

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 5. THE DOCTOR'S WAITING ROOM

[Mrs Smallwood, Miss Hawkins]

The village had **no dispensing chemist** and at times when there was much illness about, a queue reached **fifty yards** or more from the **Doctor's door to the Swan Inn**. One patient would not only bring his own 'empty' but had two or three other people's bottles in his pockets; it all took a long time. On the rare occasions when the Doctor had to be away, the Doctor's wife did what she could to help and although dispensing was out of the question, the patient would beg, 'Can't you just do it? I know what he puts in - a bit of that up there and a little drop of that other. I know what it is; you give it me'. As there were no buses, a carriers cart came over from **Kimpton** bringing empties from there and taking them back refilled, so this had to be attended to as well.

With a smaller population there were also far fewer people going to the Surgery for advice. Apart from **panel patients** not many could afford to lose working hours, and although the Doctor somehow managed to forget to send accounts to families who were hard up, there were still some people who were too much his friends to come for help when they knew they could not pay - but they probably got his help just the same. Again, there was little specialist and hospital service available, and the Doctor himself was responsible for seeing most cases right through. For all these reasons he was able to get to know all about his patients by way of their illnesses, and they came to know him. And how they loved him!

"If you were ill, he just had to come into the room and you felt better". With extraordinary sympathy and humour he dealt with poor and rich, and the lives of the village people, not only their aches and pains but their happinesses and unhappinesses, were known to him not as case histories but as an intimate part of his own life. Besides **scarlet-fever**, **diphtheria** was the dreaded disease and more than once to stop a child choking he did a **tracheotomy** operation on a kitchen table.

"One evening a woman came up to the Surgery and in tears explained that her much-loved dog had died and 'I had to come because I knew you were the only person who would understand and not think me silly'. Sometimes comedy got mixed up with tragedy, as when hurriedly sent for to stitch up a cut head, the Doctor found it was because a woman had thrown a plate at her husband.

"Or there was the time when an **emergency appendix operation** had to be done in a **farmhouse kitchen**. A surgeon, now retired as a well-known specialist, was sent for and came bringing his own **electric-lighting equipment** as the farm could only produce **oil lamps**; the Doctor gave the anaesthetic and the operation was completely successful. Very many years later the patient gave a contribution towards the fund for the Doctor's memorial. 'I shall never forget'. There are a hundred incidents, but now **Miss Hawkins** has got her story to tell.

"It was a change for me, there's no doubt about it; I didn't want to go when **Dr Smallwood** asked me one day in the **Surgery**, I said 'No, I couldn't possibly do it' and then in the end he persuaded me. What they wanted was someone to help the **District Nurse** with maternity cases. There had been **Mrs Newbury** up till then, who was an untrained midwife and she always used to lend a hand; but she got too old and died, and he asked me. **1905** it was and I was **twenty-four years old**.

"I'd never been out of the village, not to sleep; I was born in **Workhouse Yard**, seventh in a family of ten. The **Workhouse Master's house** was on the corner where the **Bank** is and there were three cottages facing on the village which were specially for elderly people. When those cottages were pulled down you could see the old beams, still with the bark on, strong as ever they were when the houses were built. Did you know there was a **little lock-up** where **Jessamine Cottage** stands? And where the **garage** is at the turning into East Lane, there were **two wooden cottages** belonging to **Mrs Folds** and **Mr Smith**. The **Dressmaker** used to be where the **Post Office** is, and where the **fish shop** now is was the **Saddler's**; **Mowbray** was the **butcher**, before old **Mr Simons** and his shop was up at **Garden House**, on the corner. There used to be an **oil shop** owned by **Mr Whotton**, where **Charlie Collins'** corner shop is now, and some of us can recollect it being burnt down about **forty-five years ago** - and the dog that gave the warning (in the middle of the night) was burnt to death.

"Before I tell you about my nurse's training I'll go on a bit more about the village, because there's many people here who'll never know what it was like: there were **ten Public Houses** here! At least! There was the **Red Lion** where the **Youth Club** is, next to **Hall's**; the **Bricklayers Arms** in the middle of the village; the **Ship** on the corner of **Marford Road**; the **Two Brewers** where the paper shop is; the **Stag** where Mr Tom Westwood lived, what they call the **White Hart** now; and more besides. Beer was cheap, one pint of beer, half-an-ounce of baccy, a clay pipe and a box of matches for less than sixpence (and people didn't drink the tea they do these days). Of course they made the beer in this village; I've seen the malt being carried down the steps from the **Maltings** - a flight of steps beside where the **White Cottage** is. And trees all up the side of the road there, from the **Bell** to **Lattimores**, and an iron fence round the **baker's** at the top of the **Hill**. The maltsacks used to be brought down those steps and put on carts and taken to the **Brewery up Brewhouse Hill**.

