

Memories of Mena, daughter of Nellie Pearce (née Wren).

(These memories were transcribed from the original manuscript by local historian Amy Coburn, another of George Wren's granddaughters and hence Mena's cousin, in about 1998. The footnotes are transcribed from notes added by Amy who wrote: "No way am I nit-picking this fascinating account which in many ways bears out much of what I wrote in the story of George and Henry – this is to 'keep the record straight'." This is a reference to "George and Henry: their lives and times in Victorian Wheathampstead" published by Wheathampstead Local History Group in 1992.)

John Edward Pearce returned from the South African War having married my mother on June 5th 1901 at St Helen's Church, Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire where she was born.

At the meal after the wedding, someone said where was the marriage certificate. "I've got it" said the bridegroom taking it out of his pocket. At which his new mother-in-law jumped up out of her chair and snatching it out of his hand said "What are you doing with it?" and thrusting it at her daughter said "That's YOURS Nellie".

The incident must have had a permanent effect on him, as he told me this himself some 60 or more years later, one of the few if indeed the only reference I knew him to make about the past.

If anyone said there was no love lost between John Edward Pearce and the Wren family they would be right. He regarded them as clodhoppers and stick-in-the-muds. In which he was wrong. There is a lot to learn about the land and animals to make a living in those days mostly by back-breaking labour and they knew it all — with generations of farm workers behind them. Grandfather George Wren was born in Wheathampstead in a little cottage¹ next to the church. There was a public house on the main road and the cottage stood well back behind it. In summer it was covered with roses and honeysuckle, hanging down in great swathes and climbing over the roof. I remember being outside having a battle with my mother because I would not go in. She wanted to see her grandparents and I wouldn't go in because, standing there in the sunshine it all looked pitch dark inside and unknown. I wasn't taking any chances. She couldn't persuade me, so went in alone and left me outside. Her grandfather died and his widow came to live with her son George. I remember her as a little old lady sitting hunched up beside the fire, in fact we called her Little Granny.

George went to a dame school and learned to read and write, which not all did in those days and at the age of 12 went down the road to the flour mill to work. The mill was on the River Lea which ran across the main road. I liked to go in there at ground-level and listen to all the noise when it was working and see the water rushing through. Lovely damp smells and plenty of cobwebs. George blamed his bent back later in life having to carry heavy sacks of flour before he was fully grown. He also started bell-ringing at the age of 12 and was to put in 60 years of that.

St. Helen's Church was his hobby. He named their third daughter Helen but she died in infancy. He was in succession sidesman, vergers, people's warden, sexton, grave digger, clock-winder.² This clock winding when I was there was an anxiety to me. For about 15 years we went to Wheathampstead every year during the summer holidays from school

¹ George was born in a cottage opposite The Swan Inn in Wheathampstead. The cottage Mena recalls visiting was near the Red Lion. See "George and Henry".

² I always understood that George left the Dame School at eight years of age. He would then have been at school for three years as he began his schooling at three. There is no record of him having worked at the mill but living close by there is no doubt that he could have done some work there from time to time. Helen died when she was six years old – family bible date. I do not think George was ever People's Warden.

and where grandfather was so was I. I made no demands, caused no trouble, did as I was told and enjoyed it so much that I wouldn't do anything to endanger this freedom. For one thing I was far away from my mother who used to complain that it might be a holiday for such as me, but it was no holiday for her, it meant turning out and spring-cleaning for her Mother, and Nellie hated housework. Needless to say my father never came with us.

To return to the church clock, which was wound up from the back, up a flight of stone steps and then you had to get along a beam of 4" x 2" straight ahead, the back of the clock being on your left. There wasn't room at the end of the beam to get beyond the clock door, so having reached the handle you then return and wind the clock, back to the door, push it in front of you, fasten the door and back along the beam and the job's done! Nobody it seemed had thought of putting hinges on the other side, so that you came to the handle first. I used to go over in my mind what I would do if Grandfather fell. There was nothing to save him hitting the stone floor of the church below except for a wood screen through which the bell ropes hung.

