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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 3. IN SERVICE

[Mrs Potter, Mrs Griffin, Mrs Harris and Mr McCulloch]

Mrs A. has lived all her seventy-nine years in the cottage where she was born, one of the many cottage homes in Wheathampstead where **straw-plaiting** used to be done.

"And we used to sell it in Kimpton", says Mrs A., "or sometimes Hitchin market. We thought nothing of walking in those days, across the fields perhaps, all the way to Luton and back the same day; seven or eight miles each way I suppose it would be."

She was christened in Wheathampstead church, held in the arms of **Mrs Robins of Delaport House**, to whom ever afterwards she became 'my little Lucy', and wearing for the occasion a red cloak with a hood.

"One of the best things I remember was going to meet my father when he came back from work at **Porter's End** across the parks. And that yard you see there with the chickens pecking (yes, they're waiting for their tea, and the cat waiting!) well, that wasn't concreted then; it was round pebbles all over, little cobblestones and my Dad put them in with his hands, and many's the tumble I've had out there when I was little. Four girls we were and me the second in the family. My mother used to go out washing, **Heron's** some days, some days Porter's End - a shilling for a day's washing, but you could do a lot with a shilling, you know. But that wasn't her real work; what she really did was the straw plaiting, getting the straw ready during the winter and sewing the hats in summer.

"I began going to work before I left school; I had my hair in two plaits down my back - black hair I had then (you wouldn't think it!) and I used to walk across the Common in the early morning and give a hand in the dairy at the big house, and the milk came up from Porter's End and I used to help with skimming it and scouring out the big flat bowls and washing the stone shelves. Later

on I started going regularly every day to work in the kitchen of the house. I didn't live there at first but I had to be there eight o'clock of a morning, or before.

"Wonderful big place it was - red brick house with a tower and balconies and great hot-houses filled with fruit and flowers all down one end, the kitchen-side, what they used to call the Winter Garden. And they tell me that when it was all pulled down, the glass lights went to make the windows in the Corner Shop in the village - still there today. I never knew that till just lately... Oh yes, pity it had to go; lovely big gardens with nine-foot wall all around. It was a **hospital in the 1914-1918 War**. Ah, many happy days I spent there.

"Yes, they had a big staff, of course. But that was nothing out of the way for big houses when I was a girl. I don't remember there being more than one or two family while I was there, but there were always guests. If not staying in the house, there were people every day to meals and everything done in the best possible way. There was the **Housekeeper** - she was head-housemaid as well; and then a **Butler** and a **Cook** - she was Norwegian I think, anyway not English, very wicked she was - and a **lady's maid** besides - I think she was foreign too. Then of course there was the **two footmen** and **second and third housemaids**, and the boy; all living in. And the **coachman**, he lived in one of the lodges and three others in the **Stables**, and then **gardeners**. There was the **scullerymaid** besides me in the kitchen, and they called me **kitchenmaid** but I always said I was Jack-of-all-Trades and master of none!

"First thing in the morning when I got there I had to help with the breakfasts; there were three breakfasts to get. There was the Room (that's the Housekeeper's room) and the Hall and then of course the House. What did I wear? We all had coloured cotton print frocks with plain white aprons tied in a large bow and a white mob cap sticking up in front with a ribbon round it, and black stockings. In the afternoons the housemaids all changed into black frocks, but not the kitchen maids.

"We had family prayers every morning and all the servants had to go. I can't quite remember but I think it was in the morning room - I get so mixed up, there were so many rooms, **outer and inner hall, drawing room, dining room and morning room: billiard room, gun room, smoking room**. But the room I remember had a marble mantelpiece and a lot of furniture, very comfortable, and any amount of pictures all over the walls, and flowers and ferns and that sort of thing in great big vases.

"After breakfast I washed up dishes and perhaps helped in the house a bit; then I had to start with helping prepare lunch. Oh yes, always piles of dishes, huge ones with massive covers; you don't see them like that now. But there was plenty of hot water from the range, and outside the **ponies pumped the water** every day, walking round and round. I'm not sure the well isn't still there now: I think it is, and the Cedar tree - that's still there, by **Lime Avenue**, with its branches low on the ground: the tree where they used to come out and have tea in the summer, with their pretty light-coloured dresses trailing on the grass, and their parasols and their big hats. That's about all that's left now, that tree - except the stables, or part of them, you can still see them.

