**. Her father was working on a well there and she'd taken his dinner; only a little thing she was then, **seven or eight years old**, and for a treat he let her down to the bottom of the well, a hundred and sixty feet. 'Put some chalk in the bucket' he shouted out to her (it's all chalk that you have to bore through). So she scratched up some pieces of chalk - you can imagine what it felt like looking up and seeing only a little round hole of light high above your head! An old man came along and called down and asked her name and she told him shouting up to him, and he threw down a sixpence; her Dad had gone to the pub to get something to drink with his dinner. It was him who came here and deepened the old well at the back there; he bored right on through the rock and got a gush of water, and that well since then has **never dried up** even in a drought; you get colder water from it in the summer and warmer in winter, it's not so chalky as the shallower wells.

"Sometime after the **first World War** we had the **first main water laid**, along the top **Harpenden Road, down Brewhouse Hill** and through the **main street**; later it went along the **Lower Luton Road** and very much later the rest of the village got it - not so long ago, that was. **Cravells Road** was where my wife lived and she used to walk every day from there in Harpenden to near the old **Bell**, past the **railway bridge** on the **Luton Road**, to work at the **Steam Laundry**. She wore **clogs** and when it was hard weather the bottom frills of her skirts and petticoats froze and crackled as she walked. For **thirteen shillings a week** and she thought she was in clover; I'm sure she was a deal happier than young folks are today.

"In those days if you went out shopping, you went on your two legs, and never thought of anything else. Women were taking their **straw plait to St. Albans on foot**, with a sort of mail-cart, **chaise** we called it, to carry the plait and wearing their **hob-nail boots** to get over the stones - field stones, spread on the roads and very rough; no steamroller to come along and flatten them. I well remember one night when me and Mrs S. were courting, walking back with two others from Luton to Harpenden in the snow; twelve o'clock at night and there was a blizzard so you could hardly find your way. We'd been to see a play and it was called **The Conscript** - the last words of the play, as the young man lay dying in the centre of the stage were: 'Thank Heaven, home at last'. And when I'd dropped the Missus at her house and got my bike and got myself back here to Wheathampstead, to my house, that's what I said to myself 'Thank Heaven, home at last'.

"If you wanted to go out somewhere special, you could take the **waggonette** (one horse) or the **brake** (two or three horses) from **Collins at the Railway Hotel**; old **Mr Will Collins**, father of the Collins brothers - bit of a wag. I remember him coming into **Simons' the butcher** once

(grandfather of the present Simons); I was in there - about eleven or twelve years old I was - and Mr. Simons asked him how he was, perhaps he was looking none too good. 'I'm alright' he says, 'but it's my missus'. 'Well, what's the matter?' **George Simons** asks him, 'What's up with her?' And old Will Collins says, 'It's that little thing between her nose and her chin'. And for years that had me puzzled; I couldn't figure it out at all, but of course he was trying to say that she talked too much: that little thing between her nose and chin - her tongue!.

"The **Waggonette**: sometimes **golfing** people hired it at the **station** to take them up to **Gustard Wood**; there was no 'bus service then. **Lintot** was the first man to run a **private 'bus service from St. Albans to Wheathampstead, Harry Lintot**. It was a motor 'bus and it came up to the station, turned round, waited a few minutes and then back again - three or four times a day. The 'buses started prior to the **first World War**; **Harry Lintot** knew just who to expect and he would wait for everybody - nobody was left behind. **Fourpence single, eightpence return**; and I reckon there was a better service than we get today. Then **London Transport** came - **nineteen nineteen or twenty** - and they bought **Harry Lintot** out and we had the first old-fashioned 'buses, not like we've got today, about **three or four times a day**; morning, at noon and again at night, and it went up to **fivepence single, tenpence return**. And that price stayed for years; it's only in the last few years that it's cost so much more.

"The **Railway**: That's been here **eighty or ninety years**, and it was a quicker service than we ever get now; there were more trains on account of there being no road transport. There was a **7.50** of a morning from **Wheathampstead** which went up to **King's Cross** without a change, stopping at **Ayot** and **Hatfield**, and got to King's Cross at **9.30**, with one more stop at **Finsbury Park**. But everyone was more contented in those days and more neighbourly, and there was more lending; if anyone was laid up ill we'd club together sixpence a week maybe, to help them out or buy them something.

As I see it, you've got to keep your mind alert to keep your memory, and then you don't get old; if your mind's awake, that keeps you young. And plenty of exercise, in all weathers: you've got to learn to accept Nature's laws, especially the weather. When I'm on my bike going six and a half miles each way every day, and sometimes in a snowstorm, you've got to obey Nature; a piece of poetry I say to myself sometimes:

"Nature beloved, I never mind your mood,  
In lovely gratitude,  
And twine in mine,  
There, that's what I mean."