

Len Lambe

Compiled from emails sent to Ruth Jeavons in 2017.

I have many fond memories of Wheathampstead, having lived at 12 Manor Road from 1940 to 1964.

Living at Manor Road was somewhat isolated in being 1.5 miles from the village centre. However, whilst it was a new house, built in 1937, there were no made-up roads, pavements or sewers, only cess pits. The development of Lea Valley Estate ceased following the outbreak of World War 2 and resumed five or six years later. One phone box covered some 200 houses.

My mother was born at The Folly in a very old house with no running water and a twin toilet in a garden shed, shared with a neighbour, separated by a fence panel and with toilet paper made from torn-up newspaper on a nail. My grandmother Ellen Maria (Nelly) Swain had a coal-fired range in the kitchen. There was no electricity, only gas lights that hissed and a gas iron. There was a wind-up gramophone in the front room; music from '78 Vinyl' Records were played including Sandy Powell singing The Laughing Policeman (perhaps PC Barker!) I recall my father saying that the house had poor foundations; he had pulled up a weed from behind the sofa!

My father Les was born in London and had a fragmented upbringing, living with various relations; he moved to The Folly and lived with Aunt Hannah next to the Rose and Crown pub and a few doors from where Mum lived.

I recall my mother Alice May being secretary of the Rose and Crown Thrift Club; customers could save every week on a Friday and cash in at Christmas. The brewery were the bankers, a reasonable amount of interest was provided, the whole process was conducted in a sociable environment and was taken seriously by my mother; I saw her in action!

A few years after completion of the housing on Lea Valley Estate, a gang of efficient Irish builders installed roads, pavements and grass verges. They were ace dart players in the Rose and Crown at The Folly (Wheathampstead then had 13 pubs). All house owners were asked to pay up for the road installations. A photograph was found that showed a notice "Houses For Sale, NO ROAD CHARGES"; this proved crucial and retrospective road charges were then coughed up by the builders! In the 1930s it was not a requirement to install roads and pavements before building houses, so many thanks to whoever it was for introducing New Planning Laws!

Raising funds to build the Memorial Hall

As a teenager I became involved in fund-raising prior to the Memorial Hall being built.

Following construction, the Hall failed to achieve sufficient bookings and maintain viability. The Parish Council under its chairman Frank Roseblade set up an Entertainments Sub-Committee to promote the new Hall and I was privileged to be asked to become secretary.

Early efforts were unsuccessful; one event with a BBC Theatre Organist attracted six visitors. The budgeted funds of about £250 were running out fast!

Villagers preferred the Mead Hall and other locations; the Dramatic Society was over-protective of its equipment.

As the youngest member of the committee and with the Rock and Roll era in its early years, a suggestion was taken up to run a Guitar Group competition, firstly to be called 'Wheathampstead', then 'St Albans and District', then (thinking big) 'Home Counties'. A small advert in the Melody Maker was the highest upfront cost; the outlay proved worthwhile.

Within days of the event, only three Guitar Groups had entered. Entries were being received by post and the Royal Mail had been on strike for a week. A 'Breakeven Chart' showed that more money would be lost by cancelling than by continuing with the event. The Royal Mail strike ended three days before the event and 14 more entries were received. Cancellation was narrowly avoided.

Urgent action was now required to cope with the looming event with unknown numbers attending.

- Two heats during the day were arranged together with an evening final.
- A system whereby people could enter and leave the event during the day was required.
- Ink stamps were carved out of pencil erasers; the only option for 'Pass Outs', and it worked!
- Judges, including a local Beauty Queen, sat on a raised platform in the Hall.
- An excellent MC officiated, who worked for Boosey and Hawkes music publishers.
- The local postman's son entered his group, 'David Hyde and The Ravens'.
- One group arrived in a double-decker bus full of supporters, all paying entry fees.
- One group had three drummers, each with large drum kits.
- All groups and kit came through one door at the back of the Green Room.
- The Herts Advertiser, then a broadsheet, carried two full pages of coverage.

The event was a resounding success.

Many photographs were shown in the Herts Ad. about the Guitar Group Competition together with statistics including the quantity of hot dogs consumed. The coverage was on two whole large pages!

The sub-committee organised follow-on Rock and Roll events over the next few months.

Experiences witnessed with the Memorial Hall taught me a lot about life, what can be achieved and how to overcome objections.

- Dear Frank Roseblade asked that an event be cancelled as a local priest's fence panel had been kicked in, so the Breakeven Chart came out to identify the cost of cancellation. The event took place.
- The hall caretaker used to attend and vote at the sub-committee meetings. He was later requested to attend only, not speak and not vote. He was adept, without being requested, at turning the hall lights on full during young persons' events.
- A chauffeur-driven official from the Ministry of Transport visited me at home; he had a dossier from an informant. An infringement of London Transport's monopoly had occurred. An advert in the Harpenden Free Press for a 'Rock and Twist' event was offering a Coach Service for '20 pence' from Wheathampstead Memorial Hall to Harpenden at 12.15 am with several drop-off points. He asked to speak to my father who was on the Parish and St Albans District Councils.

