

A History of Wheathampstead

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Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,

Where heaves the turf on many a mouldering heap,

Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,

The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The derivation of the name of a place is a very fair subject for discussion, especially when we have been assured that "unlike America, where the land is whitewashed with unmeaning names - 'the cast-off clothes of the country from which the emigrant comes' - the names of our valleys, of our streams, of our towns, have a history of their own." It has generally been supposed that Wheathampstead derives its name from Wheat-Ham-Stede, The Stede, or dwelling, or station near the hamlet among the cornfields. "So called," says Chauncey, "from the great plenty of excellent wheat which that place afforded"; "a place bounding with corn" echoes Clutterbuck. Still for a long time there had been "breakers ahead" who were sceptical, and some have suggested another derivation. The common way of spelling was improper, and the fact of the village being recorded in Domesday as "Watamestede" was caught at and writ down as "a circumstance that decisively controverts the opinion of it having received its name from the good and plenty of wheat grown in the neighbourhood"; and a gentleman who read a paper in St. Albans in 1859, took occasion to note the objection which had been manifested to accepting the usual explanation. But perhaps the most elaborate case that has been submitted at all on the subject is that put forward by Cussans in his new "Hertfordshire." Conscious of the strength of the citadel he is attacking, he makes a vigorous assault upon the ancient creed, and at the same moment as he lays down the weapons of his warfare, he hopes that if he has not been successful in reducing the stronghold of unbelief to subjection, he has at any rate shown that the derivation of the name of the parish is open to doubt. Without admitting the validity of the general arguments put forth, the writer is to be thanked for stating his objections at such length, and for endeavouring to support an opposite theory by at least plausible evidence. The author knows the old arguments and deals with them, and then is inclined to think that the first syllable is simply Wet. He relies on the spelling in various ages, in some measure, showing that the prefix has been either Wat, What, or Wet. To the present day we are told, the meadows in the valley of the Lee, throughout the whole parish, are, for the most part, but rush grown fields, and decidedly wet. "The whole valley" - this is the argument - "was one vast lake, or mere, hence the name of the Manor of Lamer, or Lee-mere. At certain places this mere was fordable, as at Batford, Pickford, and Marford." The Castle-farm was a fortified place, and an island, it is said; and there was a second island in the mere, over which island passed a roadway, with a bridge on either side, as appears by the present name Leasey Bridge-farm. The Lee-Mere, it is added, terminated at Water End, Sandridge. We have not mentioned the arguments which support the original theory, as they are very well known; we should like, however, to see Mr. Cussans's ground disputed inch by inch, for earlier writings

do not appear to have anticipated that the position would have been taken up, or if it were contemplated, then it was not challenged.

Entering Wheathampstead by what is probably part of a British road, the visitor may get, besides an almost complete view of the village - nestling in the valley, an extensive range of undulating wooded country. From Wheathampstead Hill views are carried of Brocket Hall and Lamer Park, with the houses at the foot and the Great Northern Branch Railway between. The elevated ground at this part offers what auctioneers call "eligible sites for building purposes," and probably any extension which may take place in the way of erecting residences would be made in this direction. Cottages, at present, indisputably crown the hill, the slopes of which, however, are partially occupied by houses of a better class. There is a rapid descent into the village, which consists principally of one rather irregularly-built street, having a number of small shops which have occasionally led facetious writers to describe Wheathampstead as a town. One notices that the residential property is for the most part ancient, possessing a history which is essentially that of the past, but at the same time these places lend an interest to a general survey which a mere visitor could make. To the left, turns off a road to Bowling Alley, Harpenden, and a pleasant part of the village it is, but the old here again intermixes with the new - the ancient with the modern - the one gradually declining and the other less gradually rising.

