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Memories of Wheathampstead 1941 – 1976

(by Pam Murray - January 2003)

Coming to Wheathampstead

I remember the first time that I came to Wheathampstead as if it was yesterday, it was a drizzly, damp miserable day when my mother, her little dog Vic and me, a fourteen year old, with my kitten in a box with holes in the top, got off the bus outside the Church and wandered down the village looking for someone to ask the way to Marford Road, although I think in those days it was called Hatfield Road. We went into the Wool shop to ask and also to get a ribbon to tie my hair back, it being fairly long, soaking wet and hanging in rat's tails, I don't think I had ever felt so miserable in my life. I had had to leave all my friends and the home and surroundings that I had always known and here we were in the middle of the country knowing no one and having nothing.

Twenty four hours before, we had been living in a fairly large comfortable old Victorian house in a pleasant suburb of London, and although we had had some air raids and had to go into the Anderson shelter in the garden most nights it wasn't too bad, then the night before we found ourselves in Wheathampstead we had a most horrendous air raid and lost most of our belongings including our home, luckily we were in the shelter at the time so suffered no actual physical harm. The firm that my father worked for in London had been severely bombed a few weeks before and had relocated to St. Albans. The 'Guvnor' hearing that we had been bombed out ourselves sent a van to pick us up and we were literally dumped in St. Albans with nothing but the clothes we wore, the animals and little else. My mother made some enquiries about accommodation and we were directed to the **Salvation Army** who said that an elderly couple in Wheathampstead, a **Mr. and Mrs. Hudson** were offering a room in their home in return for help in the house and garden. So that is how we came to be in the village. On the way round to this house, no **14, Marford Road** (I think it was 14,) we had to pass the Police house that was on the corner opposite Collins Antiques, where **Ted Barker**, the village copper was in the front garden, we asked him if he knew of anybody that would look after my kitten, he very kindly said he would and gave it a loving home for many years. I couldn't stay at the Hudson's but was found accommodation with **Mr. and Mrs. Cecil Allen** in **Mount Road** by **Murphy Chemicals**, Mr. Allen was the local coal merchant, he also had a Ford Pilot, which he used as a taxi. A **Miss Doreen Collins** a schoolteacher at the senior school was also staying there.

The Guides and school

As a keen Girl Guide, one of the first things I wanted to know was if there was a Guide company in the village, and luckily there was. The captain was **Miss Bubbles Rainbow** (real name **Zuleka**) who lived in one of the houses on the left hand side of Marford Road just before you come to the **Nelson Pub**. (we used to call them the 'posh houses' as opposed to the council houses on the opposite side of the road) The lieutenant of the company was **Miss Betty Elvin** from the **Lea Valley estate**. I think that Guide Company was the saving grace as far as I was concerned. We used to meet in the **corrugated hut** at the back of the Church yard by the old infants school. (Bury Green?) I should think it has long gone. It had an old iron stove in it and that's about all, and many a time some one would put their foot through the floorboards only for it to have to be patched up yet again. The Youth Club was also held there, run by **Miss Downer** who used to live in one of the pair of houses

that fronted the pavement half way up **Wheathampstead Hill**. I remember one evening whilst we were at a Youth club meeting a most dreadful smell pervaded the hall and was tracked down to young **Dickie Dawes** having put a cow's horn in the old stove, which he had most probably purloined from **Simons the butchers** (now a tea room I believe). Dickie's sister **Ena** used to work for Hall's the baker; she drove a small van delivering bread round the village and outskirts. Another roundsman was **Maurice (Mo) Odell** who **delivered milk by horse and cart** from the farm up where Rectory Drive is now (was it Thrales?) I can see Mo now in his breeches and Clark Gable moustache jumping on and off the back of the cart while the horse slowly plodded along. Mo was a lovely dancer, and I used to often dance with him at the local hop which was held at the senior school nearly every week, the music invariably being provided by a three piece band consisting of piano, drums and saxophone, and of course playing all the old sentimental wartime tunes.

