

Pam Dunham talked to Patrick McNeill in January 2025

Patrick

I understand that you have lived in Wheathampstead all your life.

Pam

Yes, that's right. Born and bred. I was born at 1, Sunny Bank, in the row of cottages opposite where the station sidings used to be. The little cottage is still there.

And there was a big house on the other side of the sidings and I was friends with the young girl that used to live in that house. I can't think of her name now. It was a big black house. It's not there anymore but it was on the opposite side of the road, where the what's-its-name new houses are.

Patrick

Kingfisher Close?

Pam

That's right. Well, there used to be a big house there. And I can't remember their name, but the people had a daughter the same age as me. I was friends with her, but they went back to Germany. They came from Germany. As far as I remember, there was quite a big garden.

Patrick

Were your parents from the village?

Pam

No. Mum came from Essendon and Dad was originally from Saint Albans and then his family moved to Nomansland Common. I'm not sure how old he was when they moved.

Patrick

The name "Dunham" appears in a lot of documents about the history of Wheathampstead. Were they your uncles? or maybe grandparents?

Pam

Grandparents. My grandfather, he worked for Bob Simons in the butcher's and he used to make all the sausages. And he used to deliver meat on his horse and cart all around the village.

Patrick

Do you remember seeing him doing that?

Pam

Yes, I do. I was only little, but I remember him going through the village.

Patrick

And that's Bob Simons butcher's that's now Marley's cafe, isn't it? And there was a slaughterhouse behind. Do you remember anything about that?

Pam

Yes, I remember the slaughterhouse being there and I remember the animals, the pigs and things. Sort of hanging in the window (*laughs*). My mum used to go in there and buy all our meat and that and I followed her as I always did.

And she'd say "Now, Bob, I don't like that one." And he'd say "Come round the back and have a look. See what you like." That's good. And my younger brother, he had a rabbit. And he never used to look after it, and in the end my mum got fed up with doing it and she said to Bob one day "Do you want a rabbit?" And he said, "Yeah, I'll have it." How she took it down there, I don't know. But the next time she went he said "That was a blooming old rabbit you gave me." (*laughs*)

Patrick

Now I've got this picture in my head: there you are with your mum and you're a little girl and you're walking down from Sunny Bank to Bob Simons and then over the bridge and up into the High Street. Are there any particular shops that you recall in the High Street?

Pam

Well, next door to Simons was Mr Hall the baker. You always queued there for your bread. And on Good Friday he only opened to sell hot cross buns.

You used to get in a queue and the queue used to go all the way up the High Street and back again and people were queuing just for hot cross buns. That's the only thing he sold when he opened between 10:00 and 12:00 and the queue was all the way down the High Street. Literally. Of course, I didn't have cameras or anything like that. But I remember being in the queue.

And the other thing I remember is when Titmusses were there. It was always my job, I don't know why, on a Saturday morning to go down there and get one bag of corn and one bag of meal because we kept chickens. And I had to queue for that in those days.

Patrick

And that was Titmusses at the mill.

Pam

Titmusses at the mill, yes.

Patrick

Where was he selling from at the mill? At the back?

Pam

No, on the roadside. So that tells you how much traffic there wasn't.

Also, I remember traffic stopping in the High Street there for ducks to cross from one side to the other (*laughs*). And people don't believe me about that, but I do remember it.

Patrick

I'm sure you do. And at that time there wouldn't have been all the arrangement at the mill quay. Was it a slope down to the river then?

Pam

Yes, there was a slope down to the river. You could get to the river on the Bull side like you can now. You couldn't get down to the river on the other side of the mill.

But you know, the ducks used to come from one side and the traffic used to stop for them. I can see them now (*laughs*). But they don't stop for humans in the village anymore. Even on the crossing. You can stand there and two or three cars will go by, and cyclists will come all the way down Wheathampstead Hill. And they never stop. They never stop.

Patrick

Indeed they don't. Now, you've mentioned The Bull and next to that is East Lane. That has changed a great deal in recent years. What do you remember of that?

