

Robert Gregory

I was born in London in 1938 and moved to Wheathampstead a year later.

My grandfather, Professor Robert Thomson Leiper, owned Leaseybridge Farm from the 1930s to the early 1950s. He was Chairman of Wheathampstead Parish Council in 1936/37 and again from 1939 to 1945, ie the duration of World War 2. He gave Homestead in Down Green Lane to my mother when she married my father in 1935/36. He worked in London at the Greek Section of the BBC reading the news throughout World War 2, for which duty he was required to wear a dinner jacket. When he visited Athens after the war, people recognised his voice and welcomed him.



Robert Thomson Leiper

In World War 2, I remember looking out of my mother's bedroom window at the searchlights sweeping the sky towards Harpenden with their moving shafts of light seeking bombers.

My brother and I slept through the explosion of the doodlebug (V1) which just missed the cottage and exploded 100 yards away in the field beyond in June 1944. I was five and my brother was three. My parents were very surprised that we hadn't woken. When I came downstairs in the morning, I saw there was dust and broken glass everywhere. I was worried that my father might think we had done it. The windowpanes with that protective stuff on them were all right but all the other panes were blown in. All sorts of military vehicles and uniformed people arrived the next day to see the crater and later on I took a cup of tea to the policeman guarding the site.

I also recall looking through the car window and seeing an enormous tractor ploughing up the hillside on Nomansland, "turning the green one brown", ploughing the ground to grow vegetables and demolishing even the gorse bushes in its path.

When I was five, I went to St Albans High School and then, when I was seven, to Aylesford House School in Sandridge as a dayboy. Maths was taught by the headmaster. I remember when a boy called Anderson got an answer wrong, he was called out to the front and given two whacks on the hand with a ruler. The headmaster said "How many is that?" meaning he wanted the answer "Two" but Anderson thought he wanted the answer to the original question, so he was whacked many times more. I remember being completely baffled by algebra as it was taught by the headmaster.

On the way home from school, the bus driver used to drop me off in Nomansland but if the bus didn't stop, maybe because I didn't ring the bell, it would go on into Wheathampstead. That meant walking up Brewhouse Hill and running the gauntlet of the local boys who would shout "Pink caps" and then attack. There was one chap in particular who asked me for money "because you've got more money than we have" and I'm ashamed to say I gave him the untold wealth of two shillings on condition that he called off the other boys. It was money well spent. I think he went to some sort of special school, maybe an approved school. I remember that he had to wear a long striped coat all the time.

I left Aylesford House early after my father had asked me to count in French and I had answered "Un, dukes, troys" because we had to learn French solely from reading the book! He took me away from Aylesford House and I went to St Albans School two or three years before the normal age of 13. Luckily, there were other pupils who had not done algebra. We

were taught algebra by Mr Jenkins who was a wonderful teacher. He made algebra make sense, giving me a sound knowledge which stood me in good stead evermore. One of the cadets in the CCF platoon of which I was in charge subsequently rose to the rank of General in the Army.

My grandfather was an eminent scientist but he wasn't very popular with our troops because he forbade them to bathe in the river Nile, which they were longing to do because it was so hot, but he realised that they would get infected with bilharzia, from the little snails in the water, if they did so.¹

He employed two men, King and Petchey, to work on the farm. Petchey died soon after the farm was sold in 1951-2, but King worked for the County Council and lived in a cottage on Nomansland. Just before he died early this century he told me that there were deer on Nomansland Common which could be seen if you got out early. He had saved my cocker spaniel by releasing him when he got caught in a trap in Little Pigotts Wood a quarter mile from our cottage.

In the village there was a butcher in the place where a restaurant is today, near the Post Office, and a vegetable shop on the East side of the High Street run by Miss Lorna Rowe. On Brewhouse Hill, on the left side as you climb up it, was Helmets who made policemen's helmets and other headwear. The person who ran it was Len Noblett. My mother was Len's son's godmother.

A tragic event was the murder of 17-year-old Anne Noblett when walking home one night on 30th December 1957 in Marshalls Heath Lane. This crime remains unsolved some 67 years later.

I saw Mr Housden, the headmaster of St Helen's School, when he very kindly allowed the school to be used for the Dramatic Society's performances.