"In **Marford** there were very few houses, just the little old school in **Sheepcote Lane** with its cobble courtyard; and I believe there was a private house at the bottom of the Lane because there's a **cedar tree** stands there now and you don't get a cedar unless it's been specially planted in

someone's garden, and a garden big enough to take it. Later on I can remember a wooden house being built where the first of our **Swedish cottages** stands; a most peculiar house that was.

"I remember the clock on the farm buildings at **Town Farm** on the corner; very useful it was for telling labourers the time of day, but it was taken away later on to **Batford** after **Mr Jesse Chennells** died (that's the brother of the **Chennells who had the Chemist's**, where the **dairy** is now). And it's many years since we had the wooden footbridge over the river by the Mill; it was put there for when the river flooded and water came up over the end of the bridge - we didn't have the foam, though, blowing all over the place!

"I felt quite a foreigner going to **London** for the first time, by myself. I had to enquire my way to the Underground and I didn't say the names of the places right, but I got there in the end. I was there three months, learning maternity work at this house in the **East End of London: July, August, September** and a very hot summer. I shall never forget the good air I breathed coming home in the train as it got towards Wheathampstead; that air, coming off the fields after breathing the air of East London; Oh, lovely.

"It was all a bit strange at first and it took us a few days to sort ourselves out. Eighteen we were in the class, but I had a nice room to myself and very good food; breakfast at half-past seven and then we'd start off on our rounds at eight-thirty. We were taken out by a trained midwife at first to nurse the mothers and babies, and later on to help with the confinements. Sometimes we would have to get through **four or five cases in a morning**. Dinner at middle day and then lectures in the afternoon, more rounds again afterwards and then tea: then out again on nursings and so back to supper and straight to bed, with lights out at nine o'clock.

"Hard work it was, very hard work, with no days off and no time off. But I liked it very much indeed, I was young and strong and I could scamper in those days. We had to find our own uniforms - **three print dresses, twelve aprons, white caps** (and a good number of them!), **coat and cape, blue bonnet** with strings, and **strong black boots**. Generally we walked to our nursings, sometimes we used trams. I got to know the districts - Poplar, Stratford, all of them. Sometimes the Doctor would give us a lift in his cab. I was proud of myself after I'd been going out only for a fortnight on nursings when they said I could go by myself: because I had learnt bed-making and that sort of thing with the **G.F.S.** here in Wheathampstead.

"Very often we came across some terrible houses, tenement blocks as a rule; you'd have to climb hundreds of stairs to get to the right room, or perhaps it was a basement place - in stifling hot weather. One place I'll never forget. There was just a table, on which was a lump of salt, a piece of margarine with no paper round it, some left-over pieces of bloaters and a bit of bread. Very few people had anything to make a fire with and many's the time I've searched around for an old box to split before I could start heating some water. Sometimes we were confronted with a case where the mother had no baby clothes at all; the Home provided them when that occurred. Kindness was very great in those days - we would take a **money box with us for contributions** and the patients would sometimes put in a penny.

"The February following that summer I took my examination, and I was nervous because I thought I would have forgotten it all by then. I had to brush it up a bit from notes, but it was alright; I passed and after that I made a start in the village here and round about. **Nearly thirty years and 1400 cases** and I never lost a mother. Then there were some new regulations brought in, **1934** it began, and the **Independent Midwives** had to give up - higher standards...

"But I'm speaking of seventy or more years ago, it's a long time. In the room we are sitting in, over in the corner, my mother had a **hand-mill** for the straw, and we helped her there with wetting it and rolling it flat. As you go up Wheathampstead Hill, on the right at the top, in one of those **old cottages** above the **Red Cow**, was where there was a **plaiting school** for teaching straw plaiting - on the other side was where the **old village school** was; you can see the stone that marks the spot. And Mrs S. standing at her door and plaiting with her fingers with the end of the plait in her mouth; the straw had to be damped first, then rolled in the mill, then plaited ready to be sewn into hats, and the women walked into St Albans to sell their plait. One hour and five minutes exactly it took, going steady, to cover the five miles. Many's the time we girls gave my mother a hand of a winter's night, it earned us all a bit extra.

"Winters were hard in those days: I can remember long frosts, weeks at a time, when the labourers couldn't work in the fields and didn't get any money, and **Mrs Drake Garrard of Lamer** (she was a wonderful lady, we always called her Lady Garrard) paid a shilling an hour to any of the men who helped to shovel away the snow to keep the drive open up to the house. And the **soup** she gave us! We all used to walk up to Lamer with our cans and get them filled at the kitchen door. I shall never forget that soup - shin of beef with vegetables and pearl barley, I can taste it now!