

John Matthews

Memories of Wheathampstead Mill, Marford Farm, St Helen's Church, his family, farming, other jobs, war service, and the Dump. 1930s to 1970s.

(notes by Ruth Jeavons from conversations with John Matthews)

After the war (Second World War) John went to work for Mr Titmuss at the mill. There was a shortage of labour then and Mr Titmuss was desperate. He and John had been good friends before the war, with a shared interest in horses. John ended up working there for seven years. He worked the water wheel which drove 2 mill stones for grinding the corn. There were several jobs: mixing corn meal, crushing oats and polishing corn for the pigeons, dressing seed, selecting the best grades for seed, hoisting sacks to the top of the mill to the Lucomb (*sic?*) floor.

The weights of the various grain sacks John had to carry up to the top of the mill through trap doors were:

- 2 ½ cwt for wheat
- 1½ cwt for oats
- 2 cwt for barley
- 2¼ cwt for black beans for cattle feed.

Government measures in 1974 [at the time of our conversation] were that no sack should weigh more than 140 lbs (1¼ cwt). John had to have three hip replacements during his old age wearing them out carrying such heavy loads during this work.

Pigeon racing was Peter Titmuss's hobby. He was president of the National Flying Club from 1967 to 1970, served as treasurer for 10 years and was a member of its committee for 54 years. One of John's jobs was to work on brushes to extract dust from the pigeon loft, to keep them healthy as a pigeon's racing is impaired if it has dust on its chest.

At this time the mill was a provender mill, having given up on flour milling because of competition from Silvertown and Garrets in Hertford. The job was to mix and ground grain into animal food and sell it directly to farmers for all types of animal feedstuffs: cattle, pigs and chickens. They had 150 customers with laying hens who would give up their egg ration for an extra 4lbs of meal to feed their chickens. Mixed poultry and pig food were the best sellers. The Ovaltine poultry farm at Kings Langley (they kept white leghorns) were good customers. They took 10 tons of poultry feed a month.

The mill, the Bull and the Church are the oldest buildings in the village.

To get the water high enough to run the wheel, John had to shut the sluice gate at Tanners Gutter. The butcher's garden at the bottom of the gutter often got flooded when this happened and Mr Simons would come out brandishing his knives at the miller. There were two other mills on the way to Luton: at Batford and East Hyde, and towards Welwyn there

was the mill at Lemsford. Horse manure was used to bind any gaps in the sluice gate to keep every drop of water to push the wheel.

The river is much bigger now. With the growth of Luton, the pressure can be terrific and the outfall from the mill was stronger than the river flow. The pumping station at Friars Wash adjusts the flow by pumping water from boreholes in the Ver valley to feed Luton. This thins out the flow of the Ver.

The mill closed from 12.00 am on Saturdays until 12.02 on Monday morning as George Titmuss observed Sundays.

There was a moat near Helmets factory which was filled in with water from the Lea. They'd let the water out in front of the Bull. This was good for skating in winter, also used as a school swimming pool. (John's wife Trixie remembered learning to swim there with a harness.) Belonged to the church, used to protect the tithe barn. (?) [*defensive moat from the old manor house?*]

Pipes were used to take the water under the road, but detergent used to foam over the whole path from the chemist to the butcher so that the road was impassable. In the 1950s detergent manufacturers changed their formula to make less foam and this problem was solved.

There was stabling at the end of the mill, and horses were led across the road to drink in the river.

In 1934 the mill was closed for 2 years by Mr Peter Titmuss's father. (*independent – anti-mill*)? It was opened again in 1936 by his son with one horse to deliver the meal. Later 10-ton lorries did the job.

Before the war, lighting consisted of candles on sconces driven into a wooden post. The men worked a 24-hour day and slept by the wheel. There were 6 workers when John was there. Joseph Figg, John Webb and John who did the grinding, mixing and polishing.

The tail water came out at the Bull, and this was just as important as the head water. Weed had to be cleared with a horse-drawn harrow to maintain a good flow for the power at the mill.

An elevator carried grain from a lorry to the top of the mill.

The grindstones were on the 2nd floor, and the sacking up was done on the ground floor where they were hoisted onto the horse's backs. Later a 35 horsepower electric motor was installed to speed the process up. Drums and beaters put the oats through the roller. Most animals can't digest whole grain, so it has to be powdered up, or crushed for the cattle. You had to keep the blades of the beaters sharp. Maize was easy to grind, beans and barley were dry. Winter oats were the worst as they were soggy.

The mill stones ground 1 ton a day and were driven off cogs, the most direct drive was greased with candles. The driving belt was leather, steel running into wood like old thrashing engines. The mill rocked crazily when the belt came off. It was dangerous. You had to shut off the water when that happened.