"Hundreds of dishes I must have washed up; but I didn't mind, I was happy then as I am happy today. And we were always busy; there were no days off then you know, only a few hours off. But what did we want with days off when there were all those lovely grounds to walk over? I'm talking now of when I went to live there: I must have been 17 or 18 then.

"In the afternoons what did we do? The Housekeeper used to say 'Do as you like; go out in the garden if you like'. Sometimes we went to gather fruit, strawberries or raspberries perhaps - the biggest ones for the dining room. Or we would help pick up the potatoes. Or I used to go up to my room which I shared with the scullery maid. It was a lovely room: we had a coal fire in it when it was cold, and gas light - the **gas was made by the Blacksmith** at the farm.

"Then there was dinner at night - four courses every night and many more if there was a dinner party. Mind you, I'm only telling you what was natural, it was the same everywhere. I don't know why anybody should be interested. Very often there were great big tea parties and we made everything, all the bread and cakes. We thought nothing of using three or four dozen eggs in a day - and the great slabs of butter that used to come in from the dairy!! The cook used to let us two girls have a taste of the things in the kitchen before they went through; the left-overs always went to the pantry.

"Oh, and there's something else I must tell you; On Sundays it was church at Kimpton, always. The carriage used to go every Sunday, and there was the **wagonette for the Staff**. Of course I couldn't go because of the lunch but I can remember the hurry and bustle getting ready and everyone scared of being late and keeping the horses standing.

"I was ten years there in the kitchen and I got five shillings a month; afterwards, when I got a place as cook it was **£30 a year**. If there was a big party in the house the coachman used to send the stable men in to help wash up and have a bit of supper in the Hall - we had a lot of fun there. And at Christmas there was parties for us in the house - for the servants. We used to go through in the evening, after our work was finished and there would be a great fire burning between the dogs, and we used to have games and dancing - **waltzes, polkas, Lancers**, that sort of thing - and everyone joined in, Madam and everyone. But I always liked the Irish jig best!"

(Mr B.)

"In 1894; that was the year," says Mr B., "that was the year I went to the **Rectory**; directly I left school. **Hall-boy**, they called me, and I was in the pantry under **Mr Skillman, the butler**. It was through the Sunday School I got there you might say: every Sunday morning and afternoon we had Sunday School, starting in the School and then ,two by two, we marched down the Churchyard path. And they had some forms in the Church, but there was one chair next to **Miss Blanche Davys**, the Rector's daughter. She used to teach in the Sunday School and somehow or other I used to get that chair, always. And how it happened was - she mentioned to the Rector about my singing and so I got into the choir; and I sung in the choir six years. Mr Skillman and I, we were both in the choir. Beautiful choir we had, sixteen of us altogether. Then **Canon Davys**, the old Rector, interviewed me when he wanted a boy in the house: so that's how I went there.

"I was one of a **family of eleven**, yes eleven children, and I was born in one of those cottages behind the **Post Office** - I think they use the buildings now for sorting letters. I fancy so. My father was born in **Barber's Yard**, that's back of where there used to be a barber's shop. Well, when I went to the Rectory I didn't have my own room but I slept in the servants' hall in a bed that let down from the wall, and ou pushed it up in the daytime so it looked like a cupboard, with drawers underneath where I kept my things. Yes! I liked it; I liked it very much indeed, very comfortable it was.

"I don't know if the old servants' hall is still there - I fancy the house is smaller than it used to be; I know they've still got the **stone floors**. I remember them all right - do you know how they

used to clean those floors? They'd sprinkle them with silver sand, then they'd have a big slab of stone on the end of a pole and they'd rub this up and down, and do you know it would make the floors beautiful. No, I didn't do it, that was the scullery maid's job or the kitchen maid, after breakfast. Make a noise? It made a terrible noise!

"My job was in the pantry, and of course the boots and shoes and clean the knives, and chop the wood. But in the pantry mostly, and helping at table and answer the door, all that sort of thing. Seeing I was the only boy there, of course I could get the blame for anything that went wrong - that's right, that was always the way, to be sure! If the sticks were damp the housemaid would be after me or if something was dirty or out of place. Yes!

