Dorothy Kok

Dorothy was born in Wheathampstead on 29th October 1921. She was interviewed by Terry Pankhurst in August 2012.

Dorothy I was born in a cottage in East Lane, one of four near the Mead Hall. My mother was born in one of them; Simons the butcher built them for his workforce.

My father's name was Henry Rainsden; he was born at the Three Oaks on No Mans Land. It's not a pub now but my Grandfather wouldn't take the pub over, so I don't really know how old my father was when they moved into the row of cottages at the top of Wheathampstead Hill - the last cottage, or the first as you come from St. Albans. The first on the right hand side. He had eight brothers and sisters. My mother was born Dorothy East and she was born in East Lane and she had eight brothers and sisters. And now I am the only one left.

Terry What is your earliest memory as a child in the village?

Dorothy We had a little group in East Lane. The Westwoods lived next to us and the Potters lived in the Bull Yard and we sort of just had that as a little group in the early stages. I started school at St Helen's when I was five, and then I had bronchitis quite badly and the first couple of years I was off school for a time. But we had a good childhood really. A little gang in East Lane because there

were four Westwood children and Billy Woodley, they kept the shop and then there were the Holloways. In the first two houses lived a couple of spinsters and they were the Dawes family and they were schoolteachers. They taught needlework. And then it was a normal childhood, I suppose. We had a lot of fun, not a lot of money obviously in those days. But we had a skipping season or a tops season and a hoops season, and we sort of made our own fun. I mean, there was nothing really it was just village life. And we went to St. Albans as a treat which it cost then, about fivepence to go to St. Albans on the bus. And I think, about one and six or maybe two shillings to go down to Luton on the train. And, how can I put it really, we played games that kids played in those days. But in the summertime we did spend a lot of time down in the Meads because the river was there and childlike we all used to congregate there, just our little gang really. Occasionally as we got older of course, we used to go about the village or roam about more. I mean during the school holidays we daren't say we were bored or we didn't know what to do, we were soon found a job. So it's quite funny really. We used to go to the shops and get two pence worth of lemonade crystals, made bottles of lemonade and sandwiches and then sometimes in the early spring we'd walk right up to Ayot to pick the daffodils and bring a bunch home as there were lots of daffodils in the woods up there. And we used to go down on No Mans Land Common you know…. when we were about, I suppose, nine or ten but not before then. I think children were more restricted then in those days than they are now. I mean there was nothing. It was just in the evening you played at home with Snakes and Ladders or Ludo or something like that. But some things do strike me as being quite funny really because we had an uncle living with us and my mother's other two sisters that were in service so if they came home on their day off they would give us a halfpenny or a penny and we would save them up and we would buy, nearer the time, big fireworks. In East Lane we had the ordinary kitchen range and there was a cupboard. We used to keep the fireworks in there. Now they'd go up the wall. My sister and I used to get them out, whether we expected them to grow in the meantime, I don't know. But then we had Bonfire Night, just by the Memorial Hall on the next piece down. That belonged to Charlie Collins. And Bonfire Night we had a big bonfire there because they lived where the dentist is now in Wheathampstead and Charlie Collins and my uncle, they were great friends. And I do remember when I was about five, I think, the river froze completely and Charlie Collins and my uncle sat me in a wooden chair and tied me in it and they skated with me from behind where the chemist is now as far as Batford and back. And it was something I really do remember. I thought that was wonderful. And the first ride I had in a car, that was in Charlie Collins' car.