Down the stone stairs, out of the church, across the churchyard and the road into Chennells the Post Office, because there would be sure to be some men there to help. I don't know how often it had to be done, but no doubt he had done it hundreds of times, without me around but I couldn't relax until we were at ground level again.

When George went into the church he took off his straw hat, and I would put it on. So if anyone came in, all was in order. They were very fussy about such things in those days. During the war when labour was scarce I helped him with grave-digging. I didn't do any real digging. He had planks of wood on the ground each side and down below he threw the spade full of earth up on top. It was my job to keep the planks clear to prevent the earth rolling back down his neck, and Mrs Chennells came out of the Post Office and shouted that it was disgraceful for a girl to be grave-digging. I pretended that I didn't hear and Grandfather couldn't, six foot down.

Grandfather served under five Rectors. Unfortunately the one who was there the longest, Canon Davys or Davis did not see eye to eye with George Wren chiefly because while the Rector made a great fuss of the Choir he ignored the ringers altogether. It wasn't as if the ringers could not be seen tucked away out of sight because the ringing chamber was the floor of the church at the crossing and the ropes were hung round the pillars. Grandfather told me once that Canon Davys had appropriated to himself land which belonged to the church, but I hardly think he could do that. There would be records at St Albans and elsewhere. What he probably did was to get the land cropped, sell the produce and keep the money perhaps. Anyway, Canon Davys came and went, but George Wren was there still.

If anyone had asked me my Grandfather's profession I should have been hard put to supply a short answer. He was private enterprise itself, worked all hours of daylight. No gambling or drinking in pubs. He wasn't a teetotaler; there was always a barrel of beer in the cupboard under the stairs, together with a sack of potatoes and the paraffin for the lamps. What consternation if a drop of the latter got mixed with the former!

Grandfather was everything in Wheathampstead. If anyone wanted a chimney swept they would come and ask. Sometimes he would buy up wood, with the exception of standing trees, and cut down and clear all undergrowth making the result into faggots. I've helped him do that. It wasn't pleasant work. At the end of the day you had cut and bleeding fingers, at least I did. He would go round the village saying he was going to kill a pig and take orders for certain joints. He would buy a railway truck of coal, bag it, cart it, and sell it, what he didn't require at home, where there were two fires going for cooking. Then there was the local authority he had to go to the school during the holidays and clear away all the paper. There was no rubbish collection; anything that couldn't be burnt was put in a ditch at the far end of the garden, such as broken crockery.

He had a field here and a field there. I wonder if it was the remnant of the old strip system where the best soils and the worst were divided up.

Grandfather was also in charge of the sewage works. Such as it was – down beside the River Lea. There were not more than three dwellings³ on main drainage, one of these was the Rectory. Everyone else had to bury it in the garden. I am writing now up to the beginning of the First World War. There were two small sedimentation tanks and Vic the horse had to go round and round, driving an endless chain, and how he hated it.

Grandfather would set him up and go and attend to some crops and as soon as he could no longer hear Grandfather he would stop, until a shout would make him start again. The end result of the process was an almost colourless liquid which trickled away across the ground. Needless to say some lovely vegetables were grown. One year of Grandfather had a pair of marrows, absolute twins which he was going to show at the Annual Flower Show. Someone came out one night and cut one in half, which upset him. He knew who it was but could do nothing about it.

The only time I blotted my copybook was down there. Seeing a pit filled with sludge with a plank across it, I jumped up and down on it, sure enough it went in and I went in, down and up, hanging on to tufts of grass growing round the edge I managed to haul myself out, black as ink. I really gave Grandfather a shock when I met him on the path. I was wearing a blue linen dress with a white lace collar all now as black as night. He took me to the river only a few yards away which was so shallow you could paddle in it. We removed most of my clothes and shoes and he washed as much as possible of the awful black stuff off. He harnessed up the horse again and took me back home to the women, who bathed me, washed my hair gave me a dose of physic and put me to bed. I was 6 or 7 and found putting to bed the worst punishment. I took no harm, but I can't think why I was silly enough to bounce up and down on a plank, it was out of character.