"It was lovely there, though, very nice. They had a big staff of course, inside and out. And the gardens were a wonderful sight; three gardeners you see. **Tennis court and croquet lawn** in front; you don't remember the old **Fernery** I daresay? Ah, I wish you could have seen that, every fern imaginable. Canon Davys used to go to a Church in **Switzerland** somewhere, each year for his holiday; Lucerne may be, or Interlaken. Can't remember. But every year he'd bring back a **box of these ferns** - you know where it was? - at the corner of the Churchyard path as you turn to go up the path to the Rectory; all overgrown now, of course, all these years after, but it was pretty.

"And the **moat**, down where the factory is, that was pretty as you looked over the Rectory meadow - **Parson's Meadow**. And **Mr Trevor Davys** keeping his boats at the **Moat House**: it was a kind of canal for **canoeing** and **fishing** and that. They had the **laundry** down there as well - private laundry, you understand, belonging to the Rectory. They kept a carriage and a brougham; it was all very different then. But we used to love to see people driving out in those days; how smart they were! As children we'd run out to see a carriage go by, lovely sight. **Coachmen in livery** - white breeches, black boots with straw-coloured tops, silk hats, brass buttons shining.

"The Canon? Always kind and very nice; mind you he stood up shoulders back, great big man, stern-looking and, well, forbidding. But he wasn't, not at all, not when you knew him. White hair - that's how I remember him - and white beard, but not on his face, underneath the chin and all around. Every Sunday, morning and evening, I'd walk back after Church Service with him to the Rectory; he'd have on his cassock and a coat with tassels up at the neck and a square hat - I don't know what the name is, we called them mortar-boards. All the choir had them; I'd have my best suit (blue serge) that was kept for dinners at night and Sundays. And I'd carry his books: sermon books and prayer books. And winter evenings I'd carry a **storm lantern with a candle** in it; and as we went he'd talk to me, like friends, about the singing or about different boys in the village. He had a deep voice and a slow way of talking; in Church he would make his voice ring out: it was very deep but it would ring, and a lot of expression on different words.

"But you know, how I see him best is down at his **Fernery**, bending over something. Any spare time he spent in his garden with two little white dogs, always with him, and a stick with a pointed thing on the end for getting weeds out. You'd see him every now and then stop and 'hup' with a weed. On every day, every morning, he'd walk up past the Stables towards the school with all the rooks in those tall trees overhead - hundreds of rooks there seemed to be, flying up and cawing".

(Mrs J.)

"**Twenty-six years** I was **in service**; that's right, twenty-six. Right up to when I was married, all the time with Lady L. I started as a kind of school-room maid, and I was paid quarterly, **£8 a**

year. And then I saved money, I did, I saved money. Good thing I had a good mother; anything I had to have she'd get it for me and let me pay her back as I could.

"We worked hard. I always say - joking you know - I've worked hard all my life and now I'm going to take it easy a bit! I worked up to head-housemaid with two under me; well really I was lady's maid I suppose as well. I had to look after Lady L., do her hair you know, brush it and comb it. And once, my husband's hair started to come out in patches. 'What am I going to do?' he said, '**Paint it with iodine**' I told him. But he didn't take any notice; he went over to Knebworth to a doctor he'd heard of - Harley Street specialist - and what does he told him? 'Paint it with iodine'!. But of course I knew because Lady L. had that trouble and I knew what she done.

"She was firm, but she was really good to us. If ever there were pears or a pineapple or something in the dining room she'd see it came back to the servants' hall to be finished. And I was married from there. She cried when I told her; but what was I to say? I said, 'Well, I think I've done my duty', and do you know she gave me the wedding. She gave me a cheque and paid for the wedding and the cake and even the boxes for the wedding-cake - it came from **Buzzard**'. And that little silver basket over there (everybody wants that thing, I've left it to all and sundry when I die), that was the children's present to me.

"Once a year we had the **Hunt Meet** and the house was full; I've done seventeen grates of a morning! I used to be up early, in London sometimes half-past four or five. But you see, you daren't be in the downstairs rooms after breakfast; and what happened was, by the middle of the morning, you were finished. We used to go out, Lady L. didn't mind, so long as I was there when I knew she would want me; that was alright.