Electric motor fans had to drive the dust through a screen and if too much feed was put on or if it was oats that were being ground, you needed a much larger screen as the dust would blow backwards. The dust was terrible.

The beaters got blunt once a fortnight, if there were bolts or nuts in the grain you had a firework display – they'd put a hole the size of a penny piece in the screen and unground grain would get through. There would be a surprising amount of metal in the grain after threshing.

We had 150 customers for "balancing meal". Customers were allowed 4lbs of meal per person a month to feed their chickens. If you had a pig you'd get a pig coupon and get smaller pig balancing meal. You were allowed 2 pigs a year on rations. They were sent to Hitchin for slaughter as bacon. This cost 7s and 6d without the offal. They'd keep the offal and give you 2 sides of bacon. If you wanted the offal the slaughter would cost 15s.

People used to buy a pig and slaughter it, but you had to register pigs 4 months before slaughter to allow time for the inspection period. You had to feed it with scraps and extra meal - to encourage people to be thrifty and use their scraps to conserve pig supplies for all. only ½ cwt a week of the balancing meal was allowed. At one time meat rationing was down to as a week – a rabbit. A pork chop cost 4d. You'd get 130 eggs a year normally from a hen, now you'd expect 180 eggs a year.

John at Marford Farm

John had been a part-time small-holder all his life, as tenant on East Meads of Wheathampstead Parish Council – the field opposite Murphy's. It used to be owned by Sir William Beach Thomas, war correspondent and writer on bird life who lived at Place Farm before he sold it and the land to Murphy Chemicals "because they made life so unpleasant".

There were 4 acres behind the house. Bull Meadow at the bottom, Tainters Field and 4 acres which belonged to Robert Simons who grazed cattle there before slaughter. There were open yards at the malting where they used to keep 200 Rhode Island Reds. Most people used to keep hens. Manure was carted onto the fields, forked into small heaps and spread on the stubble after the grain harvest.

John kept chickens, pigs and cattle. He's had 200 chickens and 100 ducks in his time. One Good Friday morning he collected 90 eggs. He kept Mr Woodley's father (Mr Woodley was the grocer in East Lane) in eggs. You had to collect them as if you didn't the crows would get them. Rook pie with a green salad was a common dish when John was young, made with the rooks roosting in the elm trees near Wheathampstead House.

Once Mr Price, who was Jim Joel's Derby-winning racehorse trainer at Childwickbury, brought round 1,100 pheasants after a shoot there. He sported a trilby hat.

Outlying heifers in winter needed feeding, and for this kale was grown. At five-foot high, this was not like the kale grown nowadays. John used to cut it to take to the heifers. It was kale up to Christmas, then mangels kept in a clamp. The cattle ate the roots. Grass falls off in May. Milk is at its best in early May when you get thick cream. They supplemented the diet for cattle between October and April. 1,000 headed kale is grown now with a narrow stem

grown 2 inches in diameter. The main goodness of kale is in the stem. It's a hungry crop. Cattle need feeding while they're being milked in the shed.

When John was at school they did light stone-picking on summer evenings. You'd get 6d a bucket (?) for a whole field. Six boys to a field each with a 28lb bucket. The field at Blackbridge on the other side of the railway line was particularly stony. The stones were used on cart tracks.

Marford Farm was a stock farm before the war and bigger then than now, with land on the other side of the railway line. When the Dump expanded it took 40 acres from Marford Farm.

John started work full time for Mr Blain the farmer there after leaving school at 14 years of age. His first job was helping with milk deliveries. The churns were 4 foot high with a tap and each held 25 to 30 gallons. They used a motor bike and side car. A half pint measure was used to pour it into a jug for the housewives. There were no bottles. You used to have to give an over-measure. He had a round of 200 regular customers. There were two rounds a day: the morning round was from 8 am until noon or 12 30 pm when they went round Nomansland, Amwell, and the Luton Road. "Keep the can topped up", Mr Blain would insist.

The second round of the day was from 4.00 pm until 5.00 pm when they delivered the morning milk, which people preferred because it was considered fresher. They had to wash the cans and churns after delivery every second day. One job was to hand-pump the water to an overhead tank outside the dairy for the milk cooler. It took two hours to pump 300 gallons for this purpose. Then they had to swill out the cow sheds.

Mr Blain and two others milked 30 cows, mostly Friesians. Then there were chickens to be fed and eggs to be collected. Duck eggs were particularly good in cakes. These could be pickled and preserved in waterglass. Hens lay best in the Spring when eggs cost 1s 6d a dozen. They are more expensive in winter as scarcer at that time of year.