Although I was past school leaving age at the time, I was able to go to the village school for a while as I hadn't been able to go to school in London for a year or so, as most of the other children were evacuated and the schools were taken over by the Army and other wartime organisations. I didn't enjoy my time at the school in the village, as it seemed as if the teachers and pupils alike had a down on those 'filthy Londoners'.

Necton Road

When we had been in the village for about a year my parents were able to rent a cottage in **Necton Road** from **Mr. Titimuss** so I could then live at home with them. The cottage was very basic with **gas light** and the **toilet, one of three in a row, up the yard**, I used to wait for ages to make sure the other two were empty before I 'went'.

The cottage had no bathroom but a big **brick copper** at the end of the **scullery** that we had to heat the water in, it was heated by a fire underneath the copper and because of the coal shortage, we had to burn whatever we could lay our hands on, like old shoes, old books, bits of wood etc., before having a bath in a **tin bath** that used to hang outside on the wall. The scullery was a single storey lean to, it had a **shallow stone sink** (which I still have as a sink garden) It really seemed like living in the dark ages after our house in London, but we were only too grateful to have somewhere of our own to live. After the war my parents and my brother bought the two cottages **26 and 28 Necton Road** for 300 pounds each. They did upgrade and modernise them to a degree at a later date.

Starting work

After leaving school I went to work at **Murphy and Son** at **Cavern House**, I was only there for six months and then went on to do a **Nursery nurse's** training,, first, in **St. Albans** and then in **Welwyn Garden City**. I used to get the **train every morning**, it was quite a walk from Necton Road to the Station and invariably I left it a bit late and by the time I had run up the slope to the station and then puffed my way up the old wooden stairs to the platform I would collapse in a heap in the carriage, the door of which being held open by the porter, whose name I believe was **Rueben**, he used to look over the bridge to see if anybody was running up the hill to catch the train and if there was he would hold the train up until the 'runner' arrived. **Mr. Gerald Lee** the **Stationmaster** lived in the station house with **Mrs. Ling** his housekeeper. Mrs. Ling used to belong to the **Red Cross** and some of my teenage friends and I used to go along to the **Red Cross hut** in **Codicote Road** where we had classes in first aid. We used to wear the Red Cross nurses uniform and really fancied ourselves. Incidentally Mrs. Ling eventually married **Mr. Housden (Johnny)** the ex **headmaster** of the school and they lived in a flat in **Offas Way**.

Getting married

I met my husband in **Welwyn Garden City** and we were married at **St. Helens in 1945** (using **Mr. Allen's taxi** for the occasion). My son **Nigel** was born a year later at the **Red House in Harpenden**, again using Mr. Allen's taxi to bring us home.

By this time the war was over, the men were mostly demobbed and apart from them getting a job our priority was to get a house. The Council started by building the **Swedish houses** quickly followed by **Conquerors Hill, Ceasars Road** and the rest of the estate. These houses were allocated by a points system, the more points, the higher up the list. Unfortunately for us neither my husband nor myself having been born in the village, were not considered to be locals, we would have had more

points if we had been. Eventually we were offered a flat in **Greenways**, the first detached bungalow along **Marford Road**, the council had commandeered it after it was left empty by a private catholic school and they turned it into three flats.