"Yes, you ask Mrs K. - she can tell you too - we used to go about together, always. On Sundays, it was like this: Church was not an obligation, not there. She let us off one Sunday morning and then the next we had afternoon and evening.off. Mrs K. and I used to go to other Churches - Lemsford and all around, biking, you know, on Summer evenings; I've still got my bike.

"Yes, I was there before Mrs K. came; I was there the day she came, I'll always remember it. She stood there, a real country girl, holding a bunch of flowers in her hand; we were in London then for the season and I heard the knock on the door - the what d'you call it? underground, basement door - and there she stood and she said 'Good afternoon, I'm the new kitchen maid' Just like that. But the underground kitchen nearly killed her: that was a really hot summer and I've seen her do the mayonnaise, dip at a time, and then she'd have to throw it away and start again. That's how hot it was in the kitchen, and she a real country wench, you know, used to plenty of fresh air".

And now Mrs K., with Mr K. putting in a word:

"That's quite right; I can remember it like yesterday! Now I'll tell you how I went to Lady L., but wait a minute - I'll go back before that. My first place - only you couldn't exactly call it a place - was with a **Police Inspector**, not far from here, quite near my home. His wife wasn't very strong and he wanted someone in the house with her. Well, I begged my mother to let me try; I was twelve and I'd done with schooling, and she let me go and I was there as a **companion-help**, to keep his wife company.

"Well then, in a year he was moved, not very far but I went with them and I went on just the same; I looked after her, but all the time he could see I was all for the kitchen. 'A very good dinner, my girl' he used to say whenever I did it - if they went out perhaps and used to leave it to me to get ready. Big man he was, six feet five and a half inches, and broad as well. They could see that I ought to better myself and they found me a place nearby; one of the stately homes - I was to go as **scullery maid**. Just turned sixteen I was. It wasn't far and the dog-cart came over for me: my box was put up in the back (I can see it all as if it were yesterday). Just as I was getting up, the Police Inspector put something in my hand - you'll never guess what - it was a **golden sovereign**. 'You'll soon be back', he said to me. 'I won't' I said 'not if it kills me'.

"So off we went, in daylight. Afternoon. And we drove up to the back door and the cook came to the door, a big stout woman. She showed me all around downstairs before I could take off my things; work first, it was. Then she showed me upstairs; I had a **bedroom with the kitchen-maid**. 'Come down for tea when you're ready' she said, tea was in the servants' hall. Great big bare room with not a bit of furniture, just the scrubbed table and forms round it. Then I was taken round and shown my work, straight away.

"I had to wait on the staff and that meant the top servants as well, and the old **Nanny** who'd come back to stay with them. There were five altogether in the Room. **Dinner** was mid-day and they all marched in in order to the **servants' hall**; the head servants came in by another door. The first day they'd all come in and the butler clasped hold of the plates and bowed his head over them. 'Mumble, mumble' he went, I couldn't catch what he was saying. 'Aren't the plates hot enough, Sir?' I said as I was just sitting down. Then somebody gave me a kick and I realised he was saying Grace; oh yes, always '**Sir**' when we spoke to him and we always referred to him as '**Mr**' So-and-so, and the cook as '**Mrs**'. We stood in great awe of them.

"Then after the meat, the **boot-boy** and I had to take out the joint and the dirty plates and I had to rush round with the pudding for the Room, and their dessert and that; then back to the Hall with the pudding. Then rush back to get the vegetables ready and the sauces for the dining room; sometimes it would be three o'clock before I got my own dinner eaten. The boot-boy used to keep it for me in a little corner.

"Mornings, we'd be up six o'clock and there were **two great long passages to scrub twice a week**, covered with oil-cloth. And on Sunday it was Church in the village; mile and a half we went, and we walked it if fine and if wet we went in the wagonette. And we had to dress quiet, you wore your own dress but you had a **black bonnet** and plain black ribbons tied under the chin. And the lady viewed us as we marched up the aisle, in order of course, head servants first. Now, my hair was very curly and one day she stopped me in the passage, 'Minnie', she said - she couldn't be troubled with all our different names so all the scullery maids had to be Minnie. 'Minnie, you'll have to learn to keep your hair in order' she says, 'it was dreadful yesterday'. She was tall, you know, elderly and she had her hair drawn back. 'Yes, madam', I said. Then, after Church, it was rush back for lunch. We had Sunday out every other, after lunch was over, and then in the evening rush back to be in time for ten o'clock prayers; and the others would be waiting for you with your cap ready to put on.

