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Wheathampstead High Street in 1901

by Ruth Jeavons

[This formed the basis of a short talk, accompanied by slides, given by Ruth on 8th February 2002 at the Annual General Meeting of the Wheathampstead Preservation Society]

Imagine you're standing at the crossroads at the top of the high street at 8.00 a.m. on a weekday morning. What would your impression be? Traffic, I think would dominate the senses. I think you would be overwhelmed by the noise and rush of cars zooming out of the village on their way to somewhere else. You might be lucky enough to catch the aroma of Thai or Indian curry or the enticing smell of fish and chips. Wheathampstead in the 21st century has become quite international, but everyone seems to be on the move dashing about to get somewhere else.

A hundred years earlier, in 1901, if you had stood in that same spot the scene would not have been quite so hectic. You might have heard the occasional clip clop of a horse slowly wending its way back from the fields. You might have had to give way to a herd of cows coming back from a drink in the River Lea. You'd have been quite likely to hear the sound of hammering: either from **James Matthews**, the **blacksmith** behind the Swan, or **Thomas Wren** the **wheelwright** working at his coach-making down where Jessamine cottage is.



Thomas Wren, wheelwright

If you were lucky you might have heard the **railway engine** stopping at the station and letting off steam as it came to a halt. The pace has slowed down to that of the horses and cows. The road to Hatfield was steeply banked and gently winding, dusty in summer and muddy in winter. Tarmac was still way off in the future. Trees shaded the high street and there were no kerbs. There were only two cottages along the **Marford Road** at this time, and much of **Necton Road** would have looked rather new – a recent development in quality housing.

A peaceful picture you might think, but deceptive. Beneath the surface there were tensions bubbling away, as in any normal society. In 1901 the issues of education and religion were very much to the fore (as today with our Faith schools debate).

The school was overcrowded and had been enlarged in **1884** to take **330** pupils. Payment by results was the system of the day. The inspectors complained of overcrowding and poor ventilation in the infants school and threatened to withhold funding. Numbers in the infants dept. had to be restricted to **120**. Not surprisingly, there were 6 changes of Infant headteacher in the years between 1898 and 1906.

Canon Davys was now **72** and a widower, living with his daughter **Blanche** aged **36** and 6 servants, including a butler (Harold Skillman) and a pageboy aged 16. The **Rev. Morgan**, minister of the **Congregational church** on Brewer's Hill, was up in arms about non-conformist children being educated in the Church of England catechism at the local school. The following year he publicly burnt a copy of the **new Education Act** on Church Green, Harpenden. Non C of E children were taken out of school for lessons in their own religion. Rivalry between the denominations extended even to the matter of church fetes, apparently, each church trying to outdo the other. The Ecumenism of today's Wheathampstead Churches Together was still a long way off.

Society then was still hierarchical with the gentry clearly privileged in their enormous homes with droves of servants. Their splendid dwellings at **Lamer, Wheathampstead House, Blackmore End** and **Delaport** are all gone now. Only **Mackerye End** remains as a family home. **Place Farmhouse** is offices. Even the larger middle-class houses such as **Garden House**, where the Governor of the Straits Settlements (**Sir Cecil Clementi Smith**) came to retire, have given way to more medium-sized housing. (Incidentally, another interesting inhabitant at the time was **Lord Harmsworth**, of Fleet Street fame, who enjoyed the fishing here and spent a lot of time at the Fisheries on the Lower Luton Road.)



Town Farm & Chennells family

With **three farms** right at the heart of the village: **Town Farm, Bury Farm** and **Place Farm**, it is no surprise that most men worked on or around farms. The **Chennells** family had been at **Town Farm** as stock farming butchers since the **mid-18th century**, but in 1901 **George Russell** was the farmer there. **Edward Herbert Ivory** and his family farmed at **Place Farm**, and in 1901 it was **J.W. Wilkinson** at **Bury Farm**. In fact you may be surprised to hear that there were 16 working farms in and around the village, according to the Village Directory for 1900.

A variety of associated trades and skills supported all this farm work: there were **3 blacksmiths** (**James Matthews, James Westwood**, and **George Nash** in Church Street), **saddlers**, a **horse dealer**, a **coachbuilder and carriage maker**, not to mention **wheelwrights, team stockmen, shepherds, ploughmen, game keepers** and **hay straw dealers and binders**.



Most men were **agricultural labourers** from the age of **14**. A few were employed on the **cross beds**, cutting or growing the cress. At this time **Jabez Nash** was at **Castle Farm**, Presumably this is where the main cress growing industry was based. **Frederick Wright** employed several men and boys as gardeners or nurserymen in his nurseries at **Gustard Wood**.

Gravel digging was the other significant occupation for the men of the village: many men supported large families of six children on their income from gravel digging. **Joseph F. Owen** is listed as a **builder** and **gravel merchant** and his son, also **Joseph**, as assistant manager in the **local brickworks**. (He was also the village **undertaker**, supplying you with accommodation both for this world and the next.) The foreman of the gravel pits was **William Austin** of Necton Road. Presumably these were up on the dump. Which explains those vast holes that later came to be used as a dump for Londoners' rubbish.