Pam

Well, you turned left at The Bull and then there was the Bull Yard on your left and the garage on your right, and then if you come past the garage, that little house was Woodley's grocery store. Behind what's now Jessamine Garage. Yes, Mr Woodley and his wife ran that shop. You could go in there and get whatever you wanted. And he also did deliveries, you know. He had a little van. And he used to do deliveries but we used to go in there and just queue and get what we wanted and come away again.

Patrick

So you go past there where the BT building is now. And a little further on is East Mount.

Pam

Yes. And at the top of East Mount, before they built on it, was allotments. My dad had an allotment up there.

Patrick

Let's go back to the other side of East Lane.

Pam

What's now The Bull car park, that was Bull Yard with the blacksmiths. Now, what was their name? Westwood. That's it. And then they had that building down by the river, which is still called the Forge.

Patrick.

And when did you start school?

Pam

I was five. I went to Saint Helen's. The old building which is offices now. And then I crossed over to the new building for older children on the other side of the road. I stayed there till I was 11 and then I went to Roundwood Park at Harpenden. I was one of the first pupils to go there when it opened. That would have been about 1956 or '57, I think.

Patrick

Do you have any particular memories of St Helen's School in the years you were there?

Pam

Miss Warren.

Patrick

Tell me about Miss Warren.

Pam

Miss Warren, she was the first teacher I had in Saint Helen's and she lived along the Marford Road. She was very, very strict. She used to frighten me because she used to shout. But she turned out to be my best friend as I got older.

She was just doing her job, you know, but it was just that I wasn't used to people shouting and she had quite a shrill voice. But I mean, with the best intentions, and she ended up being my best friend as I got older and moved on, you know. She was a nice lady.

Patrick

And she'd have had quite large classes to deal with.

Pam

Yes, I can't remember how many but they were quite big and mixed, you know.

Patrick

So she was your first teacher and is obviously the one who made a big impression on you. That's in the mid/late 1950s. What were the conditions in the school?

Pam

Well, it was an old building, you know. As far as I can remember there were toilets and washbasins but not much else. And when you came out at playtime, you played in Ash Grove. That was your playground. All us children used to run up and play in Ash Grove. On the right-hand side opposite the school building, there was a green building, which belonged to the church.

Patrick

Today, Ash Grove is built over but was it an open field then? Because it was a farm at one stage, wasn't it?

Pam

That's right. None of those houses were there. It was just all open. You got very dirty sometimes when you went up there, especially because there were some slopes and some kids used to slide down them, you know, then you had to go back into class (*laughs*). I'm sure their mums weren't too happy.

Patrick

Were there any animals in the farm at that time?

Pam

No, I don't remember any. But it was quite a big area; you can tell by all the houses that are there now. I mean, it looks totally different now to the way I remember it.

And then there were all the different shops in the High Street. There used to be Fine Fare. It's Tesco now. And then there used to be ... what was it called? Lorna Rowe's fruit and veg shop. And on the opposite side of the road was Mr and Mrs Pateman, which was also a fruit and veg shop. Two opposite one another and both made a living. It's amazing. I don't know how they would both survive today. They wouldn't. But everyone just did their shopping locally. There was no reason to go anywhere. You had the butcher's, the baker's. You had a post office. You had a chemist, as they called it in those days. And Mr Field's fish and chip shop where the men's hairdresser is now, with Stuart's menswear which is now the Reading Rooms. He sold school uniforms and took in dry-cleaning. Nearly opposite that was Amos's shoe shop.

And there were two banks. One was Barclays, on the corner where the Chinese takeaway is, and the other was the Midland. That was an estate agent's for a while and now it's another ladies' beautician.

Oh, and there was Cunnington's. She used to be at the top.

Patrick

On which side?

Pam

On the left-hand side, as you go up the High Street. Cunnington's used to be at the top. And also there was another baker's there, next door, called Auld's, I think.

Patrick

So that's right up at the top, almost opposite The Swan.

Pam

Yes. Where those flats are, Granary Close.

The village was full of pubs as well, you know. At the top there, by the station, there was a pub on the corner there. The Abbot John. The Railway Hotel. And then The Bull. Then you go up to The Bell and Crown and then The Swan on the other side. And it's amazing how they all made a living because they weren't doing food, were they? And there was The Red Cow at the top of The Hill. It's still got the sign sticking out. If you took your empty bottles back, you used to get money back on your empty bottles. And my auntie, if she picked up any stray bottles in the High Street, she used to pick them up and she always had me with her. I don't know why. She said "Come on", and I said. "Where are we going with them?" and she said "We take them to the Red Cow, we get money back on them." Yeah, we were always taking bottles to the Red Cow.