And another thing, my father worked at the Nursery. We moved up there it must have been, let me think, about 1930 something, because the manager was there, he and the foreman moved to the Lea Valley. The two cottages are still there along Dyke Lane. And my father moved up there. He became the foreman then so we lived at the Dyke until I got married in 1946. I didn't work very much just half days because my mother had terrible ulcers and being the eldest I had to stay at home cos my Grandfather was still alive so I had to

look after my Grandfather when I was 14. That was when it really started. I had to be responsible. I had to cook for them too. And my uncle, he had left the Dyke then, my uncle Stan. He worked for Miss Evans at Gustard Wood as a chauffeur and he stayed with us until he got married. And my other two aunts: when I was about six, my aunt Elsie went to Australia, two sisters of my mother were already there. And two of my father's sisters, they emigrated to Canada but, of course, they are all long gone now. Although my aunt, my father's sisters, Lucy, she died three years ago and she would have been 104, but she died a few days before her birthday. So we go back quite a long way really. I've got a few old photographs there if you'd like to look at them.

We were quite self-sufficient really in Wheathampstead in these days because we had three butchers. There were Balls the butchers in Church Street, then there was Glennister's at the Folly and of course, Simons and we had Jemma's, that was sort of haberdashery. Jemma's where the florist is now. And Laura Rose kept a small greengrocer's shop in the High Street. And then, of course, we had Cobb, the baker, where the carpet shop is now.

And then there was a pub near there called The White Swan, more or less where the Post Office is now. That's long gone. There were lots of pubs here really as you've no doubt been told.

Terry. Did you have brothers and sisters?

Dorothy. I had one sister. My uncle worked for Lord Cavan; I think his wife was named Inez so mother named my sister Inez Cleone.

I had two ordinary names and she had two posh names. But my sister died when she was 52 of cancer so really I've not any one now. I have a niece that lives in Reading but I've got cousins but they're all my age now so it's more or less, we phone one another; we don't visit like we used to. And then of course we all went to Sunday school.

Pam Latchford and I were laughing the other Sunday in Church cos when we went to Sunday School the rector was Baird Smith and we crept in like little mice and we, you know, you daren't move, but now the children are free and easy, but in those days you weren't. You just crept in and you had to sit still and it was a real ordeal in a way.

Terry. Where was your Sunday School held? In the church?

Dorothy. Yes, in the church. We used to go into church. There was a smaller hall, um- how can I best describe it? You know the drive to the rectory? Well, at the top there, there was the two halls and we used to have concerts in there years ago, plays and things like that but really there wasn't a lot for children to do in the village. And you just made your own fun.

Terry. What are your recollections of school?

Dorothy. I liked school, very much. I started in Miss Warren's class in St. Helen's and I don't know how many there were in there, in that class then. And that was called, that was the first one you went to when you were five. And then when you were six you went up into Miss Young's class and then from there you went to Standard 1, Standard 2 and Standard 3. But I remember the St. Helen's naturally, when that was built and for two and sixpence the children could have a brick in the main hall with your name on it. I often wonder what happened to those bricks. I mean it was D.R. and my sister I. R. and my cousin, Jack J.E. cos he was Jack East. And my cousin, Alec. We all had one, that was a lot of money in those days.

When we were 11 we went up into that school.

And one summer we had diphtheria. In the well they said, the germ was in school. I think two children died. So we had about six weeks off then they shut the school and we had an extra fortnight on the summer holiday. But, I mean, we didn't get the holidays they have now. At Christmas we only had about three days or sometimes a week. And Easter we just had a couple of days. And we didn't have half term like they have now. The teachers were good. Miss Young lived in the schoolhouse, I'm not sure where Miss Warren lived.

Terry. Where was the schoolhouse?

Dorothy. Well, joined on to the old school. Yes it was only very small as you come into, towards Ash Grove. I mean there was the school and there was the house on the side of it incorporated in the building.

