

Archived by Wheathampstead
History Society from the website
compiled by the late Brian Joyce.

Talking to the old inhabitants of Wheathampstead in 1956

by Daphne Grierson (1909 - 1994)

Transcribed by **John Wilson**, Lamer Lodge, between 1987 and 2002

Updated 24 August 2007

CHAPTER 4. BACKGROUND OF FARMING

[Mr Wren, Mr Tom Allen]

"Their clocks were the poultry which slept in the trees outside the stables, and their lights were the rush-wick candles made of tallow - tallow as used in blacksmith's for tempering steel (and still is) and by nurses in gentlemen's houses to rub chests with when people took cold". This is what Mr R.'s father told him of his time with the horse-keepers at **Bride Hall and Water End**.

"He was one of the lads who slept over the stables and got up at five o'clock or before to feed and bait [clean] the horses, two hours - it had to be - before the ploughman arrived to start work.

"Ninety-two, my father, when he died in **1939**; and he left school at eight years old to go minding cows at **Bury Farm**, and that's the **little school on the Hill**, long before we had the present school. (And his father, my grandfather, was farm-labourer at **Place Farm**, opposite the Mill; with **Lattimore's** first, that was, then **Ivory's** when they came there). After that, I think it was, Father, my father, changed to milk-round and then - quite a boy still - he went to **Baxendale's** at **Wheathampstead House**, and he went with them when [the Cavan's came] and they moved up to Blackmore End. Then he got married - only eighteen when he married. And what he told us is that after the wedding service he and his bride walked right over to **Chilton Green** and back to see her mother and father - there's a walk for you, on his wedding day too. But of course there were no white veils and bridesmaids and that sort of thing those days; people made their own pleasures with what they'd got. I suppose it was too far for her parents to get over for the wedding so off they went to see them and get something to eat and a glass of home-made wine, maybe. And it wouldn't have been the smooth road it is today, it was more of a lane and you walked on the sides where the wheels had been, not in the middle where it was cut up rough by the horses feet; and when a cart happened to come along you got up against the hedge to be out of the way.

" 'Grandfather' - my father that is, we always called him Grandfather - remembered the last coach going through from Luton to St. Albans, and the **first train** to run through Wheathampstead. There were some people, he said, who walked over to Ayot station to ride back on the train - to say they'd done it!. At least that is what he told us.

"Then, just after he was married, he went to **Flamstead** and worked for **Parson Hinde**; three or four years or more he was there, and my mother went with him and went into the house to do the work. He was everything there, I reckon! **Gardener, sexton, bell-ringer** - everything! (Of course he learnt bell-ringing here in Wheathampstead Church, aged twelve when he started and rang till he was eighty-two). He could tell some tales of when he was over at Flamstead. Every Monday dinner time he was paid, in small money changed from the Church collection I don't doubt; twelve shillings a week, over and above his cottage. And **Parson Hinde**, being a very strict man, would call him up to his study window (he was never allowed inside the house; he had to have his cup of tea in the morning outside the kitchen door, and there was his wife inside, boiling the kettle). Yes, Parson Hinde would give him his money and grandfather said to him: 'What happens if you give us too much?' 'You see as you get enough' says Parson Hinde, 'I'll see that you don't have too much'.

"And there was a good story about one night when he was digging a grave; right down he was, throwing up the earth, by candlelight, and a man came along the Churchyard path. Grandfather wasn't thinking, he just heard the footsteps and pops up his head and asks the time. He never got an answer, the man fled for his life.

"After Flamstead he came back here and lived at the **Folly** a few years (that was before coming to **Marford**) and he bought a donkey and a pony and he did all sorts of jobs, going round **chimney-sweeping** and **selling coal and wood** and that. And he did quite a bit of **thatching** - roofs and barns and stacks for the farmers after the harvest - and hay and straw tying, into trusses for stables. He could turn his hand to pretty well anything. He helped lay out the **first nine holes** of the Golf Course, soon after **1900** I suppose that was. And it was about **£6 or a bit over that the members paid** - **Mr Lloyd** from Hatfield way, **Mr Cecil Parr** of Kimpton Grange, **Lord Cavan** and others.

"Then there was the time he bought a donkey in **Hitchin market**; he made us laugh over that, it was a big donkey and the question was, how to get it home? He tied it up to the pony that was pulling the cart and drove them out onto the road and it ran in front of the pony and threw it down. He was with a dealer, a man with a wooden leg, and when the pony went down out this fellow toppled from the cart onto the road (it was a regular mix-up!). After that he decided to ride the donkey behind the cart, but then it wanted to go back to Hitchin and he wanted it to go on and in the end it threw him off and made off back; he scrambled up onto his feet and went after it - they got back somehow but he used to make us laugh telling it.

