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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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***Biographical note:** Lady Daphne Lambart was the younger daughter of The Hon. Edward Lambart, brother of the 10th Earl of Cavan, whose family had lived at Wheathampstead House. After her marriage to Kenneth Grierson she lived at The Dell at the end of Rose Lane, (inherited from her aunt, Miss Robbins, of Delaport House), and after Kenneth died she went for a short time to St David's in Wales before moving to Four Limes shortly before her death. Her son William and his family live in Kimpton.*

Most of the speakers' names have been changed in the original text but some, like Mr Harry Westwood, are too well-known by their work to be disguised.

[NOTE: Although Lady Grierson did not wish to disclose the identity of the people she talked to in 1956, she was prevailed upon before she died to put names to some of the people – while admitting that she was not too sure of her memory. The names have been added in italics after each chapter heading]

INTRODUCTION

This is a story about village life told by the people who lived in it in their own words.

The story began to be told at a meeting of the old people's club in this village when the game was started of '**Do You Remember?**' Different people stood up in turn and told the others of interesting things they remembered from their childhood, and very soon everyone was talking at once. (The Club does not go in very much for discipline). Later somebody suggested that a scrapbook ought to be made of life in this neighbourhood half a century ago and eventually I started talking about 'the old days' to some of the older people and with their permission writing down what they said. I was only thinking then about making some personal record and perhaps adding to it old photographs and press cuttings. But gradually as people talked they drew a kind of Impressionist picture of what must be typical English country life in **late Victorian and Edwardian times**. More than this - by revealing something of what their lives had been like

and what they were brought up to - they were quite unconsciously showing the way in which an old people's Welfare Committee could better understand and therefore better help over the various problems of old age today.

Because of this and because Wheathampstead - now both urban and rural - must be a fairly typical place, I believe that this small collection of reminiscences ought not to remain simply a private, parochial memoir. But I cannot pretend it has been anything but interest and pleasure listening to the different speakers and, while wishing very much that I knew short-hand or possessed a tape recorder, I would like to thank each one of them once again.

How can we, in our Welfare Club, talk so lightly about Old Folks when each is such a highly individual person? We may become part of a social problem as we grow older but we are really the same personalities on the day we become due for retirement pension as we were the night before!

I tried, with the idea of setting a limit somewhere, to restrict the interviews (if they could be called that) to members of the local **Old People's Club**, and this has been the case with all the women I talked to and three of the men. But most pensionable men are still working and cannot attend the Club, so to get a stronger masculine angle I had to go outside. It is also a fact that the Club membership is only about one-sixth of the total retired population here.

As a sort of deliberate afterthought, I have added a letter from the '**Displaced Person**' whom the Old People's Club here have adopted under the scheme arranged by the Adoption Committee for Aid to Displaced Persons (227 Edgware Road, London W.2)

MORNING

It's a Monday, early in the morning.

Michaelmas is over, St Luke and his summer just over. The yellow leaves are lying on the wet grass. The ladder has been left up against the stack, and in the church, smelling of apples and chrysanthemums, the shock of wheatsheaves has gone slightly lopsided in its place in the Octagon next to the Brocket tomb.

It is early enough for the **High Street** to be deserted. Perhaps one car comes down with its sidelights on, perhaps a hunched-up figure on a bicycle is setting off several miles to work. But at some point, in the pause as the sound of the car fades away, in a moment of colourless light between stormy night and mild morning, the village suddenly takes on the look of say seventy years ago. The river, the **Mill**, the **Bull inn**, the trees along the edge of the churchyard and the row of old cottages where the **fish shop** is, and **Mrs Collins'** window, all this is as it was then, or nearly. The damp road has to become rough with a few puddles, and there are trees on both sides. The low house-fronts are flattened with eyelets for windows and uneven chimneys between gables. Doorsteps are stone slabs worn down in the middle. There are **no pavements**, only footpaths with rough edges, **no plate-glass windows**, **no petrol pumps**. There is **no war memorial**.

A cat crosses the road guiltily, straight-out tail, and vanishes at once.

Now, round the corner, two men appear, probably coming to catch the early bus. The glow in that window is not candlelight after all. The clock strikes six. Everything that went to make this place

what it was has caused it to arrive at what it is at this moment. And it is Monday, in October, an ordinary working morning and a washing day at that.

Some of the older villagers are among the first to be stirring themselves today. Not only is it washing day for them, it is also **Club day**. After dinner - to be prepared for families as well in some cases - they are going to get themselves tidy. Some of them have to catch a bus. Most of them walk to the Club while a few are fetched by younger people with cars and time to give. One or two who should "ride" prefer to walk. But soon after two o'clock they begin to come in.

The tables have been arranged, the radiators put on and the members fetch out their own games. As a rule they sit always in the same place and play the same game. At half-past two, when the Club officially opens, the Committee members and tea helpers start to arrive. The room begins to get very warm, steam issues from the door to the kitchen and voices are raised. Someone has made a rug and it is being raffled in aid of Club funds at a small table. At the same time another member is taking charge of sums of money being handed in to the **Thrift Club** - these are savings for a seaside holiday next year. At half-past three tea appears and the Club is well under way. With **library books to be changed**, dates, plans and notices to be given out, news of people who are ill to be enquired for and passed on, the last three-quarters of an hour are pretty busy.

Many of these Club members are people who have known Wheathampstead all their lives. Perhaps they are the children in the old photographs of the village street. All of them have lived through a cottage childhood