

THE VILLAGE CIRCA 1943

In those days we had a RAILWAY. This chugged away from Luton to Hatfield, and on Saturdays went right through to Leighton Buzzard where it was possible to go fishing on the Grand Union Canal. During the week, stragglers hurrying up the High Street to catch the train were frequently urged on by the porter calling them from the bridge to hurry up - he was holding up the train for them. The ticket office was up the stairs on the platform, lit by oil-lamps, and it was common for little splashes of lighted meths. to fall upon the work of the ticket and goods clerks who inhabited the office. It was also fairly common for persons coming off the train in the dark to kick down the stairs, that lantern which stood by the ticket collector. Alas, Dr. Beeching saw to it that those happy days came to an end, and instead we got the 366 bus, whereas hithertofore there was no bus service to Welwyn Garden City. The train also used to stop at Ayot, which burned down one day having been ignited by a spark from the train carrying the Station-master (Mr. Lee) away on his holidays. After that, anyone wishing to ascend or descend at Ayot did so on to a box provided, as the station was not rebuilt. Mail for Bernard Shaw used to come to Wheathampstead Station from time to time, and every Xmas he would send the princely sum of 30/- as a present, to be divided between the staff - about six of them. He was not noted for generosity. At the very end of Sheepcote lane was a level crossing, and this was manned (or womaned) by Mrs. Owen, who for this service was rewarded with 6/- a week. Once a week, a train, known as the Dustcart special, would trundle down from London bringing rubbish to the Tip at Blackbridge and this went on for years. Needless to say, much protest was made against the closing of the Railway, but as usual no notice was taken of local opinion.

Along Marford Road, there were only a few council houses near The Nelson public house. Where the Swedish Houses and the Conquerors Hill estate stand, was Chennell's Field, where his cows grazed. He owned the shop in the village which is now the Midland Bank, and his sons ran a dairy service from the area round the back. The Chemist Shop was roughly where the extension to Barclays Bank is, the present shop was part of the Mill. There was a "Workman's pull-up" cafe on the corner of the alleyway where the hairdressers now stands, and a little tea shoppe where the Estate Agent is now, formerly the Post Office before that. There was a Bakers (Garretts) and several other small shops where the hideous Flats on stilts stand opposite Collins' shop, also two police houses, as in those days we

had TWO policemen, not one as now. There was no garage in the village, Mrs. Collins had a shop in the High Street, with a petrol pump outside, and needless to say there was no belisha crossing, nor of course, so much traffic to warrant one. Fine Fare was a double-fronted shop called Stapletons, and Westwoods' forge was in East Lane, near Woodleys the Grocers. Where the present Post Office and shops stand, was only a tin roofed hut, used for I know not what. The Church School was a disgrace, soon to be replaced by the new St. Helen's School, and the Rectory mansion, also in disrepair, was pulled down to make room for Rectory Close, although many people thought this should have been the site of a new churchyard.

We had Dr. Smallwood in the village (before the National Health came about) and later on he had as a partner Dr. Probyn, followed by Dr. Parkinson, who set up surgery at Sunny Cottage. Dr. Probyn lived in Kimpton, Dr. Smallwood on the Hill.

The District Nurse was Sister Smith, who still lives in Offas Way. She probably delivered half the babies in Wheathampstead.

There were more local pubs to relax in. The Red Cow, now Centaurs, Rose & Crown, Lower Luton Road, now Rose Cottage and Crown Cottage, The Walnut Tree, later a tea shop, in Church Lane, The Royal Oak somewhere off the Lower Luton Road, plus the pubs existing now, that is, those pubs now eating houses like the Bell & Crown. There was a fish and chip shop where the wine shop is, run by Mr. and Mrs. Field who retired and now live in Tudar Road. Hillydike Estate was part of the Dyke Lane Nursery (hence Nurseries Road) - the roads on that estate also commemorate Mr. Allen, for years a parish councillor, Mr. Housden, for years the Headmaster at St. Helen's (the only school in the village) and Dr. Smallwood.

The fire brigade was in East Lane, near the blacksmith's shop. Three ramshackle cottages huddled against the Bull pub, later incorporated into the pub as their dining room. There was no Mead Hall or flats in East Lane, at the end of which was the Sewage Works. Brocket View (a view of Brocket would be hard to come by from there) was built partly on Council owned land, partly Church land, formerly it was a field with a footpath leading to East Lane, and some caravans permanently thereupon.

During the war about two bombs fell upon Wheathampstead, one I think blew out the church windows, another fell in a field -a there were no

casualties. A Flying Bomb went over and fell at Luton towards the end of the war. Wheathampstead was a haven of peace compared to London, from which I came as a refugee.

I will not dwell on the only Factory - "Murphys" as it would take too long I started work there in 1944 and left when the firm was taken over by Dow Chemicals and removed to Hitchin - causing a lot of grief and hardship to the many villagers who were employed there, it being the only major employer in the whole village.

In conclusion I will say, for interest's sake, that Necton Road was named after Necton in Norfolk, that being the place where the owner of a lot of the property came from. This area is New Marford, as opposed to Old Marford, which comprised Marford Farm, and one or two houses in Sheepcote Lane plus I think the house next to The Nelson. I believe all the others are "new" - i.e. built between the wars. I don't know about The Nelson. The allotments seem always to have been there. I believe the only old houses in New Marford are the cottages between the two Necton Roads, they must be about 120 years old. A few houses were built around 1887-1897 by the said gent. from Necton; some in the Marford Road, some in the Necton Roads, many of these had large gardens which have been infilled.

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