And then there was, where Coppertop hairdresser is, that used to be a cafe. And if you come down the other side, which is the dentist now, that was Mrs Collins' shop. It was a hardware store and she had a petrol pump on the outside of the building. And on this side of the building, next to Lorna Rowe, was another hardware store.

And I'm just trying to think of the name of that one now. But there were two and they were all able to make a living. Yes, because obviously people shopped in the village. When you think of all the shops that we had, you didn't need to go anywhere else. Anyway, people didn't have the transport, did they? They had to rely on buses, or our train. Yes, my lovely train.

Patrick

Tell me about the train.

Pam

Well, we lived opposite the sidings.

The stationmaster, Mr. Lee, lived in the big stationmaster's house. It's not there now. Gerald Lee. He lived there. And, as I say, we lived in those little cottages opposite the station yard. We could sit in our front garden and see all the trains going backwards and forwards and the drivers always used to wave to us (*laughs*). My mum used to put my younger brother out in the front garden in his pram so he could watch the trains, you know. It was lovely. And my auntie, she used to go to work at ICI at Welwyn Garden City on the train.

And in the school holidays, my dad used to take us to Luton, to the park. That was a day out in the school holidays. We always went on the train.

And then Dr Beeching did away with it.

Patrick

The reason he gave for doing away with it was that it wasn't being used enough. But was it still pretty busy?

Pam

Yes, it was. People used to use it to go to Welwyn Garden City to work, you know, and going to Luton as well. Using it as a commuter train.

And we would have a day out going to Luton or to Welwyn Garden City in the school holidays. So I think it was used. My auntie used it all the time to get to Welwyn Garden City when she was working. It was a big loss to the village, that's for sure. Yes, definitely.

Patrick

So there you are, growing up in the village, and you went to Roundwood Park School. When did you leave there?

Pam

I left when I was 15 and went to work at the Metropolitan College in Saint Albans. The correspondence college, where the pharmaceutical place is now at the top of Saint Peter's Street. That was a correspondence college. The Duke of Kent passed his exams there and I handled his papers. I used to say "I've got the Duke of Kent's papers." (*laughs*)

Patrick

What was your job there?

Pam

I was just in the post, you know, doing general things. I started there at 15 and then I was made redundant after 14 years because they moved it to Aldermaston in Reading. I could have gone, but I didn't want to go, so I left.

And then I went to Polycell Products in Welwyn Garden City and I was there for 15 years.

Patrick

Did you go on the train?

Pam

No. By that time I was driving.

Patrick

What was your work at Polycell?

Pam

Well, I introduced microfilming to the filing department. So that was quite interesting. And the post was all intertwined with it, you know.

And then they made 100 people redundant with an hour's notice, and I was one of the 100.

Patrick

An hour's notice?

Pam

An hour's notice, yeah. Terrible, it was. It wasn't a good thing. But anyway, I then went to work at ...

Patrick

I'm just going to interrupt you for a moment. At this point, where were you living?

Pam

In Offa's Way in Wheathampstead. My dad died quite suddenly when I was 13. Sunday morning, he just collapsed on the landing and that was it. He was dead. And three months later my mum had a nervous breakdown. She was in Hill End Hospital having all these electrical, yes.

So, Mrs Smallwood that lived in the village. She was a lovely lady. She was a school governor and she arranged for me to have three months off school to look after the rest of the family. I was 13.

Patrick

And how many were there in the family?

Pam

There was me, my younger brother who was only 6, my sister, she's 18 months younger than me, so she was 12. And then my older brother, he was 17.

Patrick

And where were you living at that time?

Pam

We were living in Offa's Way. We'd moved from Sunny Bank because there wasn't enough room there. My younger brother couldn't have a bed. There wasn't enough room, so we had to move from there. And so we moved to 1 Offa's Way.

Patrick

So there you are, 13 years old, looking after the family and the little ones.

Pam

Yeah, I'm taking my younger brother to school and picking him up and doing all the washing and cleaning and shopping and cooking and washing up.