While I have Vic in my mind I must write a bit about him. One of his parents was a grey and one brown because he was brown underneath and grey on top. I expect it's got a name but I don't know it. My one ambition but I told no one, was to get out in the morning and catch Vic asleep. But I never did. He was always with his head out of the stable door. Grandfather took the greatest care of him. He, of course, represented quite a sum of money, and without him grandfather could never have got through his work. He never used a whip on him, the most he would do was growl "get a move on you old sod", and shake the reins. Vic would flash his tail and get a spurt on for a few yards and then back into the same trot. No matter how dilatory he might be on the way out, once his head was turned towards home there was no need to urge him and no matter how hot the weather or how far from home he would never touch a drop of water until he was home again. The water was delicious and icy cold from a well, deep in the chalk, he knew a thing or two.

One day when out, George found there was a large shaggy dog running along at the horse's heels, came indoors and laid down in the back kitchen, couldn't be persuaded to go and never did go. Grandfather knew all the dogs for miles around and he had never seen this one before, made enquires to no avail, no policeman in Wheathampstead of course⁴, so as he had adopted Grandfather he was allowed to remain until he died of old age. They kept a cat down the sewer and every day when it heard the cart creaking down the lane it would run out to meet it, as it knew Grandfather would have some tasty pieces of meat in a piece of paper.

³ There were quite certainly more than three dwellings on main drainage. See "George and Henry" for date etc.

⁴ There were policemen in Wheathampstead at the time Mena writes about. Two police houses were built on the site of the cottage where George was born.

When the First World war broke out there was great consternation because soldiers were coming round taking all horses. Fortunately they left Grandfather alone as he had only the one, anybody with more than one horse had to give them up.

Although I intended this to be the story of my life I have to include my immediate ancestors and forebears. It must be remembered that I had no intention as a child of ever writing experiences, what I am writing now at the age of 80 is all from memory and I think I must get back to George down at the flour mill. He had a brother William and a sister Emily. William in his turn also worked at the mill and indeed made it his life's work, following the river Lea to where it enters the Thames at the East India Docks and Uncle Will married and brought up his family there. Emily married and lived at Dunstable⁵.

George married a girl from the Folly⁶ which is a hamlet a mile from Wheathampstead on the Dunstable Road, Anne Hill. She had a sister Eliza who never married and lived at one time with George and Anne. I have a book of hers, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. It says inside, A gift Jan 1868. I read that a great deal when I was young.

Where George and Anne lived after they were married I do not know, in Wheathampstead certainly⁷. They had nine children, everyone had large families in those days, because of a great deal of infant mortality and children expected to care for their parents in old age. Ernest, Walter, Annie, George, Percy, Helen, Nellie, Ada and Arthur.

When the three eldest boys were of an age to help him he brought a piece of land at New Marford about a mile out of the village to the east. There was nothing at New Marford except three rows of cottages and one corner shop. He set to work to build a house and dig a well after a day's work. I never knew Ernest (killed in the First World War) nor Walter but they must have worked hard, the well was dug and bricked, the house was built, four rooms downstairs and four upstairs, as far as I know without any outside help. The fourth room downstairs was paved and was to be the horse's stable, but my mother told me that the noise of the horse clomping about at night was insupportable and he had to have a stable built down the garden. It's obvious he did it without any help, he didn't put a damp proof course in, no planning permission was required then.

Apart from the child that died, Helen, when the railway came it took all his children away except Reginald Arthur the youngest. Ada married Jim Hay and had two daughters, Ada and Gladys, they all went to Australia in about 1910 and my mother lost touch. Before they went we went to see them where they lived near Southend-on-Sea, what a desolate landscape I thought. Annie married Dick Tamblin and they lived near Bedford Park near Turnham Green, they had three daughters, Rita, Renee and Phyllis. Renee married a school chum. Phyllis died at the age of 18 from some virus infection and Rita did not marry. Their father worked at Hampton Water Works where also my father worked. George went to live in Yeovil and became a policeman. Percy came to London and for long periods lived with us.