This officious chauffeured gentleman (in very smart black coat, astrakhan collar, trilby hat and clipboard) paid a second visit. He objected to this same coach service being offered for free and said that it still violated London Transport's monopoly.

The Breakeven Chart showed that twelve entry fees to the Memorial Hall dance would pay for the contract coach and that London Transport's option was not cost-effective. They had been requested to quote for this same service. It was 250% more costly and would only leave from the nearest bus stop (half a mile away) and only drop off passengers in the centre of Harpenden. It was not selected.

Some more memories

- Being interviewed by village policeman PC Barker (in plain clothes) regarding a suspected theft. The interview was in headmaster Johnnie Housden's office (with cane in corner) at Wheathampstead School. A brand-new Rupert Bear book had been given to another boy in my class and this was admitted. The boy was PC Barker's son who would have had a home interview!
- Police were called out on an emergency at 1.30 am on a Sunday morning to investigate a suspected break-in at Wheathampstead Post Office.

There was a Wheathampstead Dramatic Society party, firstly at producer Dr Parkinson's house (Four Limes), then at a house beyond Ash Grove. Plenty of homemade rice wine was available to celebrate the last performance of a play held at Kimpton Village Hall. I had been in charge of sound effects. I recall walking home at 1.30 am along the white line in the middle of the road in order to walk straight. While passing the Post Office, I saw a flashlight through the shop window. I called 999 for the first time in my life. I was instructed to remain in the phone box and call back if anyone exited the premises. Half an hour later three police officers arrived in a black saloon with chrome bell ringing loudly. Two police officers approached the rear of the building and the other officer, together with myself, kept watch at the front. An electric motor could be heard, suspected to be a safe being drilled; however, the noise stopped and the officers banged loudly on the front and back doors.

A shocked man appeared; he was the new postmaster and explained that he was decorating at the back, fancied a cup of tea, couldn't light the gas, so took a torch to go into the shop to get a box of matches!

I was thanked for being public-spirited and was given a lift home in the police car, arriving home at 2.30 am to anxious parents; a most sobering experience and didn't sleep at all!

- Upsetting a Bingo audience. Ron Hyde allowed me to call out the numbers one night but I was swiftly sacked! Being fascinated by the lingo used, 'two fat ladies' etc. I created some new ones and the audience shouted 'Get him off! This Bingo stuff is far more serious than you think!
- Mrs Douglas Cory Wright (from the magnificent and glorious Mackerye End House) being very miffed at not being asked to supply flowers to decorate the stage of the Memorial Hall, I believe for the opening day.
- Reg Arnold, a near neighbour, pig farmer and De Havilland engineer also ran a flower shop. He took me to Covent Garden at 4 am and we purchased masses of flowers and plants for the display at low cost.

Both Douglas and Mrs Cory Wright were splendid to my father Les; when he retired from Vauxhall Motors he used to work as a handyman at Mackerye End. There were occasions when Mum and Dad would help with evening events as maid and butler when Lord and Lady Horlicks visited. Mum was an ace mimic of Peggy's shrill demeanour: "May, May, more soup for the Horlicks".

- On Christmas Morning an enormous tree in the massive hallway was lit up with hundreds of candles and Mrs Cory Wright handed out presents to staff, all carefully wrapped in white paper. I witnessed this once with my wife Margaret, a joyous occasion to be remembered, staff being called up in order and graciously thanked for their years' service.

Douglas Cory Wright was a traditional gent; at Nomansland Common Sunday cricket matches, his large Rolls Royce would sometimes appear. One day he demonstrated a flip-up hatch on each front wing; via a lever each side the car could be jacked up to ease the burden of changing a wheel. He had a ride-on miniature train track around the grounds at Mackerye End; this was such a delight and he shared it well.

- Delivering large wooden posts from Vauxhall scrap wood yard to Helmets Ltd, run by three Noblett brothers from Marshalls Heath. I assisted Len Noblett in his wood shop; the posts were sawn into strips, planed and made up into fencing panels for hoopla and other stalls used for the annual Village Fete. My mother worked at Helmets in the village and was often asked to help Mrs Noblett who had a house nearby to the factory.
- Being requested by Nurse Smith (President of the local Royal British Legion and the great lady who brought me into the world at 12 Manor Road!) to pay 100% of the

profits from a dance in aid of sending two delegates to their Annual Conference in Harrogate.

My mate Fred's mum Mary Minall (Proud Parade Leader and Secretary) asked me to organise the dance. We agreed that I would fund the 'Rock and Twist' dance, guaranteeing that they would not lose money. They would provide all the helpers required and the profits would be shared 50/50.

We would have made more money if the dear ladies had not tipped Coca Cola from two small (thick) glass bottles into plastic cups and charged for only one bottle!