"Well, one evening, there was a new footman, rather a handsome fellow; we all liked him. He hadn't been long, had a drink, and when we all got up to turn round and kneel down against the seats of our chairs, he fell right over! Ooh, I can see the lady now, she sort of half stood up like this, hands resting on the table, and peered over her spectacles - just like that. Well, the men picked him up and they made out that he had fainted, he wasn't well, but I suppose he smelled of

beer and he was packed off first train next morning and no one was to speak to him. They thought we should be contaminated if we went near him!

"And the **copper pans!** Now that I'll never forget; if anyone says to me now 'There's a nice bit of copper', I say 'No thank you, it makes me feel sick' From the ceiling to the floor, all one side of this kitchen - huge place, with white stone slab floor - there was these copper pans in rows, and to clean them you had a **mixture of salt and sand and vinegar**, and you rubbed them with your bare hands. Do you know, I've been out for the afternoon, back to the Police Inspector's, with my nails all worn down and bleeding. 'Whatever have you done to your hands' he said to me, 'you'll have to leave' 'No I won't', I says 'I will stay'. I would and I will! And I did; for two years.

"Oh yes, we liked it - it was hard work but it was such fun. One of the stable men had a concertina and he used to play it when the people were away, and we used to dance and sing; we had lots of fun. Then what happened was that the kitchen maid went off ill and I did her work for her - six or seven weeks - and at the end of that time she couldn't come back and I asked if I could take her place. The cook said, 'You could if it rested with me but I shall have to ask the lady.' And when she came into the kitchen next morning she asks her but she said 'No, certainly not, Minnie's not old enough'. So I left. The cook didn't want me to; 'Don't leave me with a new kitchen maid and scullery maid'. 'But why should I study her,' I said, 'if she doesn't study me?'. The Police Inspector had made me that independent. 'Don't be afraid to speak up,' he used to say.

"So then I applied to the **Registry Office** [in Oxford?] and I got an interview with Lady L.; **kitchen maid** this time, I was seventeen and a half. And that's how I came to Hertfordshire. But we were in London first, for one year; and Mrs J. opened the door to me, she was kind of **housemaid-lady's maid**, as she told you. And we had a lovely old cook; she was just like a dear old mother: 'Have you saved anything?' she said (as kitchen maid I was getting a little more money) 'Have you saved?', it's most important'. And she took me herself along to the Post Office and I put in five shillings: and that was my first savings.

"You know Mrs J.'s mother and father lived at the **Lodge gates** down here? We used to go there together on our Sunday afternoons out and sit down fourteen round the table; lovely times we had, we were very happy. It was a lovely place to be, everything more modern and all the servants were treated alike. They still had a Room, but there were no meals in the Room and no waiting on the upper servants; and the Hall was more comfortable, much better furnished. It had a sideboard and a carpet and a kind of **musical-box affair with cardboard records** with holes in, and you turned a handle and we used to dance to it. Oh no, they didn't mind the music there, everything was more human, you might say, and we did our work because we were all in the family and not through fear, or just routine.

"Of course you know I met Mr K. there? He came as groom - **soldier-servant** - to one of the sons, to look after his horses. It was just before the War, I should say, **1912 or 1913**. They were back **on leave from India** and Mr K. had only just got home to **Ireland** when a message came to say would he come back from his leave to **train the polo-ponies** a bit more and see after the **hunters**. And they spent most of the winter here, Mr K. as **groom** and five under him; they slept out but they all had their meals in the house along with us. When the **War** came they were sent out to **France** - he's our Old Contemptible you know - and I'll always remember Lady L. when Mrs J. was doing her hair and told her I'd had a card from him. She got straight up in her dressing gown and went downstairs and pulled the bell in the Library (and that was another thing, **the gentry never came out to the kitchen quarters** after the lady had been to see about the meals of a morning) well, I went in to her and she said, 'Mary tells me you've had a card from

K.; do you think I could see it?' 'Of course' I said, 'I'll run and fetch it' You see she was anxious about her son and she thought my card might say something about whereabouts they were.