Arthur, as I said lived at home and was the village postman, also his father's right-hand man as George got older. Arthur was engaged to be married for a very long time. His wife to be lived in a village halfway between Wheathampstead and St. Albans, Sandridge. She had parents she couldn't leave, he had the same. Surely no two people were ever so unselfish. They used to bike between both places year after year. I am

⁵ George had two other sisters, Isabella b.1849 and Betsy b.c.1850, according to the 1851 census.

⁶ Anne née Hill was not born at The Folly, she was born at Chiltern Green, just over the county boundary in Bedfordshire.

⁷ George and Anne went to live in Flamstead after their marriage (see "George and Henry"). Their eldest children were born there. On their return to Wheathampstead they lived at The Folly.

happy to say they were able to marry in the end and had one daughter Amy. She is a bell ringer along with my son David and my grandson, Ian, they keep alive the tradition started by George Wren so long ago and maybe his father before him. Arthur was unfortunately knocked down and killed one dark night by a car at the top of his own road. Walter also went to Australia and my mother lost touch. So we come to Nellie born in 1880⁸, married John Edward Pearce and had three children, Mena, the writer, Harry and Lorna.

Harry married Hilda Blener, had no children, Lorna still going strong has not married and I have one son whose father was Jack Boyd Livingston died in 1963. I also married Percy Owen Wade who died in 1976.

To return to Wheathampstead. My grandmother Ann or Anne Wren in the early 1900s when I first knew her must have been in her 60s. It would have been impossible to ask, children were not told adults' ages. She also had been to a dame school and could read and write. She kept a book on a high shelf and if anyone in New Marford wanted the Rector for a christening, a wedding, a funeral or someone was ill, she entered the particulars in the book, which George took with him. This saved them the long walk to the village. Everyone came to the back door. I was there once when someone, obviously a stringer, came to the front door. Stunned silence! Then a chair was fetched. Someone climbed on it and with great effort withdrew the bolt at the top and another at the bottom, the lock unlocked in the middle and the door could then open and the daring person who came to the front door revealed. I thought it all most intriguing. The road had no name the houses no names or numbers.

I saw something once at the back door which I never saw again. The milk delivered with a yoke across his shoulders. From each end chains hung down, on the end of which was a can of milk. The can was unhooked and the milk transferred into the housewives jug. My mother told me that when she was a girl she had to fetch the milk from a farm and avoid if possible various geese and turkeys who acted as watch dogs.

I also vaguely remember men wearing the old farm workers smoke, not many and only once or twice, made of heavy linen, deeply smocked yokes and coffs, buttoned down at the front. All hand made. Grandmother had a most stupendous cape, black lined with black satin. It was covered with jet beads in exotic patterns and must have been heavy to wear. When I knew her she never went out. She went outside one winters day and fell on the ice and broke her hip nothing was ever done about it and she walked with a limp. She was an excellent cook. She used to make a fruit pudding the like of which I have never tasted since. In a thin suet crust she could put all the fruit out of the garden red, white and black currants, gooseberries, raspberries, apple, plums, no water. This used to bubble away all the morning and was delicious. I never saw such mountains of food, but hard physical labour day after day needs plenty of fuel and with two men at home for every meal she needed to be a good cook. Such as they couldn't supply themselves was delivered.

Like Grandfather with his pigs, the butcher in the village would take orders for beef before he killed an animal. This was done to avoid waste, as with no refrigeration everything must be disposed of quickly. Being inland too they never had any fish⁹, when going home from London my mother always took kippers, herring etc. The word waste I always associate with Wheathampstead it being a crime to waste anything. You were throwing away the hours of sweat and toil put in to produce whatever it was and never, ever, I was told, burn food. If you couldn't eat it put it out for some animal, chickens or birds.

⁸ Nellie was born May 25th 1881, according to family bible.

⁹ There was a fishmonger in Wheathampstead but it seemed a tradition to take fish 'home' after a visit to Luton or as a 'present' from further afield.

Grandfather used to get angry with the pigs because they put their feet in the trough. He would stand there with a stick in his hand and fetch the offending trotter a sharp blow. Getting the pigs breakfast was always the first job of the day. A cauldron of boiled potatoes, any vegetables left from the day before and meal sprinkled over it to avoid lumps until it all resembled a kind of porridge. This was put into pails and taken down to the pigsties whose inhabitants would be making a hell of a din and although he considered putting their feet in the trough as wasting it, I'm sure it all got eaten or licked off.