Village shops

In those days we used to live our lives in the village, hardly anyone had a car and apart from the occasional trip into St. Albans mainly for clothes, we had no need to go out of the village. We had plenty of shops, there was **Blindells**, the **shoe shop**, **two bakers**, **Garratt's and Hall's**, **two greengrocers**, **Mr. and Mrs. Pateman** (The Salad Bowl) and **Lorna Rowe's** tiny little shop, where I remember just after the war she had the **first delivery of ice cream** in the village for six years, we all queued up for an allocation of one small brick each, boy did that go down well! There were **three grocery shops**, they were **Woodley's** round by the Bull car park, **Mr. Stapleton's**, later to become **Fine Fare** (I worked there for a time) and **Mr. Bangs** who had the shop on the corner of **Necton Road**, taken over at a later date by **Mr. and Mrs. Oldfield**. There was **Chennel's Dairy and Post office**, Mr. Chennels was rather a large man and it seemed as if he was a permanent fixture behind the post office counter on one side of the shop, his wife serving the dairy produce on the other side. **Miss Pateman** had a **haberdashery** shop where the florist is now, and apart from the usual stock of pins, needles, aprons, scarves etc., etc, she had a few shelves with books on that she used to lend out at 1 penny a book. (This shop was later to become a **cycle shop** for short while, then **Bentleys a hardware shop**, then eventually **Mr. Stuarts, the gentleman's outfitter**.) Next door to that was **Mr. Stubb's fish and chip shop** taken over by his daughter **Connie** and her husband **Reg Field** on Mr. Stubbs retirement. People would come from miles around to get their fish and chips there - they were delicious. Prior to the **bank** being where it was until recently the **chemist** used be, before moving to the **mill**. We had the **Wool shop** that **Gwen Kerrison** ran for a long time; we did lots of knitting in those days, not many of us being able to afford to buy shop made woollies. There were **two hardware shops**, **Mrs. Collins** with the **petrol pump** outside that you had to turn a handle to get the petrol flowing and **Millis's**. You really had to see that shop to believe it! Mrs. Millis sold everything. I remember seeing dusty old bowler hats, second hand men's jackets, buckets, bowls, pots and pans crockery, paraffin etc. You name it she had it. Amongst all of this she used have a large round cheese on the counter and other foodstuffs none of which were covered up. I can recall to this day the smell of a mixture of cheese, bacon and paraffin. There was **Mrs. Pearce's paper shop**, **Mr. Morney Davis** the **Solicitor**, the **Spinning Wheel tea room**, later to become the **Post office** shared with **Mr. Cunnington's electrical shop** before he moved up the village to the shop vacated by **Blindells**. We used to take our accumulators to him to be charged at sixpence a time, ultimately he moved next to the **Walnut Tree** where I believe the shop still is. **Mr. and Mrs. Albert Wright** ran the **Walnut Tree** and I can remember buying sweets there on the way to school. Of course there was **Titmuss's mill** where we used to buy corn and meal for the chickens, practically everybody kept a few chickens because if I remember rightly the egg ration was only one a week or it might have been only one a month. There was **Simons the butcher** where we used to go for our meager ration of meat, and I believe I vaguely recollect **Ball's butchers in Church Street** where there was also a **barber** owned by **Frank Knight**. How my son hollered when he had his first haircut there!

Entertainment

Apart from the numerous pubs and the **Working Mans Club**, there wasn't much in the way of entertainment in the village. The annual **summer fete** in the **Rectory Garden** and the one at the **Congregational Church** were well attended and enjoyed, and I remember going to **Mr. Nicoll's** farm when he held a **Highland Games** day in one of his fields.

Mothers & babies

One of the highlights for us mothers with young children was the fortnightly trip to the baby clinic held in the **Mead Hall in East Lane**, where we had the babies weighed, and collected the **national dried milk powder** and **bottled orange juice** for them. It was a good excuse to gather with all the other mothers and have a good old chat and compare our babies' progress. We all had proper prams in those days and used to take a great pride in making them look nice (especially clinic days). These prams were mostly second hand as you could only get new ones that were utility and they were very basic with no springing. I remember going to Harpenden to get mine, it was lovely big coach built thing (second hand) with great big wheels and well sprung, I walked all the way back from Harpenden with it when I was seven and a half month pregnant. Unfortunately it was too big to go

in my mother's cottage so had to be kept in the barn up the yard. The babies were so warm and comfortable in these prams. We used to go for long walks, sometimes taking a 'picnic' (a bottle of water and a sandwich). On one of these walks with my friend, we came across a potato clamp being opened by some **German prisoners of war** that were working on one of the farms and as potatoes were rationed (as practically everything else was) we persuaded them to let us have a few, so out came the kids from the pram and these dirty muddy potatoes were put in the bottom of it, covered by a blanket and the kids put back on top. We felt like criminals all the way home and it didn't do much for the pram either, but a good scrub and nobody was any the wiser. Those potatoes tasted better than any that we ever bought from the shop.