They got thirsty these hardworking men, and luckily **pubs outnumbered the farms**. There were **21**. Shall I list them? (In alphabetical order of the proprietor's name:)

The Swan	Mrs Agnes Brown, landlady
The Cricketers, Gustard Wood	Charles Carter
The Nelson, Marford	George Carter
Park Hotel, Nomansland Common	Wm Cain
Cross Keys, Gustard Wood	Samuel Coates
The Lion	Elijah Collins (later known as the Abbot John)
The Railway Hotel	Miss Ellen Dawes
The White Stag	George Elmore
The Royal Oak, The Folly	Amos Gale
Elephant and Castle, Amwell	George Garland
The Ship	Charles Gray
The Red Cow	Thomas J. Jones
The Three Oaks, Nomansland	Thomas Dickson Myles
The Bull Hotel	Charles Parker
Bell and Crown	J. Pyrke
The Traveller's Friend, the Folly	J. Robinson
The Tinpot, Gustard Wood	



The Swan



The Railway Hotel



The Red Cow

The Plough, Gustard Wood	Francis Russell
The Rose and Crown, Folly	Amos Smart
The Royal Exchange, Gustard Wood	George Spikesley
The Two Brewers (also blacksmith's)	James Westwood

The **Railway Hotel**, run by **James William Collins** would have been a cut above the ordinary public house, offering accommodation. **The Bull** also advertised itself as being “nicely situated to accommodate commercial gentlemen and cyclists”. So did the **Park Hotel** on Nomansland common offering “every convenience for cycling and beanfeast parties”

Luckily we had our own local Hope Brewery on Brewer’s Hill run by Harry Boys Woolridge and Francis Christopher Hill. A few men and boys were employed here, as maltsters, labourers or brewer’s draymen.

More surprisingly there was a **coffee tavern** in the high street, run by **Mrs Eliza Howard**.

The railway employed some men and boys, as messengers, platelayers, shunters, clerks, taction engine drivers, etc. The station master in 1901 was **George Holland**.

We had our own **policeman, Wm Hagger** lived at the Folly: and there were 2 police pensioners, including **Charlie Pond** at Marford.



As for **village shops** we had our very own Tesco equivalent in **Mr John Chennells** who ran from his single premises in the high street the post office, a chemist’s, druggists, and grocer’s shop. Like Tescos he also branched out into selling insurance and annuities.

There were three **boot and shoemakers** in the village (**William Gatward, Thomas Seabrook** and **William Neale**) - all pillars of the community, two of them serving on the newly formed parish council. Mr Gatward was parish clerk as well as church sexton. He would make your shoes, count your rates and dig your grave.

Dressmakers, milliners and hat makers were even more numerous, many of them living in Church Street. We had our own **jeweller, Edwin George Worsley**, and a watch mender.

Charles Latchford would cut your hair for you, and **John Nash** would sell you a hat from his draper’s shop which was also a grocery down near where Dillons is now. In 1901 Nashes had been keeping a shop there for the past 50 years (recorded there in the 1851 census as well.) And I haven’t yet mentioned the **four bakers**, and **three butchers** supplying the village with

quality, home-grown bread and meat.

And what of the **women** of the parish? The number of widows is striking – both rich and poor. At **Wheathampstead House**, **Mary countess of Cavan** at 55 was living on her own means with her daughter **Lady Ellen Lambart** and 8 servants. The head of house at **Mackerye End** was **Caroline Green**, also widowed, aged 58. (Her son **Charles** followed the unusual occupation of marble merchant.) **Delaport House** too was presided over by a widow, **Emma**, living in comfort with 5 maids and a butler with her inimitable daughter **Olivia Upton Robins**, aged 23. Olivia was a great follower of the local football and, I believe, started off the boy scouts **Robins Nest** in the Folly and the **working men's club** in a tin Nissan hut near where the post office is now.)

At the other end of the social scale there were several middle-aged widows supporting several children and an ageing relative on an income derived from taking in laundry. **Hannah Barton** in Necton Road was one, widowed at 47 with 5 children aged 8-14. (Londoners sent their dirty linen up here in hampers on the train to dry in the clean country air.)

No wonder then that as soon as children left school they had to contribute to the family income: in Gustard Wood **boys** could add a shilling or two to the family purse by **caddying** on the **golf course**. At the Folly the **girls** went off to Batford to work at the **India rubber factory**. Was this the Almagam? Or was that a later name?

My impression of Wheathampstead in 1901 from looking through the newly released census returns is of a hard-working country community. (They had to work hard. They were overrun with children.) The village was self-sufficient, prosperous and people looked after each other. Most of their basic and spiritual needs were catered for locally. People then did not have to leave the village on their way to somewhere else. They lived and worked around Wheathampstead. That is the big difference between then and now.

[There follows three films. The projectionist for the evening is **Alan Willmott** from **Windjammer films**, well known to us from previous film shows.

We are especially indebted to Alan for discovering two of the films we are going to see: *The Village Postman* and *the Map Reading* film. Both these are educational films professionally produced in the 1940s. These last about 10 minutes each.

We thank **David Cleveland** and the **East Anglian film archive** for making these films available to us. They have specially copied the first film onto 16mm stock for projecting this evening.

The Village Peepshow was made by Margaret Wright in 1938 It lasts about 15 minutes and we see:

Mr Westwood village blacksmith at work,
Mr Sparsholt the grocer,
Mr Peter Titmuss,
Miss Betty Warren the village school mistress,
Mr Lee the station master,
Mr and Mrs Ivory,

the bellringers of the day,
Mr C.V. Wren coachmaker and wheelwright,
Mrs Collins, Mrs Bracey and others.
We can also see life on a working farm in the middle of the
village.

We hope to add a commentary to this film and there is a move by the East Anglian archive to produce it as a video, along with a few other local films.