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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 8. ANOTHER KIND OF LIFE - 2

*[Mrs Gape & Mrs Lindley]*

"Yes, it was a sheltered, gay and happy life," says Mrs G., herself an old friend of **Fanny's** and sometimes a guest at the House. "Gay, that is, within the limits of propriety," and she laughs. "We were **four sisters in my family** and all of us rather good at games; we used to play a great deal of **tennis**. I actually played, I remember, every single day through one **June and July**, at different houses round about. I'm sure we must often have played in the tournaments which Fanny helped to get up. But - we **never played on Sundays**. That was forbidden; a little **croquet** perhaps, on the quiet, but not tennis". And she is reminded of the time when **Lady Maud Lambart** and **Dr. Smallwood** deliberately went and played a round of **golf at Gustard Wood on a Sunday**, the first time such a thing had ever been done, with every window round the Common containing, they hoped, a secretly approving eye.

"Punctuality was another thing our parents were firm about: 'Dinner in the kitchen for anyone who is late' father used to threaten and we knew he meant it. We were not spoilt but we were rather naughty, I suppose; we really had a splendid time. Mother as a rule said 'No' to all our plans at first, then she would give way as we knew she would. Only once she put her foot down - that was when we wanted to have a **tennis tournament** which went on all day, with a **lunch party** in the middle: and it was the kitchen-maid's day out; then she was quite firm. She would have liked us to be nurses - I can hear her now: 'I can't think why some of you girls don't want to take up nursing'. But it was the last thing we wanted to do; we had **governesses**, but we were always running away from lessons if we could. **When we were sixteen we were sent away to school** - a different school for each of us, I don't know why, not for any special reason, I think.

"We liked to make our own occupations, though - I always loved **needlework** and **dress-making**. And there was **music and singing** and any amount of **gardening**. Then we used to pair off to do different things; I kept **bantams** for a time with the sister next in age to me, and once we reared six **partridges**. We **rode** together too: that straight mile of muddy lane (at least it was

a muddy lane then) between **Hatfield and our gate**, had **grass verges for galloping** and a **thorn hedge which we used to jump**. Many, many times we must have walked that lane from the station, picking up our skirts in the mud; if we missed the train the horses couldn't be kept standing an hour for the next one - we never walked it alone. Two of us together was all right, but walking by yourself was frowned on, and we would never have dared take a cab. Cabs were not considered proper.

"**Lord William Cecil** - he was **Rector of Hatfield** then (and I can see him now, when he came to tea absentmindedly balancing his cup on his clenched fist as he talked; we used to wait, fascinated, expecting it to fall every minute) - he used to call that straight lane 'our fortifications', because it was one mass of thorns after the hedge had been laid, and a perfect menace to bicycle tyres.

"We didn't go in for good works at all, I'm afraid; I suppose we were very frivolous but it didn't occur to us then. We attended some nursing lectures once - that was mother's influence, I daresay - and we went to **Lenten Sewing Parties at the Rectory**, and there was the little **Church at Coopers Green** (pulled down now) where we used to teach in the **Sunday School**, and grumble a good deal about it, I'm afraid. Funny to think that I taught the keeper's daughter and afterwards her father became **head keeper to Sir H.L.** and she made friends with Fanny there. It's not so long ago since she was living here in Wheathampstead, and I always remember her greeting me when we came back to live here in **1940**...'You taught me in Sunday School in Coopers Green'.

"Then - **dances**. We always **went in pairs**; who could possibly want four sisters all at once? And garden parties and the huge teas. I remember a most delicious black currant ice at a garden party at **Blackmore End** - I seem to have forgotten everything else about that occasion, but then it was something of an achievement to produce ices for a party in those days and they were considered slightly unwholesome. **Bicycling-picnics** were very much the thing, too. But we were more keen about **games** than anything; we had a **girls' hockey team** made up from among our friends and we wore a **special green tweed uniform with peaked caps to match**, and called ourselves the **Grasshoppers** and went round playing matches all over the place, sometimes at other houses but sometimes, very highly organised, against **schools or women's colleges**, with a special coach attached to the train to get us there and back.