Four Limes

Quite a big day in Wheathampstead, was the celebration of Mr. and Mrs. Cory Wright's daughter Cleone's ? **wedding**. The **Cory Wrights** lived at **Four Limes** on Wheathampstead Hill then (presumably it is still there.) and they had a big marquee set up in their garden and everybody in the village was invited. We all thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. They had a meadow at the back of the house where they kept their horses, this meadow had some horse chestnut trees in it and if, as youngsters we were going to meet a boyfriend, it was always '**up the conker trees**'. Little did I realise at the time that the meadow would become **Garrard Way** and I would live in the house at the end of Cory Wright's garden, although by this time they had moved to **Mackerye End** and **Mr. and Mrs. Dangerfield** and their son Graham had moved into Four Limes. Graham Dangerfield was quite well known as the **Zoo man** on television. He made the garden into a **wildlife sanctuary** and had all kinds of animals like foxes, that used to smell to high heaven, badgers, otters, that ate all the goldfish in our pond, a roe deer, that escaped and ate flowers and shrubs in our garden, an eagle that used to screech very loudly, he had an injured swan who used to sit for hours with its head through our fence for some reason, I have seen rats playing on our lawn like kittens and the rockery was honeycombed with rat holes. It was a novelty at first but got a bit too much in the end and I think after numerous complaints he eventually moved away.

Village characters

We had quite a few `characters` in the village and one that immediately springs to mind is **Teddy Clark**, he lived with his aunt (who was the image of Margaret Rutherford) in one of the bungalows just before the **Swedish houses**. **Teddy** used to trundle around the village with a flat cart with a big wheel on either side looking for odd jobs. I think he used to do a bit of work for the Rector and also delivered grocery orders for **Oldfield's** shop on the corner of Necton. **Nurse Hawkins** the **District nurse** must have just retired or was about to when I first new her. I used to take her stale bread which she would cut into cubes and put in the oven of the old kitchen range and bake it hard and used it instead of dog biscuits for her little rough haired terrier. Then there was **Dolly Westwood**, she was the spinster daughter of **Harry**, and she used to look after her father and brothers, she had always got lines of snow white washing hanging out. I don't know how she did it with soap being rationed and the fact that the men used to get so black from working in the forge. She also did shopping for any body that couldn't do it themselves and I can see her now dashing up the road with bags full of shopping weighing her down. At one time she had a pet pig and it used to follow her about the house and garden like a pet dog, I think eventually it got too big and went to live down the garden field (allotment).

Leaving Wheathampstead

I really loved the thirty- five years that I lived in Wheathampstead and will always consider it my home. Sadly my father died in 1959, and my mother remarried six years later at St. Helen's and shortly after went to live in Wellingborough to be near my brother where she died in 1983. My son married in 1969 also at St. Helen's but went to live in Devon, later emigrating to Australia, from where, much to my delight, he has recently returned for an indefinite period. We moved a couple of times still in Wheathampstead, the last time to **Garrard Way** where for domestic reasons I had to very reluctantly leave my dear village. For the last year or so before leaving, I worked at the **Bull** and loved every minute of it and often think about all the people that I served whilst there. There used to be a small bar at the back of the main one that was called **Normans Bar** for some reason, and all the local lads used to congregate there as opposed to the `posh lot` in the big bar. These lads were a lovely lot and although they could be a bit rowdy they always behaved themselves. There was one chap we called '**Bill the Hat**', as he always used to wear an old battered looking trilby hat, he had his own special seat and no one would dream of sitting in it even when he wasn't there. There was **Tony Dear**, who had a pony called **Tomasina** that he used to keep in a

field along the Gustard Wood Road, We used to save all the ullage for Tomasina and Tony would bring her to the back door on a Friday night where she would enjoy her drink.

I now live in a village on the Northamptonshire / Buckinghamshire borders and although the people are lovely and it is quite a nice village to live in, my heart is still in Wheathampstead.

Sadly, Pamela Murray died after a short illness in May 2006

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