The next job was to collect Vic from the stable to have a "wash and brush up", food and water then it was our breakfast time. How I would have loved to live there always, but I knew it was impossible, everyone except those who worked on the land had to leave Wheathampstead to get work elsewhere.

What struck me as a curious was the attitude of the Wren family to those living near them but more important or wealthy. Having such fertile loamy soil there were several large estates in the neighbourhood. Grandfather often went to Ayot and Waterend but I'm sure he didn't know that George Bernard Shaw lived at the former and Waterend, an Elizabethan farmhouse, was the home of Sarah Jennings. Neither did he know that Mr. Gladstone lived at ????¹⁰

It was just as if they each lived in their own watertight compartments, live and let live carried to extreme. When he went to any of these houses he dealt with the housekeeper, steward or butler, never saw the owner. Two places only I remember being talked about, both concerning happenings. One was Mr. Cherry Garrard. He was a well-to-do landowner and a bachelor. He went with Captain Scott on his journey to the Antarctic in 1912 and was among those who comprised the base camp. On his return he wrote a most interesting account and called it "The Worst Journey in the World", he also brought back a husky sledge dog – poor thing, a great mistake, and must have spent a lot of money to do so. He had a wonderful kennel built for it, all white tiled with an inner place to sleep and a large area for exercise. Anyone could go and see it, which I did twice, but of course away from the other dogs and all alone, no doubt the weather here didn't suit it, and it soon pined away and died.

The other place was Wheathampstead House which was the residence of Earl Cavan, he had built a tennis court entirely enclosed in glass and when the First World War began, offered Wheathampstead House to some Belgians refugees, he was in the army. The refugees arrived and in no time at all, every bit of glass in the fabulous glass tennis court was in smithereens, so much for human gesture! I have no doubt the house suffered in the same way. The family never lived there again¹¹. My mother used to tell how the old Countess, daughter of the Vicar at Ayot had a saddle put up in a tree and mother and other girls used to stand in the road below to look at her. She used to get very angry and tell them to clear off. I wonder why, with a huge park, extending both sides of the road connected by an ornamental bridge she had to choose a tree right on the road, if she didn't want to be seen. Perhaps she really did. Also what my mother was doing there in the exact opposite to her own way home from school through the village, at least 2 or 3 miles¹². Along the girls watching the Countess of Cavan up the tree – an activity that absolutely none of THEIR mothers would have indulged in, even if they had

¹⁰ George certainly knew G.B.S. (see "George and Henry"). Mena is muddled over Mr Gladstone. She is probably thinking of Bocket Hall where Lord Melbourne P.M. lived at one time.

¹¹ Lord Cavan did return to live at Wheathampstead House after the First World War. Grace and Win Barton worked there.

¹² Nellie would have been living at The Folly in her early school days and would not have been going far out of her way. The distance to either home was under a mile in any case. This tale about her Ladyship's strange behaviour is still told in Wheathampstead by old residents.

been so inclined it would have been well-nigh impossible with long full skirts and multitudinous petticoats of the age – were Leonie, known as Lo, Winnie and Grace Barton and perhaps their brothers Charlie and Fred. The Bartons lived in a cottage next door but one to the Wrens and when I first went to New Marford Mr. Barton had already died leaving a widow and 5 children. I do not know Mrs. Barton's circumstances, and it was not my business, but I do know she did the only thing she could and took in washing and kept her family together. She did Grandmother's washing for years. The hard labour it entailed is unbelievable today. Every drop of water had to be wound up from a well and carried to her kitchen and then disposed of. The only thing to use was a bar of yellow soap, perhaps a little soda, too much and your fingers were raw. What impressed me was the fact that her house was scrubbed. The chairs, the floor, even the stairs were all scrubbed as white as snow. She was a tall gaunt woman who to my childish eyes looked as if she did not get enough to eat and probably didn't.