And Mrs Smallwood used to come every week and make sure that I was coping OK and she was so kind and so lovely, you know. She became my friend. Her husband was Doctor Smallwood. He died, and she lost both her sons in the Second World War.

And then, once Mum came home, she still became a friend and I think she looked after me particularly well. She knew that I was interested in doing hairdressing when I left school. And she used to go to a hairdresser's in London Road in Saint Albans and she arranged for me to go there as a Saturday girl when Mum was well enough to carry on.

And so I did that. I went there. And did Saturday work for about three or four months, I think, if I remember rightly. But then I got ill. And by the time I was better, I'd changed my mind, I didn't want to go hairdressing (*laughs*).

Patrick

Well, you're in your teens. You're allowed to change your mind!

Pam

But anyway, I still made a living. I was never out of work.

Patrick

So, OK, we're now at 1, Offa's Way and we've talked about your work at Metropolitan College and then at Polycell, where you had this instant redundancy.

Pam

Williams Brothers. Apparently they were renowned for making people redundant with no warning, you know. And within an hour, we were walking out of the building.

Patrick

So you walked out of the building and you went home to Offa's Way. Were you living with any other members of the family in Offa's Way?

Pam

Yes, because Mum was still alive. And we moved from 1 to 11 Offa's Way because my sister wanted room to put her wardrobe separate from mine. She didn't want my clothes mixing with hers, and there wasn't room at number 1, so we had to move and we moved to number 11. And then, of course, later she left home and got married anyway so it didn't make a difference (*laughs*).

And my brother left and got married. Well, both of them did eventually, but I didn't. I stayed with Mum and looked after her as she got older. And she landed up with Alzheimer's. And I looked after her for a long, long time until I had to have major surgery.

Doctor Stephens was here then, and he was such a lovely doctor. He was so kind. And he said "Pop along to Stewart's in Harpenden." He said "Don't tell them you're coming." He said "Knock on their door and ask them if they'll show you around."

So I did what he said and a lovely secretary came to the door and she said "Come in, I'll show you everywhere." And she did. And then I met the manager and I explained to her what the situation was. "I've got to go into hospital." Mum was not able to be left alone.

She said "No worries." She said Mum could come here and stay until you're well enough to look after her again. She'd been going as a day patient one day a week so it wasn't completely new. So she went in there. I had my surgery, but then it was three months before I was able to look after her, and she'd got into that pattern, you know, and I said to Elliette, the manager at Stewart's, I said "I think I'm going to be unfair by taking her home again. She's got into a routine."

She said "I'm with you all the way. You wouldn't be doing her any good by taking her home but you can treat this as your home and you can come and go as you please. If you want to come and help with her washing or wash her hair or whatever you want to do. Feel free."

And I said "Can I book room 29 for when I get there?" (*laughs*) And they were so kind. All the staff. I could have travelled the world. There was only one English nurse and one Irish nurse and all the others came from everywhere. But they were all so kind. And I sing their praises all the time but it's not there now. Mum was content, you know. I mean, I could go every day of the week and I did. And I used to spend two or three hours at weekends with her. And I used to do things with her, you know.

When I was off sick, I couldn't go for many weeks because I couldn't drive. And I wasn't well enough anyway. And then six weeks on, my brother said "If you want to go, I'll take you."

So he did. And as I walked through the door, one of the nurses looked up. She said "You watch Katie's face now." And as I walked round in front of her, there was this great big smile, you know, and I thought "She knows who I am." And then of course I knew that I couldn't bring her home. And we had a big garden at 11 Offa's Way and I knew I wouldn't be able to manage that. So then eventually I moved down here which is not the best place to be but it's convenient for the shops as I get older. I hadn't thought about online shopping at that time – I don't think it existed – and I want to use the shops when I can.

Patrick

I'm going to look back in time again to when you left Polycell. Did you get another job after that?

Pam

Yes, I did. I went to, well, it's Affinity Water now. it was Lea Valley at the time. I went there. I was quite happy there. I had a supervisor's job. I was there until I retired.

Patrick

So we're now well into the '70s, '80s and '90s. What would you say were the major changes in the village over that period?