A churchyard wall of considerable length occupies the earlier part of the west side of the "town street" and then there follow, on either side indeed of the British-Roman, highway, lilliputian places of business, interspersed with the private houses, which if not commodious are at any rate respectable looking. There is, however, little that needs particularly pointing out. Wheathampstead is very much like the other villages in the county which have come clustering alongside the main road, either for the sake of trade or for the sake of "life," or indeed both. That there was some business done at Wheathampstead a couple of centuries or so since is evident from the fact that tradesmen issued it tokens, coins which first came into use in the reign of Henry VIII., in consequence of the want of any authorised coins to represent the fractions of a penny. A specimen of a local token has been sketched and transferred to the pages of history. On the one side of the coin are the words, "James Greene, 1659"; on the reverse, "In Wheathamstead"; in centre of reverse "I.G." The coin was probably a farthing token, though the intrinsic value of these tokens was often much less than Imperial coins would be. The course of the public street is somewhat diverted at the bridge which crosses the Lee, as the mill stands on the river, and probably occupies the identical spot which Bridge Mill occupied at the time of the great survey of England. Then the ground rises in the direction of the railway, on the other side of which there are cross roads - the Hatfield and Luton, and the St. Albans and Welwyn. At this point stands Wheathampstead House, the residence of Lord Kilcoursie, and in which, among other valuable paintings is an original portrait of John Bunyan, when that notable Puritan was 56 years of age. Mackrey End is a small hamlet a short distance beyond, and the birthplace of Abbot John de Wheathampstead; and in the same locality lived the Gladmens and the Brutens, relatives of Charles Lamb, and a visit to which place the well-known writer describes in one of the Essays of Elia.

The general style of the parish church is Early English, mixed with Decorated and Perpendicular features. Cussans says it is certain that a church existed at Wheathampstead before the date of the Conquest, for it was given by Edward the Confessor to Westminster

Abbey, but it is difficult to determine whether any portion of the present building is of Saxon work. The original structure was demolished in the reign of the Third Henry, the oldest portion of the present church, in the chancel, is assigned to the year 1280. The description which Chauncey, who wrote about the year 1700, gives of the church at that time is that it was "erected after the manner of a cathedral, having a cross and a tower in the middle thereof, with a spire and a balcony round the middle of the spire, all covered with lead. "A curious fabric," says someone else. In 1865, by which time the building had got into a pitiable plight, the church was restored at a cost of £4000, and made to present the same appearance as it did four centuries before. By the restoration 309 additional seats were obtained, the total present accommodation being for 649 persons. 'The sittings are all free and subject to allotment by the churchwardens, suitable provision being made for the poor inhabitants. In the south transept, called the Brocket Chapel, are the remains of an ancient shrine. It was demolished at the time of the Reformation, and a few years later its place was occupied by the tomb of Sir John Brocket, where it now remains; the north transept has for centuries been the burial place of the owners of the estates of Lamers and Mackrey End. On the floor of this transept is a brass 2ft. 1in. long, to the father and mother of John of Wheathampstead. The pews of this part of the church came from the private chapel at Lamers. when that building was demolished rather more than a century since; the pulpit also came from Lamers Chapel. There are many handsome stained windows in the church; the various monuments record the virtues and biographies of the departed. There are interesting memorials of the Drake-Garrard and Brocket families; to the Heyworths, thought to be related to William Heyworth, 22nd Abbot, and predecessor of John de Wheathampstead; and to Mr. Pretyman, the late rector, and others. There is a ring of six bells in the tower. A somewhat extensive churchyard has of late been much improved by the widening of the pathways and the planting of flowers on the borders, and by the levelling of the turf where no inscriptions were interfered with.

Till 1859, Wheathampstead and Harpenden were one rectory, and the total value of the combined living was £1591 per annum. The parishioners of Harpenden, at the date named, when a vacancy occurred through the death of the Rev. G. Pretyman, petitioned the then Bishop of Peterborough (Dr. Davys) to make a separation. The request was acceded to, and the Bishop appointed one of his sons, the Rev. O. W. Davys, now Canon of St. Albans, to the rectory of Wheathampstead. The living is at this time of the annual value of about £800, with residence. It is interesting to notice a few matters affecting the several rectors of Wheathampstead-cum-Harpenden since 1238. Richard Sampson, who held the living in the sixteenth century was in 1523 appointed Lord President of Wales, and in 1543 consecrated Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield; Richard Pate, another rector, was in 1554 consecrated Bishop of Worcester. Lambert Osbaldeston, who was also master of Westminster School, engaged in a controversy with Archbishop Laud, and having used libellous language was, in 1639, deprived of his living and fined £5000. Henry Killigrew, in 1661, was made Master of Savoy. John Lambe, whose father mainly devoted his life to the alleviation of the sufferings of prisoners, was also a rector, and was made Chaplain in Ordinary to William and Mary. John Wheeldon (1773-1800) was the author of several works. George Thomas Pretyman, the last rector, described as "the rev. pluralist," and who had a net income from Wheathampstead, Harpenden, and other places of £1697 a year, was the son of the Bishop of Winchester of that name. The present rector is, as already stated, a son of the late Bishop of Peterborough, who also was tutor to the Queen.