And for recreation in the winter, we used to slide down Ash Grove on tin trays or sleds, if we were lucky enough. I think my uncle would build us a little sled and we would have slid down there because there were no houses there at all it was just Thrussells Farm. Yes, as you went up Ash Grove, I haven't been up there for a long time so I don't really know the position of houses up there now. And then we had a schoolteacher lived, you know where Cunnington's is? That used to be a pub, called the Walnut Tree, then coming this way there were two houses. Well Mr. Hampton lived in one and he, I don't know if he had a bad hip. We all called him Hoppy Hampton. And then we had a sports master we used to call Mr. Dapsy, because he used to take the boys running over No Mans Land Common. I can't remember his name, I was trying to think of it the other day. I really can't remember it but we used to call him Mr. Dapsy. He used to say to the boys "pick up your ducks and run, boys". And then we had Miss Robins she was another teacher there. I didn't like her at all because I was left-handed and she used to hit me over the knuckles with a ruler and make me use my right hand. They wouldn't do that now. But on the whole I liked school. I was quite good really. I won quite a few prizes for different things. In those days you got books and George Bernard Shaw presented me with one

that he'd signed. I can see him now but I've given that to my niece. I thought, well it's something that she might like to keep because she's got children now.

And I don't know if you've read Robby Lock's book about Wheathampstead. In there he says about the dung? Lorries coming down to the Dyke. I don't know how often they came, can't really remember that, but that was all the manure maybe from the zoo or maybe from all the horses, to grow the cucumbers and tomatoes. But he used to pull my leg because I'm so small. They used to say "you've got enough dung there, you ought to grow bigger". But that was very interesting really. That's all long gone. Tomatoes and cucumbers because they were sent up to London. Pouparts was the people took them for the market.

I suppose they were sold, don't think it was Covent Garden. That I'm not sure about, but then of course, after the war ended, Sir Mortimer Wheeler came down to excavate in the Dyke and when he was down here he always came and knocked on our door and asked if he could have water to make a drink during the day. He was a very nice man. I remember him quite well. Very polite, very nice man. We saw a few of the relics before they were sent to St. Albans Museum. But he was a very nice man. And then another thing I remember when I was small, unfortunately my Grandfather he did like a drink and sometimes he would take me out and he would often, I mean you had to walk everywhere obviously and used to go down to the Elephant and Castle and at the side of, you know the Elephant and Castle at all? Well at the side is, I think it's the toilet now, well when I was small there was a man lived there, very well spoken, and I believe that he had been turned out of his house because he was an alcoholic, I think. His name was Jim Sapple and he had a whole suit of moleskins. I can remember that. I can remember him quite well. My mother use to get cross when we came home if she knew that my grandfather had taken me down there. Which we use to call that Amwell docks because opposite it used to flood quite a lot. There were quite a few springs there. And we always called Sandridge, Sandridge docks because there were a lot of springs there. And originally the two cottages in Dyke Lane where we lived, where the Dyke is opposite, obviously , and the end piece nearer the farm, that used to flood quite deeply in the winter because there were springs there but they've all dried up now. And I didn't swim but the boys and my uncle they all learnt to swim. We called it Doctors Corner and that was down Sheepcote Lane over the bridge and turn left into the field there and why it was called Doctors Corner I've never found out. We didn't know but it's quite deep enough there and all the village boys learnt to swim there. It's quite a depth. But the river was kept very clean in those days. And then of course, there were the sewer beds down at the end of East Lane where Mr. Wren, he was in charge of the sewer beds and from the sewer of course it came into the river and there was some big concrete pipes and it came out into the basin and we use to call them "our channel". We used to catch tiddlers there and another thing we used to catch a lot of crayfish. In the summer holidays we would take a dustbin and lid, or the boys would, Billy Woodley and my two cousins, and go down the Meads and then push the dustbin lid with pieces of netting over the top. We were scared

stiff they would pinch us but we would bring them home. We used to catch quite a few and my mother wouldn't cook them; she couldn't bear to hear the squeaks when she put them in. But Mrs. Westwood that lived next door she always cooked them and we used to sit in the garden and eat them with brown bread and butter. Simple things but that was the life in those days. School days of course in the beginning you didn't have the school uniforms. I don't think we had uniforms until we were about standard 1 or 2. But as soon as we came out of school we had to change cos they were really precious. We only had about two white blouses each but you know, one was washed and then you wore one the next day and we had light blue and dark blue school ties. Yes, school days were good I found in those days.