Pam

Probably seeing Fine Fare disappear. That disappeared and the little shops disappeared, the fruit and veg. and the hardware shops, they disappeared. They were the big changes, I think, apart from losing the station.

Patrick

The two big employers at that time were Helmets and Murphy's. Did you have anything to do with them?

Pam

Helmets, yes. My dad worked there. I'm not quite sure what he did but he used to help make the firemen's and policemen's helmets. I'm not sure how old he was when he went there, but he worked there until the day he died. And he was one of the men there when Ann Noblett disappeared. And all the workers there went looking for her. They didn't go to work. One day they all went out looking for her. And they never found her. Well, they did find her, much later. Terrible thing, and they still don't know who did it, do they? And whoever did it is probably dead by now. That was about 1958 or '59, I think.

Patrick

Right. But other than that, Helmets was just "the place that Dad works." You didn't have any particular links with it yourself. And then there was Murphy's.

Pam

Murphy's. That was the chemicals. My sister worked there for a short while when she first left school, as a typist. Because Mr. Lee, that was the station master, when he retired from that job he moved into one of the bungalows in Offa's Way and he used to teach typing. And my sister learned to type with him, and then she got a job as a typist at Murphy Chemicals. And after Dad died, Mum tried going to work there but the chemicals affected her throat and she couldn't do it. So she stopped.

Patrick

So your sister was a typist. Was she at Murphy Chemicals at the offices across the road?

Pam

No, she was on the main site - Chemicals.

Patrick

Going back to Sunny Bank for a moment. If you come out of your house at Sunnybank and turn right, there's Rose Lane goes off up there.

Pam

Yes. My playground. The first bungalow up there was Mr and Mrs Toyer; their daughter-in-law is still there. And my brother was friends with Dennis, the son. He used to come out of Sunny Bank and go up to Dennis's because they had a big garden and everything and there was all the trees, you know. I used to tail after him sometimes and go up there. And I learned to go picking blackberries. There was so much space. Dennis and my brother were great mates, you know. And they died within six months of one another. Oh, and if you went right to the top of Rose Lane, there was a house. Now what was that lady's name that lived

there? And outside there was all just a mass of snowdrops. I loved them. They were beautiful.

Patrick

Earlier, you mentioned your auntie. Was that your father's sister?

Pam

Yes, my dad's sister. She used to work at ICI. Well, she just kept an eye on us when Dad died, you know? She used to bring bits and pieces of food left over from the ICI canteen. To make sure we didn't go hungry (*laughs*).

Patrick

There have been some hard times, haven't there? Some very hard times.

Pam

Hard. Yes. But we've come through it. It didn't do me any harm.

My dad used to say, because there was six of us when we were all there. Four children and Mum and Dad. Round the table. Six of us and they always cooked and he always helped. He always helped with the washing up or whatever needed doing. He always helped with it. But we were expected to do the same.

And when we sat round the table, if you left anything on your plate, I can see him now, saying "Aren't you going to eat that?" and you'd say "No". And he'd fork it up straightaway. Years later, I thought they must have been hungry. They gave us food to eat and they went hungry because he always ate what was left. And afterwards Mum got up to clear the table and it was "Right, your turn to wash up, your turn to wipe up, your turn to put away."

But he always helped as well. He took his turn, but he expected us to do our bit as well. Mind you, I don't think it did any harm knowing what happened afterwards, because maybe I wouldn't have coped so well. We all survived anyway.

Patrick

We've talked about some of the big changes in the village. But over that period of time who would be two or three individuals you remember most vividly? Village people, village characters.

Pam

Mrs Smallwood of course. And there was another lady, but she's died now. Stella Bailey. She was the Girl Guide captain, and that was through Mrs Smallwood. She said afterwards "I think you ought to join something, get away, get another interest. How about joining the Girl Guides?" And so she took me to meet Stella and I went there. And I stayed till I was too old. (*laughs*) But she was a very nice person. And I got on really well with her. And Jill Hazlehurst. She was a nice lady. From the church. Reverend Jill Hazelhurst.

Patrick

You've always been associated with the church, haven't you?

Pam

The church, yes. Right from day one, basically. I often say to them "It's my church." I was baptised there at six weeks old and I've been going ever since. Whereas some people come and go, you know?