To recall the fact that John Bostock, better known as John of Wheathampstead, was born at Mackrey End, and to touch upon his career, is to become the biographer, in some measure, of one of the most famous abbots that ever held the pastoral staff at St. Albans. There is, however, no need to attempt to write his life here, for is it not written in numerous histories and abbatial records? Wheathampstead was trained at Oxford, and subsequently became prior of Teignmouth. He was abbot during both the battles of St. Albans; on his election he immediately looked to the state of the Abbey, in which he effected many alterations, and made several additions. He also built St. Andrews Church, rebuilt the church at Redbourn, and purchased Aignells Butterwick, and other Manors; built much at his own house at Tittenhanger; "did stoutly defend the lands and liberties of his church," as one would expect him to do, and in consequence thereof had a very vexatious suit with his fellow abbot at Westminster. The old feuds between the two houses were renewed. Westminster complained that the tenants of the local abbot had stopped on the highway and made a raid upon the cargo which was travelling to London, and did damage both personal and to property to the extent of £140. It was also alleged that the tenants of John had torn down and carried off sundry boundary posts on No-Man's-Land, which Richard of Westminster asserted to be in their parish and manor of Wheathampstead, and that his attendants had ever enjoyed a right of common. The Abbot of St. Albans replied that the goods had been destroyed because the drivers refused to pay the accustomed tolls. The matter was ultimately carried to the Court of Common Pleas, but never came on for trial.

At one time the Manor of Wheathampstead formed part of the possessions of the Saxon Kings, and by Edward the Confessor was conferred as Wheathampstead-cum-Harpenden upon the Abbey of Westminster to which it has ever since remained. The present Mills in Wheathampstead-Hyde, Batford, Pickford, and Bridge are all recorded in Domesday, and in all probability occupy the same sites as they did 800 years ago. The list of landowners of the Manor in 1705 is to be found in the British Museum; the names are over a hundred in number and include those of Jonathan Cox, Sir Samuel Garrard, Francis Sibley (Sibley is an old name at Wheathampstead), Robert Salmon, and Lady Read. There is also in the parish the Manor of Lamer, first mentioned in the middle of the sixteenth century, but since 1555 it has been the Garrard family. There is a third manor - the Manor of the Rectory - of which the rector is Lord ex-officio.

The statement is found in works which scarcely deserve the appellation of histories that in 1312 the barons who leagued against Edward II and his favourite Gaveston, gathered their troops at Wheathampstead, but the absence of any record in recognised histories needs that the statement should be, if not rejected, at any rate treated as apocryphal. However the case might have been, there is now little fear of the inhabitants being disturbed in their quietude and retirement by a military invasion. The only invasions the parish meets with are a heavy highway traffic and a small number of passengers who are brought into the village by an unpretentious branch railway. Nestling in the valley of the Lee, the place is pretty, the country pleasant, and the people orderly, and there is a vestry ever alive to the interests of the parish, as witnessed by the several committees appointed and the many resolutions forwarded to the only two bodies which hold sway over local matters - the Highway Board and the Rural Sanitary Authority. There has been a Foresters' Court planted here within the last few years; there is also an Oddfellows' Lodge; and a branch of the Church of England Temperance Society has recently commenced a work in the parish. Benefactors seem to

have remembered that there will always be poor people in England, whatever charitable funds they may have to draw upon, and have accordingly left money for the indigent poor; while Mr. T. Marshall of Wheathampstead bequeathed in 1719, a little over forty-eight acres of land for the purpose of apprenticing boys in Harpenden and Wheathampstead.

The national mixed schools in the village are educating about 140 children, and a girls' and infants' school at Gustard Wood, 80. The Congregationalists, who have had a chapel for the last sixty years, erected a new building in 1877. It will seat 300 persons and has a light and modern appearance. There is also a small Wesleyan Chapel, recently enlarged, on Wheathampstead Hill. The population of the parish at the last census was 2188, some 400 less than that of Harpenden. In 1801, the number of inhabitants was 1043, principally employed in agriculture, as is now the case, though in the return made seventy-eight years ago a good population was stated to be engaged in handicraft or manufactures. There is a large malting place in the village, and a small portion of the female inhabitants is engaged in the straw work, though the distance of any manufactory, and the slender wages which are paid for outdoor work render the occupation of but little attraction to those who are able to procure other employment. The first syllable of the title of the parish will suggest to some readers, and the fact of the name of John of Wheathampstead being recorded on his tomb as Johannes de Loco Frumentario will remind others, what is part of the produce of the parish but, in addition to wheat, barley and potatoes are included amongst the chief crops.