"I suppose it was **1894** or thereabouts he took on his main work here and he had it for **26 years**; I took over from him for **34 years**, that is up till two years ago. Given a free hand, I was, and nobody bothered me, so I kept on; but if I'd had my choice I wouldn't have done it: I'd have gone in for forestry. Many a time I used to go into the woods - **Fishwood** and **Dowdells**, along towards **Codicote** - and get bunches of pea-sticks, hardwood and that; faggotting, when they were felling - I always liked being in the woods."

"And I," Mrs R. joins in, "both of us, we loved to walk in the woods; the smell of the trees and leaves. We knew all the paths and in those days they were proper paths, kept open by the

farm hands going to work, and by people on horse-back, and by courting couples. And by the children going to school, they wore the paths open. That's what I would have done, something to do with the woods.

"I did other jobs when I was younger; I used to do a bit of jobbing gardening, and I was a **postman, part-time, for twenty years**. Walked to **Waterend** and back every morning - I began that before I left school and it meant I always missed the first lesson: arithmetic as a rule. I didn't mind then but now - well you begin to value what you lost. But Grandfather was hard-working and his father before him, and he made us children do the same."

"He certainly did," nods Mrs R. "Never allowed to play cricket and football with the other boys after school; kept at it all the time from first thing in the morning. We were up at **Lamer** then and living **over the stables**, my father being **coachman** to the **Cherry-Garrards** and very often out late with the carriage. No, I wouldn't like to see those days back."

"Nor I, I would say. But there's some today that wouldn't mind having a bit of what we had: there's a happy medium. The pendulum's swung too far now in the other direction; there's very little done to make youngsters realise their responsibilities, they don't appreciate what they've got."

"They certainly don't".

"There's too much laid on for them; plenty of money and very little management. I'm old-fashioned, I know, we both are, but there were some people who lived in poverty and in cramped - you might say primitive - conditions who still could be respectable, clean, good-principled and independent".

"You never see anything today patched or mended hanging on the line; patches used to be something to be proud of - you never see them now. If a thing's torn or getting a bit worn it's thrown away and something new is bought".

"Yes, it certainly was different in the old days; very different. I suppose I must have gone to see my grandfather at his work many a time, and heard what was going on but I can't pick on anything. You hear old yarns and don't take particular notice and then the time comes and you wish you could remember - same as the old implements and tools people used: if they'd not been thrown away they'd be quite historical today.

"But there is one thing I remember and that's the **thatching**; I often used to go along with my father and I went to give him a hand thatch the **old keeper's cottage at Lamer**, over the **Ayot** side, where the daffodils grow in the wood. It was always straw thatching round these parts and it had to be as good straw as you could get hold of. Lamer supplied the straw for this job and it came from **Bride Hall** I think. Now with thatching the straw has to be heaped and soddened first, then pulled out and laid down in rows - that's how you get the yelms. **Yelms** are what you call them, portions of straw, wet and flattened and stuck together, making a kind of slate, a convenient shape for roofing. Now my job was to put so many yelms together in a cord and hand it up to my father, and he took one yelm out at a time and laid them like slates, overlapping each other and working down all the while, course by course.

It was winter, **February 1909**, and we used to go up there on and off according to how many other jobs there were to be done; it was bitterly cold weather and towards evening the straw would

freeze and were my hands cold! Chilblains up my arms. We used to keep on till the straw was solid and you couldn't work it any more - I was glad to get home to the fire of an evening when we'd done.

"Then the yelms were sewn onto the rafters with the big thatching needle - that's to say they were sewn on when you had a new skeleton roof, and I used to get inside the rafters to push the needle back. Iron needles, about two foot long with eye at one end and hammered flat; you could cover an old thatch without going through the rafters, and then you used a curved needle like a carpet needle with a big eye, or you could fix it with rods and sprays of wood - **nut hazel** as it was nice and bendy; long rods for laying along the top of the straw and the shorter pieces, called sprays, for holding down the rods instead of string. That was more for re-covering and repairing or for thatching a barn. To thatch a rick you used straight pegs driven into the stack and binder twine twisted round them, or hay or straw made into bands. Not many stacks had to stand more than a twelve-month so they didn't have to be lasting like a house.