Two other farms delivered milk around the parish: Mr Chennells at Amwell Farm used to take it round with yokes (?) and Mr Throssell at Bury Farm used to deliver to St Albans. They delivered cream, hen and duck eggs, also any rabbits that had been shot on the farm at harvest.

Cream was collected in large pans two feet in diameter and 6 inches high. Whole milk was poured into them and the cream left to rise to the surface. The next day it was scraped off. Skimmed milk was fed to the pigs, though at Lamer Farm they used to sell it to people as it was cheaper than full cream milk.

While at Marford Farm, John's jobs were to clean out the cow shed (which housed 30 cows). To deliver milk at 6 30 am from a large churn with a tap from a motorcycle and sidecar. The can's capacity was 2 gallons. Housewives used jugs to collect the milk and quantities were measured with a metal rod stuck in the churn.

Three farms delivered milk direct to customers then, selling it to housewives at a penny halfpenny a pint. Cream was scooped off from large pans into cartons. Skimmed milk was cheaper and bought direct from the farmhouse. Afternoon deliveries of milk were done by means of a three-wheeled bicycle. If you tripped over you lost 5 gallons.

Working with horses

Mr Blain (?) kept six horses. Bob (a horse) was good on the elevator, moving it not driving it [the elevator was used at harvest time for threshing]. There were 12 horses at Bury Farm, and Taff was one of five ponies used by the shepherd there and for milk rounds.

Mr Blain also kept several bulls. They would charge at the door of their shed which took some battering. He would walk down the lane and the men would keep him at bay with their pitch forks. He could kill you by kneeling on you and goring you. Cows still had horns in those days. Working with them was risky and dangerous. De-horning only came into practice after the war.

All the local farmers would come to the mill in due course. One always came on his horse. John remembered the farmer at Hill Farm saying of the Hertfordshire Hunt which used to run over his fields, "Let them slog their b... guts out on my fallow field if they want". Farmers weren't paid to let the land in those days, so not sure how much of a sacrifice this was.

Haymaking

The first harvest of the year was in June when you'd cut the hay with a mower and then turn it into rows with a rake. There'd be two horses on each side. Then you'd fork it onto the elevator after which it was bound into bundles with a three-horse binder and stood up in stooks.

There would be 100 tons in each stack. Hay matures well, but the heat can build up something terrific. You could get spontaneous combustion. You've got to get the flavour into the hay, and it needs ripening up in the sun. Nowadays it's bashed up like cardboard. Present bales of hay grow mouldy if they're damp and bound too tight. Not so good. The most valuable winter feed is hay. The stack is thatched with straw when it has settled down. The insurers wouldn't insure a stack unless it was thatched. They used to put a bar down inside to test whether it was mature. Jim Joel, (the horse trainer from Childwickbury) would cut it into large squares, a corner at a time with a huge knife.

Any grain (oats and barley) wasn't grown to sell – but kept for feedstuff, and all necessary power was produced on the farm. Wheat stood three Sundays in stooks, before it was carted to the stack. And the stack was built in the same way as the haystack and thatched. There were usually four to six stacks, the wheat having been threshed by machine in the winter and wired round the bottom to keep off the rats. The grain would be returned to the farm and the straw stacked for thatching was sold to thatchers. They kept the sheaves longer then, not mashed up like now.

The machines used to pull up at the mill for water. They'd knock out a stack in a day. Before the war there was a lot of casual labour. A.T. Oliver from Wandon End (still in business in 1974) brought his threshing tackle, also a chaff-cutter to chop up straw for the horses. Horse bags had a mixture of chaff and oats. If you see a horse tossing his head in his feed bag, it's to get at the oats.

The men would live in a caravan on iron wheels and it took six men to work a machine. They used coal and water to get up steam and had a net in the engine funnel to stop sparks from setting the rick on fire.

Mr Titmuss bought milling wheat and took it straight to the Rank mills at Silvertown. There were no sacks by then – just bulk tanks.

John at St Helen's church

John was confirmed by Bishop Gresford Jones at St Albans Abbey in 1946. His aunts were mystified. "What do you think of John going over to the Anglicans?" His aunt Harriet would say. His family had belonged to the Congregational Church on Brewhouse Hill all their lives.

John had been 20 years verger at St Helen's in 1974 working for the same rector all that time, Rev. George Roe. I think he was appointed to the role in 1951. Particularly significant occasions he recalled were the memorial service for Dr Parkinson, Mr Cherry Garrard's funeral, and Douglas and Peggy Cory Wright's daughters' weddings. He also remembered vandals stealing the lead off the roof at Christmas time in 1973.