Terry. Can you tell me about the house you lived in?

Dorothy. It was a three-bedroomed house. Simons had them built for the people that worked for him originally but, of course it was on gas. We didn't have electricity.

Terry. And you mentioned the range. That was a coal-fired range?

Dorothy. Yes. We had an ordinary kitchen range really. Coal you know just… The coalman came round. Hawkins, the coalman, that lived in Necton Road. He came round with the coal and you use to buy about a hundredweight at a time but I can't remember what it cost. And I think those houses they've been altered a lot since we lived there. But we had, as you come out of the back door you had a long passage and then there was a loo. We were on a sewer but we had a pump at the bottom of the, well, of our passage really, that served four houses, and the water was so pure that Mrs. Simons use to send a man, Bill Folds, that was the local man. They lived at the top in one of the cottages that were pulled down years ago. And he would come every day with the yoke on his shoulders and take two pails of water back to Mrs. Simons at the shop because she would only drink that water that came from that pump. And then we had another pump about there was the water pump and there was another pump and that was what we called the rainwater pump. And that was used for … I don't know why it was different, maybe it was just a spring or something originally. That was used for washing. The pump at the bottom that was used for drinking water and also it was for… we had a water can in the loo and that had to be whoever went to the loo, flushed the loo, had to fill the can up again. And also attached to that was a big barn and there was stored your potatoes. I mean my mother didn't buy a vegetable, at all. My father grew everything because he had, he rented from Beach-Thomas a piece of land where the big house stands next to the Memorial Hall. Then my father bought that land and it's my one big regret that I told him to sell it because my husband wasn't sure whether he wanted to go back to Holland or not and when the Dyke Nursery closed my parents had one of the cottages in Offa's Way. The bungalows, I mean, in Offa's Way, and my father, because then he couldn't do that any more. He couldn't work on that, he was too old then and he used to rent it out to somebody and then that person died so my father sold it to Fenn Hardy and

they had the house built there. And Muriel Hardy, I don't know her married name, she lived there for years. And I think she died so a while back now. I don't know who lives in that house now cos they've altered it completely, haven't they?

Terry. Which house was this again?

Dorothy. In East Lane. Big one, next to the Mead Hall.

Terry. Loufenway?

Dorothy. I don't know who lives there. I haven't a clue. But that was my one big regret that we didn't, you know, have that land cos looking back, be worth quite a lot of money today. But I met my husband cos as I say I don't work full time not until the war started and then every… I was 18 then and I had to register and because I was still looking after my mother I had to go before a tribunal in Luton and they said that my sister was old enough then, which didn't go down very well I'll admit, to stay to help my mother and I was sent to Skefko to work. I was absolutely horrified cos it was a big factory and not being use to that, it was …. But I was very lucky because I was in with, along with about 40 girls from all over the country and I was on inspection and we used to have to inspect the ball bearings that were, you know I suppose putting them in tanks, ammunition, and all sorts of things. And that's… it was there through a girl that was sent from Barking to work there and she was going with a Dutch sailor and it was his friend that I eventually married. And we went to Holland in 1946 but my husband, he was training at a naval school before the war so as soon as the war came he, you know, was called… He went and he was in the Far East for a long long time. He didn't know whether his parents were alive or not. His father was a baker in Amsterdam and then he just couldn't settle when in Holland. He just couldn't I think it was a bit feudal there in those days. Dad was … although you were married Dad sort of told you what to do. And he really got fed up and he said he either wanted to go to New Zealand or come back to England. He loved England. So I said "I'm not going to New Zealand that's too far". So we came back to the Dyke. My parents were still living at the Dyke so we came back to live with them and we moved in here in 1955. The other estate, we always called it the other estate, I don't know why, was built quite a time afterwards. And then, of course, Nichols had the farm there so really it was quite isolated, when we lived up there. Only the two cottages and when we were younger, I mean, I suppose, what was I? About 14, no about 16 I suppose, when we moved up the Dyke. After living in East Lane to us it seemed quite isolated, just those two houses. I mean really the village has changed so much. Well, you live in Garrard Way now, don't you?