"Sometimes in winter we would get up an **ice-hockey match**, not seriously though, just with ash sticks with a knob at the end. **Our skirts were twelve inches from the ground - that was considered short of course - and belts with elegant buckles and long double-breasted jackets with fur collars, and knitted caps with a feather at the side**. It seems comical now but we were really quite smart. The day-clothes were severe, mannish really, and so tight you couldn't think we could possibly run in them.

"I remember well coming over constantly to **Gustard Wood** with my sister, ostensibly to play **golf** but it always meant a drive round the lanes to **Kimpton** and back with a young man friend from **Gustard Wood House** in his **two-donkey tandem chaise**, a kind of miniature dog-cart - my role being entirely that of gooseberry as he and my sister were more or less engaged, 'courting' at any rate. He used to walk and the two of us drove the donkeys, and one of the donkeys was always digging in its heels and refusing to move and having to be urged on by the poor young man at its bridle, he getting very cross while we two girls sat up on the chaise making encouraging

noises and flapping the reins. After I was married I was given one of the **donkeys** and I drove him in a **basket-work chair** kind of thing, with some very pretty yellow harness.

"Mostly we drove ourselves about in a **pony-cart called the Tub**, or the **high dog-cart**, and once by mistake we galloped the Tub all the way down St. Peter's Street in St. Albans; father wouldn't have been at all pleased if he had known but we kept quiet about anything like that. We also had a **brake** called the **Bus**, a kind of **waggonette with a hood** which could be taken on and off, and this was used for **Church or steeplechases** and that sort of thing. The **Victoria** was more formal: Mother used it for calling. Once two of us with my Mother and the coachman were run away with in the Victoria coming home from tennis somewhere near Hatfield; the two horses took fright on what is now the main London Road. My sister managed to jump out and I was tipped out when the horses turned and ran us into a wall - I was cut on the head, but not badly, and Mother cleverly somersaulted into a nice soft geranium bed and was just badly shaken; I may say that the owner of the geraniums was furious. I remember running to fetch the Doctor in Hatfield, and I remember all the kind people calling to enquire the next day. I don't think I could have been much affected, anyway I was well enough to get out of bed and peer out of the window every time the door-bell rang. It was quite an adventure."

Then suddenly, or so it seems, it all begins to change: one by one the sisters marry. **Mrs G. marries one of Lord William Cecil's curates** ("There were plenty of them to choose from - six or seven at one time, I think!"). He takes her to a **living in Kent** and considering that up till then she had never been inside the kitchen, never made a milk pudding nor boiled an egg, she fell to her new life with amazing energy. She was obliged to ride a bicycle now instead of driving, and not just for pleasure or picnics. This is where the donkey and basket-chair on wheels comes in handy "But I didn't have it for sometime..."

"It was a very different life after I married, but one of its advantages was that we now had a **bathroom and a proper water system**. We did have a **bathroom** at my old home but mother was always afraid of it being used as she thought the boiler would burst when the water was run off. We only had a **handpump from a well** to fill the tank; she was frightened of the pipes cracking in winter too, and the whole **house would reek of the paraffin stoves** which we set about the place in frosty weather. Anyway our baths there had always been those **tin affairs in front of the fire** in our bedrooms. My uncle came to stay - mother's brother - and he said 'Absolute nonsense, of course I'm going to have a bath', but mother was very soon hammering on the door calling to him to turn off the taps, 'That's enough water, you'll empty the boiler'. So to be able to use a bathroom with a clear conscience was an intense pleasure.

"We often went back to my home on visits and took our children; it was a lovely home and a happy one". Inevitably, though, change comes here too, and quite relentlessly. **An Aircraft Company** had already, many years before, offered to buy up part of the **400 acre estate** and had been refused, but a neighbouring farmer had sold up a part of his land which ran alongside, instead. The idea of an Aircraft Factory so near and so hideously noisy was at first horrifying to **Mrs G.'s father** but, she says, he gradually got used to it; and after his death **the whole estate was sold, bit by bit**, to the same Company. **Runways** stretched across the fields where he had taken such pride in his **harvests - 74 of them** had been gathered in his life time. The buildings which had housed the cart-horses which he bred were pulled down, and the house itself became absorbed into the Aircraft establishment.

"A long way from the day when Father decided to add **two wings to the original farmhouse**; but, you know, it was so nice - my son was asked there not long ago to shoot with the

syndicate and he remembers **shooting** there with his grandfather. They had lunch in the dining room, just as usual..."