In Canon Davys's day the verger's duties in the past had included keeping undesirables away with their long staff of office (the Latin word *virga* means a long staff.) and controlling the crowd of beggars who came at Christmas to claim their free loaves. At the beginning of John's period of office, Mr Lee, the station master was organist. The cows had his cassock once in Rectory Meadow. They used to keep up the custom of beating the bounds on Rogation Sunday to pray for the growing crops when nature is at its best. They'd start after the morning service and return when the bells rang for the evening service. The tradition is to beat the choirboys at various points along the parish boundary.

The rector used to have the income from the Glebe Farm. Rev. Roe lost his first wife and was left on his own with three girls to bring up during the war and before the end of rationing. John used to take him his mixer meal for the chickens after he had injured his leg falling down the hole at the entrance to the vestry from the chancel outside the vestry, and the rector was so impressed with John's natural courtesy that he asked him to be his verger. John was always deferential calling the rector "Rector", not the more familiar "George" which would be more acceptable nowadays. Mr Gerald Lee, who was organist as well as station master, also recommended John. They would have been a good team. Both gentlemen "of the old school". Once he played "Moonlight and Roses" while a couple were signing the register after their marriage in church. "He couldn't!" exclaimed one of the women working on the station with John. But he did.

Mr Lee had a big "turnip" watch that he used to time the departure of trains from the station, having to agree with the driver exactly when it was 8 32 a.m. On Saturday night he'd practise the Sunday hymns on the small organ he kept at his home in the Station House. Rev. Roe wasn't too particular about the timing of the start of a church service, but if the procession at the start of the morning service was getting late, Mr Lee would pull out his turnip watch and look at it. "Never a word said", John told me, but the point was made. Church services and trains alike kept to time courtesy of Gerald Lee. John used to have to pump the bellows for the organ when it stood in the chancel in the 1950s. He also used to see to the coke fires that heated the church then. Jackdaws were the nuisance bird of the day at that time, noisily

roosting around the church. Now it's pigeons that cause trouble, perching on the stone quatrefoils in the windows and making a mess.

The job of a vergers is to escort the rector to his place in the pulpit and welcome people into church. He has a staff and wears black robes. Vergers are more commonly seen nowadays escorting preachers to the pulpit in cathedrals where the rituals are more formal. By the time Tom Purchas succeeded the Rev. Roe worship styles had changed. Tom wasn't keen on this sort of formality and didn't require a vergers.

Trixie and John knew three rectors: Rev. Alexander Baird Smith who married them, Rev. George Roe and Rev. Tom Purchas. I remember John telling me how Rev Roe would bring a brace of pheasants to Trixie for plucking. Not sure whether he wanted them back or whether this was a gift, but I suspect he was asking her to prepare them for his table. He was reputedly good at cultivating the wealthier folk in the parish so that they would fund the necessary building works on the church fabric. He would go swimming at the big house at Beech Hyde where he was friends with the family. Their daughter married into the Saxby (sausage and pie) family. She helped Margaret Roe (the rector's second wife) at the little nursery school she ran in the garage at the rectory. So did Mrs Sparrow from Porters End. I once saw Douglas Cory Wright of Mackerye End himself repairing the rope that held the gothic work font cover. Katy went there from the age of 4 and unusually was not going on to Aldwickbury or a prep school. It was really a pre-prep school nursery.

Mr Norbury of Delaport was Rector's churchwarden at St Helen's all the time he was at Delaport. He used to go up to London by train every day and was, I think, a solicitor. His name is inscribed on the tenor bell. So all the big name families were involved in church life: from Mackerye End, Delaport, Beech Hyde, and Blackmore End.

George Wren when he was captain of the bell tower would play Lenten hymns with the bells.

John told me the story of Patrick Ogden, the organist at St Helen's who'd been educated at Marlborough and died tragically in a train fire at Dead Woman's Hill in St Albans when he jumped off the train and hit his head on the track. His wife was heavily pregnant at the time with their first child. There's a plaque up in the choir to commemorate him. *(It got lost when that part of the church was being restored, so when a replacement had to be made Sayling, churchwarden at the time, asked David to make the new one, but they wouldn't accept computer assisted engraving for the wording so had to pay a lot more for a hand carved oak plaque. This would have been at the insistence of the Diocesan authorities as they would have needed to obtain a faculty for the purpose. RJ.)*

A visiting preacher once said to John after first service and before the next 11.00 am matins, "I feel sorry for you". "Why would that be?" wondered John. "Because I'm going to preach the same service now that I've just preached at the 9 30", was the answer.

The Patersons of Carter Paterson (later merged with Pickfords the removal people) used to live at Gustard Wood, near the Slype, where the Broadway is now. Every year they invited their workers up there for day out. A whole procession of Carter Paterson vans would drive through the high street on the day of this annual treat.