They were concerned that the 'yoofs of the day' would attack each other (as they could) and so tried to engineer out of potential situations at adverse cost. No recognition was given that the event was properly planned with a couple of big lads from Vauxhall's Boxing Club acting as bouncers.

However, without the support of the British Legion Ladies, the event could not have taken place.

The British Legion received enough money to send their delegates to two annual conferences and dear Mary Minall was delighted.

Dear Nurse Smith thought I was being unfair as it was a 'Charity Event', but it wasn't! I enjoyed arranging the event, making all decisions without committee influence and can only thank Nurse Smith for safely bringing me into this world on 18 June 1940, an event that I do not recall.

- This was precisely nine months after war was declared when the nation urgently went into preservation mode; my dear wife was also born in June 1940, but in Bromley, near Biggin Hill Airfield in Kent. A house opposite disappeared into a crater, thanks to a Nazi bomb that was off target. The next day, at the age of three months dear Margaret moved to Luton, thanks to her mother Violet and Aunties Bertha, Clara and Emmie in Luton!
- I recall Chairman Frank Roseblade, Joyce Kerrison, Len Noblett, Ron Hyde, Joyce Hunt, the lady who had a small fruit and veg shop in the High Street and of course the illustrious and very village-supportive Douglas Cory Wright and his demure and spirited wife Mrs Douglas Cory Wright.

Recollections of the Noblett family and Helmets

There were three Noblett brothers who ran Helmets Ltd factory in Wheathampstead; Len, Tom and one other. At first their house and factory were on Brewhouse Hill before they moved to larger premises in the High Street alongside the River Lea and Wheathampstead Mill.

The Nobletts moved house to Marshalls Heath, near to where Mum and Dad later bought a house in Manor Road, about 1.5 miles from the village. My mother, Alice 'May' Archer, in her 'teens used to work at the factory and often helped Ma Noblett, with whom she got on very well, with housework.

Len Noblett was sweet on my Mum, 'May'. They were friends and I believe went out a few times. One day Len called for May to take her out, but Les (my Dad) was around too and he became the chosen one! Les and May were married in 1937 and bought a new 3-bed semi in 1937 for £365. I was born in 1940 and got called Leonard Leslie Lambe!

After marriage, my Mum took on homework for Helmets Ltd; machine sewing in the lean-to conservatory at home. I can still smell the newly tanned leather interiors of the firemen's helmets. There is an old short movie/news item showing how the helmets were tested in Wheathampstead.

I knew Len Noblett well. He was a great guy and drove an Oxford Cambridge Estate. Dad was on a committee with him to raise funds for the Wheathampstead Memorial Hall.

I once bought some scrap wood from Vauxhall that was used in steel roll deliveries; 6" x 4" x 6' long (5p each!). I took them to the Helmets factory wood shop; Len Noblett cut them down and we made fences to go round Hoop-La and other stalls for the annual Village Fetes, so there was plenty of cutting, screwing and painting by the two Lens.

More miscellaneous memories

- My father Les Lambe was a LNER lorry driver, based at Wheathampstead Station in the 1940's following WW2 Army Service. He used to deliver parcels to a big house with grounds and servants (Shaw's Corner) at Ayot St Lawrence, a few miles away. Dad's workmates reckoned that Les used to cut old Bernard's toenails with his secateurs!

Dad was a traditional socialist and served for many years on the local Parish Council and St Albans Rural District Council.

He later fell out with the local party and became elected as an independent, continuing for many years and serving the local community well.

He was a member of the local Working Men's Club and became President, with a plaque on the wall.

His support for the Wheathampstead bypass was relentless and successful; named not as 'Les Lambe Way' as he would have wished, but as 'Cory Wright Way'.

- Within the village history of Wheathampstead Station is a reference to George Bernard Shaw sending his chauffeur ahead of him to 'hold the train' until he arrived; he was running late for an important appointment in London! This 'self-appointed power' was accepted without question in this idyllic village (beware of rampant socialists with real power!)

There were no phones and only a few trains each day, such were the 1940s.

The LNER branch line later suffered from the Beeching cuts across the UK in the 1960s; only fragmented paths remain.

From Dunstable the steam train passed through Luton Hoo, Harpenden East and Wheathampstead, joining the main line at Welwyn and on to London.

The journey time from Wheathampstead to Kings Cross was 45 or 50 minutes without any changes; somewhat swifter than travel times ever since!

- Businessman Douglas and 'ex-show girl' Peggy Cory Wright were classic 'Lord and Lady' at Mackerye End House (large manor house, near the village of Wheathampstead). They were both parish councillors and most active in the village.

Dad later worked as a handyman for the Cory Wrights at Mackerye End after retiring from Vauxhall Motors at Luton; he also was a shop steward for the NUVB (National Union of Vehicle Builders).

Peggy's Grand Show each Christmas morning; dozens of real candles on a massive tree in the main hall with 'snuffer-staff' on alert at intervals around the winding staircase.

Designated staff were called forward to gratefully receive gifts, wrapped in plain white paper was the custom, neatly tied with ribbon.