"Getting the good straw for a thatch was half the battle; and there was a big difference in the straw in the old days when it was threshed by flail and not in the machines - in revolving drums - by hand-machines. They spoil the straw, bruised it and smashed it and it wouldn't stand up to wear and tear; wouldn't last half as long. **A flail was a long ash stick which has whip in it, with one end a swivel of hut-hazel and a cow-hide strap, fastened to one piece of blackthorn.** This would be swung over the men's heads - a knack in it - round their heads, a particular movement, and brought down onto the threshing floor; a concrete floor it had to be. **Waterend** had its threshing barn, opposite side to where the house stands; **taken away and put up again as a restaurant-dancing place.** And down at **Place Farm** there's the old mow barn, still standing. Put to some purpose to do with chemical mixing now, I think. Double doors either side for driving straight through; the cattle used to stand one end, away from the road and the corn would be stacked along the sides. As the threshing went on, you'd have it all separated out: chaff winnowed off by the wind from the wicker baskets and swept up in one place, cavings raked off - that's the broken straw pieces - and stacked outside in the cattle-yard, then the grain shovelled up in a heap, the whole grain out of the corn, husk and all; then the straw. In winter this would be, and winter was the time for malting too.

"**October to April or May.** And if it were for brewing then it would be **barley threshing**, though it could be wheat or oats, but you wouldn't find that here much".

Now this is Mr S. talking, the son of **Lattimore's Maltster** and a Maltster's labourer himself until he went into the Army in **1916**. He has lived for **forty-eight years** in one of the cottages converted from the old Brewery, and standing over the cellars where the beer was kept.

"You wouldn't get much wheat or oats malted unless the harvest was bad and the farmers would send a mixture of 'darkened' grain to be malted for giving to the lambs and calves. You'd get barley, probably from over **Hitchin** way; **Essex** and **Suffolk** was more barley country, drier. Or it would come from abroad, a lot of it, and the ships would come in at those ports on the east coast.

"**October to May;** that's about right. So if you were a **maltster** you had another job during the summer. And you know, you take that malting grain and the whole business of brewing it - what used to take three weeks or a month can be done today in a week, perhaps less. I can tell you it all - all the different stages - only I'm a bit hard of hearing now; you tell me what she wants" (he turns to Mrs S. and she lays her hand on his arm, all attentive to act as interpreter). "The first

thing we did, the first part of the process, the **grain was put into a cistern** to be steeped; you cover it with water and it stood for **forty-eight hours**, according to the dryness of the barley. Sometimes big cisterns, but that one down at the back of the **White Cottage** ('The Maltings') only held eight or ten quarters - two sacks to a quarter.

"Then, after it finished standing, it was **thrown up onto cement floors; in beds or layers**. Here, we had the floors one above the other, like big shelves with the cistern one end and the kiln the other, and a ladder up the wall to get to the floors. And it stood again, in beds, for **twenty-four hours**; you had to keep moving it a bit to stop it sprouting too much, and you work it with a wooden shovel, not metal. The metal scoops were for working at the kiln when it was hot; wooden for this job so as not to cut the kernel. If it was cold weather you made a fuss of it, you had to thicken it up in a frost, specially the lower floors. In mild weather you work it, keeping it growing but not too much; it's got to sprout, just so much according to the weather.

"Then it **goes to the kiln**; it's like a close-woven wire sieve, with an **anthracite fire** underneath (hand-picked anthracite) with no smoking. You've got to get it dry and have a glowing heat; then it's got **to be cured** - getting the flavour into it, something like roasting coffee. You got the heat up according to if you wanted pale ale or dark stuff, and you keep turning it for about a day: two days drying, say, and one curing. Then it comes off the kiln and it's **dressed - trodden and screened**. Trodden first and then put through the screens to get the tailings off (the root off) and what is left goes to the farmers for feed; and there you have the malting grain which you sack up - dark grain, brown, and tastes like a biscuit.

"In my time the grain for brewing went nearly all to the big brewers, but it was done up here - up **till forty-fifty years ago they used to brew here; Lattimore's** did their own, they used to employ one man they called The Brewer. And there was a little brewery at the **Bell** at one time and the man there used to go round helping with brewing for private people. **Lamer** used to do a bit, and several of the farmers.

"I've watched it done up here many a time, **your grain in a tun** - a big tun made by a cooper - and it's got to be **broken and crushed to make a mash** with the boiling water sprinkled on it, to make a '**wort**', with water from a copper with the furnace under it. Then the engine pumps the liquid back into the copper and the hops are added to it, so many pounds for each barrel that was wanted, in **sacking pockets**"

"Which went afterwards to make **aprons** for the men", Mrs S. reminds him.