Other more sombre processions through the village were those on Remembrance Day, led between the wars by Lord Cavan who also preached at the service on that day. He it was who was instrumental in constructing the war memorial in the shape of a crusader cross. He also gave the processional cross for use in St Helen's. Lord Cavan had been in the Guards and when their chapel was bombed during the World War II, he gave generously towards its restoration. He was also Commander-in-Chief of all land forces as well as Master of the Hertfordshire fox hounds. The hunt used to meet outside the Bull between the wars.

Lady Daphne Grierson, who used to live in Rose Lane and compiled a series of old folks' memories from her days with the Darby and Joan Club in the 1950s, was his niece. She used to worship at St Albans Abbey rather than at St Helen's. Major Grierson, her husband, was well liked, it seems. Her nephew lives in Kimpton and has published her collection of memories on the web. *(I had paid to get them typed up on disk while at Routledge, thinking to publish them as a book after she gave me the typescript when I visited her in retirement at Four Limes. But no need now they are on the web, I suppose. A lovely Christian lady she was, always interested in other people. Most anxious not to reveal the names of the people whose memories she had compiled. Most can be guessed, though, from what they recall. RJ)*

John was village postman for a time in the 1950s. He cycled all round the village up to Gustard Wood. He remembered putting Sir William Beach Thomas's post on a silver salver in the entrance hall at High Firs. He'd moved up there after selling Place Farm to Murphy and Son. People left their doors open before the war.

Also before the war, men walking from Hitchin to St Albans in search of work would knock on doors and ask for hot water to put on their tea leaves for a cup of tea. John remembered these men as always polite, if poor.

Lorna Rowe's brother-in-law had an aversion to sleeping in a bed in a house, and John would let him sleep in the straw in his henhouse every night. After his night's rest he'd rake over the straw in the morning and be off on his travels. His brother kept the Rowe's village store in the high street and was quite respectable.

John's father similarly would let Gladys Webb's father (who by Gladys's account was a drunkard and a wife beater) sleep in the smithy behind the Swan every night. He'd just lock the door and leave him in there for the warmth of the embers. "Nobby Nogs", was his nickname, it seems.

Gladys had been parlour maid at Lamer in her youth and remembered serving Apsley Cherry Garrard and guests at a formal dinner but getting the cutlery wrong when fish knives and forks were needed. "He was very kind, and let me off," she recalled. She used to take the discarded manuscript pages of his book "The Worst Journey in the World" out of his wastepaper basket and read them at home. Lady Desborough and Kathleen Scott were frequent visitors at Lamer. *(Julian Grenfell the war poet was Lady Desborough's son. His diaries and letters have been published by the Herts Record Society. T.E. Lawrence is a likely other visitor. Both he and Cherry were frequent visitors to Bernard Shaw just along the avenue of lime trees from Lamer to Ayot St Lawrence as they were both writing their accounts of heroism – one in the Antarctic, the other in the deserts of Arabia. "The Worst*

Journey in the World” and “The Seven Pillars of Wisdom”. Shaw said he was advising both authors at the same time, snow and sand.

Geoffrey De Havilland may have been another guest, as John told me he would sometimes take Cherry for a flight over Lamer – perhaps in one of his Mosquitoes? Gladys remembered two King Emperor penguins in glass cases at the foot of the staircase at Lamer. I think one of them may now be at the Scott Polar Research Institute. When Cherry died, his widow was confronted with attics full of documents and papers relating to 400 years’ worth of Garrard history. She had it all catalogued by a local estate agent (Stimpson Locke and Vince?) which can now be found at the county record office at County Hall. RJ)

John’s family

John’s grandfather Alfred had been shepherd to Mr Dolphin Smith at Castle Farm in the Lea valley. The sheep would have to walk to the train station in Wheathampstead for sale. There were also flocks of sheep on Nomansland Common.

Alfred and Ann were grandparents on his father’s side. John’s father, James, was born at Dolphins in 1873. John remembered living at the Dolphins where the well served 4 families and you drew water once a day. There was a bakehouse with one big concrete oven for 2 cottages. The cottages were of lath and plaster, His grandmother would glean for wheat after the harvest when the corn stooks had stood three Sundays. Wheat then was hand-threshed with a flail. After school John would read verses from the bible to his grandmother who was bedridden by then. She liked to hear from the book of Isaiah in particular.