My father used to 'volunteer' my brother and myself to work for the Wheathampstead Dramatic Society, painting scenery etc., usually taking up our whole weekend! My brother and I handed out the programmes which my father had printed. We rather enjoyed doing it.

Going down Amwell Lane, on the right is Amwell Cottage belonging to the Walton family. Tony Walton was away fighting in Malaya during World War 2 but on occasion his wife invited us round to tea during and just after the War. Next cottage along is Laurel Cottage occupied at present by the distinguished test pilot Desmond Penrose. The Elephant & Castle pub was run by the Beavis family after World War 2; I am not sure whether they ran it during the war. Going up Down Green Lane there is the first cottage, the Homestead, now occupied by my niece Catharine's family. I moved out to a flat in Four Limes to let her have it. Next is Weaver's Cottage, owned by Mr and Mrs Sharpe during World War 2. Trevor and Nesta Haywood lived in the next cottage. Trevor was away on the continent fighting the war and he told me that the way the soldiers heated the house that they were temporarily living in was to pour oil in the cellar and set light to it. Mr Fisher, the founder of Messrs. Ekins and Fisher, lived in the house above that. The Meaker family, owners of Meaker's chain of outfitters, lived in this house afterwards. Opposite the end of Down Green Lane, on the far

¹ Eventually, sixty-four years after the discovery of Bilharz, Robert Thomson Leiper understood the complete cycle of *Schistosoma* spp., with the recognition of aquatic snails as intermediate hosts of these trematodes. Leiper was a Scottish physician later on named the 'Father of modern helminthology'; apart from schistosomiasis, he made other considerable discoveries on life cycles and mode of transmission of other helminths, namely *Dracunculus medinensis* and *Loa loa*. In 1915, when he was a member of the Royal Army Medical Corps, he also distinguished between *S. mansoni* and *S. haematobium* by their morphology, egg type, and snail host.

side of the Harpenden Road, is Down Green House. That was owned by the Thorntons, who used to invite us to parties every year on New Year's Eve.

The Rector of St. Helen's Church was the Reverend Alexander M. Baird Smith, who was succeeded by the Reverend George H.E.T. Roe, who was always cheerful; I always picture him in my memory with a smile on his face. He used to cycle round his parish, calling at houses, accompanied by two dalmatian hounds. There was very little traffic during the war and in the 1950s. The local policeman also used to cycle round the village – I can still picture him pedalling up from the crossroads where Amwell Lane meets Down Green Lane. The Reverend George Roe was a friend of my parents and a fellow member of the Baconian Club which met in St Albans for a lecture once a fortnight. My parents took me if they thought it would be of interest to me.

My mother believed in the church and we went quite frequently.

After my brother and I had both left home, my mother decided that she didn't want to be just a housewife. She'd been Honorary Secretary of the British Psychological Society before the war so, after we had left home, she took a course and became an educational psychologist in Welwyn Garden City.

After I left school, I did my National Service. I was posted to Cyprus where we were fighting EOKA terrorists. After that, I got an honours degree from Trinity College, Cambridge. All my high-frequency hearing had been destroyed by an explosion in the Army and I couldn't hear what the lecturers said but I didn't realise this until I went to a Harley Street consultant when I was 25. Returning to the Army was ruled out because of this hearing loss.

I became a teacher of mathematics. Mathematics teachers were much in demand but unfortunately this was the period of the wretched School Mathematics Project, SMP, "modern maths" and I had to learn that before teaching it. Children like to be given problems for which they understand the method of solving. SMP favoured never doing a problem like the previous one. There was no real meat for the mathematician. One result was that when people went to university, for example Cambridge, to read science, they had to do a special course to bring their maths up to the right level. I was pleased that, when I visited Aldwickbury School recently, the head of the maths department said that the SMP had been kicked into the long grass.

I taught at Eton, Wellington (Crowthorne) and Oakham and in the holidays I came back to Homestead in Wheathampstead, where my mother lived until she died at the early age of 66, just a year after she retired from her post as an educational psychologist. My father told me that she made her lovely farewell speech without notes and mentioned everybody by name.

I lived there until 2014 when I moved into Four Limes to let my niece's family live at Homestead.