"That's right, and it's the **hops** that gives the malt its **bitterness**; two kinds of hops there were: the best and most expensive were the **Kentish**, and a poorer kind from **Bavaria**. Sugar you add as well; saccharine you could use instead that came in lumps like stones, wrapped in sacking. And the refuse malt that was left when the liquid was taken off goes to the farmers again for stock feeding.

"The mixture is then **run off down the cooler into vats**, hogs heads they were called, and the **Excise** people came and tested for strength. The tax used to be on the malt not on the beer. The yeast (the froth that ran off) overflowed into a trough. The beer was 'cleansed' as it ran off; there was a man there all night keeping the vats filled up with a bucket, so the yeast would work itself off - mostly thrown away, but that was very good yeast liquid and was used sometimes for **bakery**. And all that is done today in a week; in a few days. All that work; there's no money

nowadays in muscle or brawn. I wasn't one of those who've had a good education 'Strong in arm, weak in head' that's what they say!"

Mr T. remembers the **mow barn behind the White Cottage** where the grain was prepared for malting; as a schoolboy he used to help sometimes beat the corn with a flail, "Swinging my arm up and round my head", he says, "after the thrashing, the grain was wetted and then heated and spread out on the concrete floors for two or three days to start it growing, or maturing. After that it had to be trodden (the extra growth trodden off) and the **kernel** rubbed between your boots. Then it was thrown up by shovel onto **big upstanding sieves** to divide the growth from the kernel, then into bags and carted up to the **Brewery on Brewhouse Hill** and stood in vases. If stout was wanted, treacle and **liquorice** was added. The malt, partly fermented and sweet, and the liquid would be extracted from the grain and stood again, brewing; the grain was kept for the cattle.

"I remember the wooden steps alongside **White Cottage** for carrying the malting grain down: I remember it well. My father was a labourer at **Bury Farm** when '**Jackie**' **Ransom** was there; a very **gifted** farmer and **one of the best known** around here. His corn - most of it - used always to go to **Royalty**, chiefly wheat, which was of such good quality. We lived in the **Workhouse-Master's house**: eight children though there were more of us some of whom died very young. My mother went out on **maternity** - two-and-six a case - people used to come for her at all hours of the day and night; sometimes gipsies at two o'clock of the morning, shawls over their heads, and they'd walk along with her to find the place - often on the verges along the Codicote road or on the Commons, or on **Coleman Green**. Very friendly and hospitable were the gipsies. My mother walked everywhere, in all weathers; she'd put on her bonnet and shawl and pick up her bag and leave the elder girls to mind us children, telling them what to do as she was getting ready.

"**Forty years we were in Master's house** and I began my trade when I was fourteen, and kept on till I was **eighty**. **Mr Jack Gatward taught me** and it was all by hand; **boots and shoes** for all classes of people, and nailing and tipping. **Gatward was sexton here for over fifty years** and foreman of the bell-ringers. He brought me up in that job too - sexton or verger, it doesn't matter which you call it; and when he went I popped into his place and carried on. But I never took it over entirely - just helped out.

"**Cobbling**: seven of a morning till eight at night, and if I went off footballing on a Saturday he'd say: I don't mind you going off but you must come back after and sit down to your work again till eight or nine to make up the time'. And his son, **Gatward's eldest son**, went as organiser (*organist?*) to **New York's Cathedral** and fifteen years ago he died and his ashes were brought back here. I can show you the burial place.

"I don't have a wireless, there's no peace or stability nowadays; everywhere it's friction and no-one agrees - in everyday life even the children are affected and young boys are turned into murderers. I don't like to read the newspaper, it worries me to death - it's all so different now."

His quiet voice continues as he sits, a small figure, wearing his cap on an upright chair in front of a low fire. He lives alone and he is quite pleased to have a visitor and to talk a little, and all his movements are gentle and deliberate.

"I never married. I promised my mother I'd look after my sisters. 'They are three good girls', she said to me. That's my mother", turning his head towards an enlarged photograph on the wall - a dark-haired woman with a strong lined face. "A very gifted woman; and that's the bell-ringers

in the **Octagon**, ready to sing". He gets up slowly to point out the different figures; "and my father. A **ploughman** all his life - none of us followed him into farm-work - there wasn't much money to be got that way then; it takes a war to help farmers."