The men didn’t get back from the fields until 10 30 at night during harvest time and the shops stayed open until 11.00 pm for provisions. The men were paid on a Saturday. Alfred and Anne had 6 children. John often used to say of those days “If you had half a herring for tea you were fortunate”. There was no transport to St Albans, so Granny used to walk there with her straw plait to sell for making hats. Before the war, there would be occasional summer outings by horse and carriage to Bricket Wood fair with all its delights of roundabouts, swings and a helter-skelter. It took two horses to pull the garlanded four-wheeler carriage holding about 40 people. You had to walk up Holywell Hill on the way back to save the horses.

Rats would scramble about under the tiles and under the eaves. You could see the sky above if you sat in the alcove round the open fire, and when it rained the wood would spit. It was a big inglenook fireplace with seats all around the hearth. The saucepans and kettles were all black. His two spinster aunts, Emily and Harriet, were both in service to the Cavans at Wheathampstead House. When Dolphins was sold the aunts had to find somewhere else to live and moved to an old thatched cottage near the old school in Church Street, built by Canon Davys. This was in the days before the Rent Protection Act. John had an uncle who worked as a saddler and harness maker where Damian Discount (*now The Reading Rooms*) is.

James Matthews, John’s father, was born in 1873 and died in 1968, at 94 years of age. He was blacksmith first at Knebworth, where he lodged, then at Tottenham. When living at the Dolphins he would walk to Breachwood Green to visit his father’s parents. Eventually he settled as blacksmith behind the Swan public house on land since developed for St Helen’s

school. He was there 45 years, finishing in 1940 with the coming of mechanisation and the replacing of shire horses with tractors.

James had over 100 horses on his books and worked with two forges and hand-blown bellows. There was a shoeing floor which took three horses at a time. Outside was used for wheels and tiring. You'd use flat steel and build a fire round the wheel to weld the steel onto the oak. Mr Wren at Jessamine Cottage was the wheelwright. He was also a sign writer, writing signs on carts. He won prizes for it too. Simons the butchers, founded in 1840, had three horses and carts at one time.

Winter was hardest, as the horses were ploughing all the time – two horses for one furrow. Six sets for one field. A tractor can draw three or even five. Horses were sent for shoeing after the ploughing after dark, not to waste time. John used to hold a candle at the mud-covered fetlocks so that his father could see what he was doing. Then they'd be back in the field before daybreak. The ploughmen would ride side-saddle on the plough horses, their dinner hanging on the ames – (a wicker basket holding their bread and cheese.)

Horses that pulled the carts delivering coal had a particularly hard time of it driving off their back legs and wearing out their hind shoes going up the hills. It was hard work, both for horses and the blacksmith who frequently had to repair their shoes. Horses would draw the plough and pull the carriages of tradesmen and wealthier parishioners who owned carriages.

A horse-driven pump was used at the sewage farm to drive the sewage into open ditches. (The horse's name was Vic.)

Necton Road was put on mains drainage in 1926. Mr Wren, who managed the sewage farm at East Meads, built his own house in Necton Road. He was also churchwarden (?) and sweep to the village?? [check] Mrs Wren's grandfather, Henry Hobbs, was coachman at Lamer.

If you welded three pairs of shoes for the back legs, they would last 10 days. It cost 4 shillings for one horse. You'd have the iron in the fire so hot but not so hot that it would burn. They used silver sand for a few seconds to weld on the anvil. Sparks did fly. The landlord of the Swan once said to John (aged 14 at the time), "You'll have to get rid of those short trousers, boy!" They'd put iron tyres on wheels.

There were three coal merchants in the village then, one of whom, Mr Hawkins, lived at 42 Necton Road. His sister, Nurse Amy Hawkins, was the village midwife and lived upside of the coal yard. They had their own stands outside the station. Winter was hardest, as the horses would slip on the ice. You'd use rough nails and put a sharp edge on the tip of the nail.

When he was a boy, one of John's jobs for his father was to turn the big, heavy sandstone grindstones used to sharpen the scythes and knives. They were heavy and that too was hard work.

The village then was run by the squirearchy: the Garrards at Lamer, Lord Cavan at Wheathampstead Place, the Robins at Delaport, and the Rector. There was stabling

everywhere. There was no compulsory education in James's day. If you went to school on a Monday without your 2d, you had to go home. Only the Rector and squirearchy could write.

Farming

On leaving school John started work at Marford Farm, under Mr Blain. He was there three years from 1936 to 1939, working with another four people. It was the only way he could earn a livelihood. But John's mother thought this not good enough for him as such work was looked down on. So she paid for him to take up a three-year apprenticeship in upholstery at Gibbons in Victoria Street, St Albans. He had also tried for jobs at Vauxhalls in Luton for car manufacturing. Otherwise the only work on offer was delivering milk or stone picking.

Marford Farm at that time was larger with lots of land north of the railway line.