Terry. Yes

Dorothy. That used to be Chennells' field and they used to have the flower shows there in that …more or less where Garrard Way is now. Used to have the flower show there. And my father won quite a few prizes for his veg…. well men did

in those days, you know, most people in the village they had allotments or they all grew their own. You didn't go out of the village much at all. I mean we had the chemist and then where the garage is now, Wren's used to live there. Have you read any of Amy Coburn's books?

I know her as May Wren naturally and of course, they were the wheelwrights and when the women in the Bull Yard, the Potters lived there and Williamson's and Maloney's, I think they were called, when if they had their washing out he would go and tell them cos when you ….. I mean the pit was huge and when they put the wheel in and then the iron all the smuts flowed up. The women used to grab their washing. It was quite funny really. And then during, I mean, also the Bull has altered quite a bit because the piece by the river that was the four cottages. And then there used to be a door and a passageway through as you went over the bridge, as you came over the bridge there was the Bull and here's another little cottage there and she was a washerwoman and she was called Hannah. And we used to annoy her cos we used to run through that passage. She'd chase us and I used to have to take my grandfather's collars there. He wore the collars that came down, big starched things and she used to charge two pennies to starch these collars and I had to take these there once a week. I remember things like that quite well. And then of course where the shops are now, where off license is. I remember those cottages coming down before these shops were built. Used to be a row of cottages there. About four cottages and then as you turn into the church, the lower end, used to be some cottages there but, of course, they've all been pulled down over the years. But as a whole, I mean the village is quite self-sufficient. You had something of everything. And people, I suppose one of the highlights too, was the Statty. That was the Statute Fair on Harpenden Common. I mean we really looked forward to that. Of course we had to walk there. Used to walk along the top road into Harpenden to go to the Statty. That was in September time and also, I mean when we were fifteen or sixteen then we were allowed to go to the pictures.

Terry. Where did you go?

Dorothy. Most of us had a bike then so if the weather was good we'd cycle that wasn't too bad. There were two picture houses in Harpenden. There was the Embassy which is now a garage and then where Anscombe's is, I think that was called the Regent. But in wintertime when it was cold if we wanted to see the end of the film then we had to walk home because the last bus went about half past nine, I think. Although in those days we had a bus service. I'm not sure whether it went every hour or every half hour but of course we had the trains which was marvelous. I mean, we could go to Luton or go up to Welwyn Garden City on trains which was wonderful. My father had a sister, lived at Southgate and once a year when he had dug all the potatoes, we used to have two big sacks of potatoes and I used to help him, my sister wouldn't but I used to push the barrow load of potatoes up to the station, put it in the guard's van and then get out and take it to my aunt. She lost her husband in the First World War and that kept her and the children going. Used to load up with the

potatoes. That was another thing you wouldn't dream of doing these days. My father, I mean he grew everything so we were quite lucky really. And then during the war when we were at the Dyke we kept pigs at one …... Mr. Barker, the farmer, they kept pigs up there and we had geese and if you had to give, if you killed a pig you had to give so much, I think, I don't remember if it was to the local butcher or …. But anyway Jack Hunt was the policeman and he used to come up there for tomatoes and cucumbers and they were going to kill this particular pig. It wasn't all that big and he said "Golly, there won't be so much if you share it". He said "if you give me a piece I'll see that you don't have to give any away". So it worked quite well really.

Terry. That was the law was it? That you had to give part of the pig to the butcher?