"That's how we met, through his coming as groom; and we were married there in the end. And now I'm going on ten years or more: I was **cook** then (I was only kitchen-maid for two years) I was the youngest cook they'd ever had, or anyone around: aged 20. **Lady L. gave us our whole wedding and we had it in the Garden Room - forty, fifty people.** The family treated us just like we were friends. But I made the food, every bit of it, cake and all. And the school-children had a holiday because I used to do their treats when they came over twice a year: strawberry tea and Christmas party. I used to do the **jellies with calves feet** and stand them on ice from the fishmonger's.

"Then we left. It was like this: one day, before we were married, Lady L. was away and Sir R. up in London (he was a **Sheriff**, and that's how I got to know all about the **Maundy money ceremony** when we went to **St. Albans Abbey** this year) and a letter came for me to say the Police Inspector's wife had died and would I go. So I rang up Sir R. in London to ask him and I went, and while I was away the Inspector said why didn't I get married and we both come and live with him and look after him. We had no house, you see. Well, I wouldn't say 'Yes' till I'd taken Mr K. over there four or five times to see how we all got on, and to see what he could do about a job. It was getting to the time of **the Depression and jobs weren't that easy**; still that's how it was and in the end we got married and we went and we lived with the Inspector till he died, and he was like another father to me and grandfather to our first boy.

"There's a lot more, and times when work was difficult to get and money was tight. **Seventy four men out of work** here in this village when we first came to live here, and we lived on **18/6 a week** with two boys: and we managed. But we came back here and in the end we got our house, and I've always been grateful to that old cook who started me saving. I'd say I'd had a very happy life, very happy, and always active; I'll always remember Sir R. when we were married, he made a speech at the wedding and said, 'I can't possibly say I'm pleased when I'm losing a good cook, but I know this - she'll be well looked after!'

"I've remembered another thing that'll make you laugh, when I was over that first place - very formal. It was one Sunday afternoon, a very hot day, and I was just about finishing the washing up: we had **two great tubs, wooden and lined with zinc**, under the scullery window, **one for washing** dishes, **one for rinsing**. Well, through the open window with bars up and down, I could see the footman strolling past outside; he'd just got himself ready and I suppose he was waiting about for them to give the sign that they wanted the tea brought out. Anyway, he was **in his fine clothes - white shirt, bow tie, little piece of waistcoat showing (white with dark red stripes), and cut-away coat with gold braid and buttons with the crests on** - and I was up to my elbows in the water and - well, the devil entered into me. That's all I can say. I thought to myself 'You do look a ninny', and what d'you think, I took up the water with my hands - dirty water, all scum because there weren't any detergents in those days - and I slushed it two or three times through the bars of the window all over him. There now! He dashed for the scullery door and got his foot in it and pushed it open against me, and he came after me and picked me up, I was only a little thing, and he sat me right down in the tub of water and then he dashed off to get his clothes changed.

"What did I do? I don't know. I got myself out somehow onto the draining board and I wrung out my skirts as best I could. The kitchen maid was down in the dairy and the cook out of the way

resting or something, and I had to creep upstairs in all my wet things making as little mess as I could.

"But the ceremony! I was in the passage one day when the tea-things were being carried through to the front of the house. These young people wouldn't believe it about those days. **First the butler**, walking ahead to open the doors, then **one footman with the silver tray** and all the lovely silver things on it, and behind him **the other footman with the cakestand** in hand and a plate of mixed cakes in the other, and both of them dressed up and **paraded before the butler** in the pantry beforehand, for him to look them over. I pressed myself up against the wall as they went by and suddenly I started to laugh, and I laughed and laughed and ran back as quick as I could. In a few minutes (they had a kind of hatch-door between the pantry and the kitchen) they came back from carrying the tea and they called through to the kitchen-maid, 'Where's Minnie?' 'I expect she's in the scullery'. And I came through and I'll never forget their three faces, looking through the hatch and asking me what had been wrong about them to make me laugh like that; and I said 'Nothing wrong, but you all looked so silly and I've never thought about it before'. But all friendly, you know; we never saw any harm in it, it was just part of the fun."