While at Marford Farm, John's jobs were to clean out the cowshed (which housed 30 cows). To deliver milk at 6 30 am from a large churn with a tap from a motorcycle and sidecar. The can's capacity was 2 gallons. Housewives used jugs to collect the milk and quantities were measured with a metal rod stuck in the churn.

Three farms delivered milk direct to customers then, selling it retail to housewives at a penny halfpenny a pint. Cream was scooped off from large pans into cartons. Skimmed milk was cheaper and bought direct from the farmhouse.

Horses

John had very detailed memories of horses. He told me that horses used to be left alone in the field for 5 years to strengthen them before being trained and broken in. (*George Ewart Evans describes how this would happen: one old and one young horse were put together, so that the older horse could train the younger. Then the younger one would be tied to a tree and chased round in circles with whips to tire it out before it could bear being harnessed. RJ*) Arthur Robert Woollatt at Beechhyde kept horses out for five years like this.

In 1938 a Scotsman came down from Ayrshire in a special train bringing his whole farm stock, including 12 Clydesdales. Suffolk Punches have a cleaner leg than Shire horses. The Shire Society reports that Suffolk Punches are used to work with sugar beet in Suffolk now (1974). Lord Brocket kept a stud of Percherons for use as draught horses.

Beer was delivered by Shire horses.

Cattle

In wintertime cattle would be kept going in the fields with mangolds (mangel worzels) and kale. John used to cut the kale by hand. Then it grew to 4 foot high 'like elm trees'. Now that it's broadcast, it's smaller and thicker. Cleaning the cow sheds would take 400 gallons of water.

To grow kale you'd need 10 tons of manure to the acre, spread by hand. The horses would put it out in heaps and it was spread by men with forks.

Hay

Had to be cut and turned by horses. One to pull the machine and one to drive the blade for cutting the hay. One horse to turn the hay getting the wind and sun on it. One to drag the hayrake dragging the hay into lines across the field; and two to pull the giant rake to sweep up the hay into a stack. The elevator was driven by a horse walking round in circles to take the hay to the top. It was difficult to get the balance right for this, but Bob was one horse who could do it. Not every horse could.

It took four men to pile up the hay. A skilled man could thatch the stack in two days. This would keep until winter and would be cut into squares the size of a table for feeding the animals. Hay matured well in such stacks. The straw from them was used for thatching, as at Wicken Fen where they use a Streatham steam engine to pump water from the dyke to the Ouse.

Three horses were needed to harvest the corn with a binder. This was very heavy work, requiring two horses at the back and one at the front to cut, bind and string out the sheaves. This was heavy intricate work. The sheaves had to be put into stooks by hand, and these had to stand three Sundays to dry. Nowadays they're all put into a combine harvester and are dried in another machine which kills germination. The moisture content can be controlled now.

Threshing

Steam engines were hired twice a year to do the job. Very noisy they were too. There was a driver and a threshing drum. The men lived in wooden wheeled constructions or lived rough under hedges. Several tramps worked with the threshing tackle, who would spend the night in Hitchin or St Albans. Water for the steam power was drawn from the River Lea near the mill. They were thirsty engines. The machines were belt driven with a wire skip and chimney to keep the sparks away and wire netting to keep out rats. The grain was sold. Eventually tractors were used to drive the drum.

Ploughing

It took two large engines to steam plough. There was a windlass with wire rope hauling the plough winding a winch to draw six furrows. One horse was kept busy all day providing water. It was so noisy you had to shout to make yourself heard. This machine could do the work of 12 horses.

Six teams were used for ploughing. Then there was harrowing to break up the soil, then drilling to sow the grain, then the roller to firm the earth. All done by horse power. Ford tractor adverts appeared in 1915, but few were used before 1939. Crude TVO tractors were used after the war, running on vaporising oil and started with petrol. They had steel wheels and were slow and heavy. Then modern diesel tractors came out and with them a consequent changing of the landscape.

Upholstery at Gibbons in Victoria Street

Springs were sewn in by hand and laced with cord both ways. Armchairs had a cane round the edge bent into shape by steam. Finer twine was used to bind the spring to the cane.

Armchairs and tapestry work were easy. Working with hide was more difficult. First hessian was used to cover it all, then horsehair, then more hessian, then cotton wool, then calico, then the final covering. It took a week's work to make one seat. Horsehair was dusty. We remade mattresses. Machines made them more resilient. Stitching through the sides and at the tops. There would be two lines of stitching on mattresses with the same twine. We made divans and mattresses. Flock was no good for mattresses as it gave them no shape. Horsehair was firmer but heavier.

You'd have a mouthful of tacks. The most awful thing was laying carpets or lino, and beating carpets was no fun. You'd have to drag them onto the grass "to put a polish on". It took two people to do this, or sometimes the back wheel of a Morris Oxford car.