Dorothy. Yes. I don't think it was half. You had to give some, which I really can't remember. It was just during the war, while the war was on. I do remember one morning my father and I, we got up early to go and get some mushrooms. There were lots of mushrooms in the field opposite where we lived. Well behind the farm. And we'd picked a whole basket of these mushrooms. I mean, Nicholls didn't mind because they used to come to us or come up there for tomatoes and suddenly we heard a doodle bug coming over. My father said "get down quick" cos it cut and the ground just shook and it fell somewhere in Hatfield but it shot all those mushrooms out of the basket. I had to pick them all up, but, I mean, during the war there were lots of troops stationed here and my father could cure warts. He didn't tell me how he did it. He said if I tell you I can't do it anymore. But one or two of the soldiers came up to the Nursery in the evening and said they'd got warts. What he did I don't know. He only just looked at them.

Terry. What age were you when you left school?

Dorothy. Fourteen. We were all 14 when we left in those days; we didn't go to secondary school. The girls next to me, Betty Westwood and Myrtle, they went into service; some went to work at Murphy's later on. But I didn't because I had to stay at home and look after my mother. Then Stella Potter was working at the basket factory in Harpenden and my mother got better for a little while and Stella said "well I'll ask if you could come and work there." She said it will earn you some money so I only worked in the afternoons and I think I earned about 7/6 a week. Not much. I had to give my mother 5/- and I had to save 1/- and have a little bit to spend but we didn't need a lot of pocket money because we weren't allowed to go out like children do today. I mean you just didn't.

They made punnets for strawberries and I was on a machine for a while. They brought the trees in and I was there a couple of years, I suppose just in the afternoons but then, of course, when the war came most of the men that worked there, they were called up and that was when I was there I…. you just got a paper saying you were eighteen you got to register for war work. And then we used to …. There was another girl Barbara Wray, I can't think of her married

name. She lived opposite the Red Cow. I mean she died a long time ago. We were both sent to Skefko.

Terry. Where was the Skefko works?

Dorothy. In Luton. down the … they call it Blackberry Park now. I forget what they used to call it. They shouldn't but they do. And we'd try and get the bus but if we missed the bus there was a train. And we used to run round the corner and the drivers, they got to know you and he would wait cos there was the bridge across the road, and he would put his hand up and we'd go like this and run like blazes and go down the train and then catch a bus from there. Berry Park, I think they call it. Yes it was as I say, it was there I met my husband but I have got a photograph up here. (looks at photographs) This was my Grandmother. That was when she was 95. She lived on Nomansland Common but that cottage is gone now and that is my grandmother. My parents are not on there. That's my uncle Frank, that was my Auntie Eddy who was a …… She worked for the Duchess of Bedford, of all things. And in his book Born with a Silver Spoon he mentions the Duchess. And that was my Grandmother. That was the one we used to take the potatoes to. And that girl is, that's my aunt, those two were my cousins. And that girl, this one lives in America. Now these two both died. But it was quite interesting really.

No it's nice to talk about old times. I mean when Val and I get together we all have a chat about old times which is quite nice. Lots that I went to school with of course, they've all died or moved. The problem was really, I suppose, when I got married we went to Holland in '46. Well I lived there for 5 ½ years so I lost contact with a lot of people that I went to school with. By the time we came back here they were married and gone to live elsewhere. I see one or two occasionally, or did do then, but I don't know.

Terry. Thank you very much for a very interesting talk.

Dorothy. You're welcome. You know, afterwards you think of other things. In those days Cobb the baker on Good Friday he brought hot cross buns round. My mother worked for Cobb. She used to drive the van for him. She could never ride a bike, my mother, but she used to drive the old van and deliver the bread for him. But on Good Friday we always had hot cross buns. They came round, delivered them, and left them on the doorstep. People trusted in those days. I mean, we didn't even lock the door even when we lived up the Dyke. I was saying to someone the other week, when we were older and we'd go to the pictures, we didn't lock the door. We didn't need to; things are so different now.