Mr Gibbons was terrifying. He'd throw his tools out of the window in an argument with the cabinet maker. The labour exchange blacklisted him. It cost £20 to be apprenticed for the first year at 5s a week for the first year; 7s 6d the second year, and 12s 6d the third year. You were cheap labour as an apprentice and he kicked you out after the third year. There was no security of employment. John did some work for Collins Antiques for a time, and then went to Vauxhalls. There was terrible unemployment in the 30s. Groups of unemployed men would stand around outside the Bull in Wheathampstead. You'd have to cycle round to the Labour Exchange in Harpenden to sign on three times a week. You could wait two hours outside Vauxhall Motors in Luton filing along in line to see the employment officer. There was a surfeit of skilled men then with no work. The reverse of now (1974).

Farming was in a poor condition as food from overseas was cheaper. Farmland too was in a terrible state. John went to try for employment with the London North Eastern Railway company at the loco shed at Hatfield, but with no luck. He also tried Helmets Ltd in the village, and the Telephone Exchange and post office, where Mrs Crook was in charge. Helmets founded by Mr Tom Noblett made all sorts of protective head gear including firemen's helmets made of cork to replace brass helmets. They supplied the whole of the London Fire Brigade. They also made tropical helmets for overseas and police helmets, also from cork. The cork was layered into shape with steam baths, then hammered into shape on a block. The girls did the linings. Crash helmets were made of pith (compressed cardboard that came from Thetford).

War service

When the war came John joined up with the Royal Artillery. He was with the army for 5 years and 3 months, not returning until 6th May 1946, though the war in Europe was over by May 1945. He was on heavy guns. He trained at Arborfield near Wokingham, Berkshire, with no ammunition, then at Weybourn near Cromer for 8 weeks where you'd learn to fire a 56 lb shell from 4.5 calibre gun. John wanted to come home. He spent some time at naval bases in Rainham in Essex, in the Orkneys at Scapa Flow, also in Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen.

He liked Orkney and the farming there. He was let out to farmers on 24-hour leave and lived on a farm that kept beef cattle and poultry for export to the mainland. Oats were the only crop, and the first to ripen, so particularly suitable for that part of the world. John kept 12 chickens there, and they used the eggs in camp. By chance he met Dr Smallwood's daughter at the Thanksgiving service held in Kirkwall cathedral to celebrate the victory at El

Alamein. Each Sunday they would visit the war ships at Scapa Flow. There were two routes to the Orkneys: Aberdeen to Kirkwall, and Thursoe to Inverness – an eight-hour journey on a single track railway.

He was sent to the Middle East attached to the battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment but never got posted to North West Europe as the Russians had won the war there. He was sent to Cairo on a clerical job and didn't return to Europe until the end of the war. He worked with the natives at GHQ, 2nd echelon Egypt where the locals resented the presence of the British and there was lots of bomb throwing. He came home on the Caernarvon Castle luxury liner and was back in Europe for 10 days. South to Alexandria, then to Mombasa. Caught a disease at Tarranta, on the toe of Italy, but couldn't stop. Came home via the Medlock Route: Alexandria to Toulon, then 850 miles to Calais. It was mine-ridden. The men slept in lifejackets. 'The deserts weren't that lovely,' said John. 'I was one year in the green fields of France where the railways are impressive.'

The Dump

In 1919 the Dump was taking rubbish from Islington Borough Council. The railway line to the Dump closed later than that to Wheathampstead station. The horses that pulled the rubbish trucks had to have leather under their shoes to prevent them getting cut by glass. John's father made a four-tined hook to pull the rubbish out of the trucks. An inspector checked that they didn't pull the bottoms out of the trucks. Two trains a day usually came to the dump, but when loading was being done by hand only one train a day came.

Sheepcote Lane before the war was a very pleasant walk. They used to build haystacks in the dell beyond the crossing keeper's house. Trixie remembered the bluebells there in the highway field.

Brocket Hall offered 90 acres to the National Trust, but they didn't take it. Less beautiful now than it used to be as they can't afford to pay the gamekeepers. The first son died at age 15, the second son, the present David Nall-Cain, used to live at Water End House. They used to own land at Bramshill. Devil's Dyke too was beautiful. Lord Brocket gave it to Wheathampstead in ... ??? (1937)

Farms, the railway and nurseries used to be the main employers in Wheathampstead.

Mrs Harding, licensee at the Brocket Arms, was one of the six people at Bernard Shaw's deathbed. She and her husband (Fenwick Harding, the sign writer and friend of Charlie Collins) lived in their later years at Loufenway in East Lane. (The house name combines their forenames.)

