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Memories of Ena Spearing (née Dawes, born 1927)

Memories (as written down by Ena herself, 3 April 1989 and presented by Brenda Dawes, her sister-in-law who still lives in the cottage next to the Nelson (now L'Olivo, Italian Restaurant) - 2012

I am now 62 years of age and I thought it time to write my own story about Wheathampstead through the years of change.

I was born in the **little cottage next to “The Nelson”** public house. It was then known as **old Marford** and later years became Hatfield Road.

I had a very happy childhood along with my brother John (who lives with his family in this cottage now). We spent most of our days in the garden, playing amongst the gooseberry bushes and the damson trees.

The cottage which has been in our family for a number of generations was quaint. We had only **oil lamps** downstairs, and **candlesticks** upstairs, but we did boast to have two staircases, one of which was solid oak and a number of old beams supported the ceilings which were very low. We had an **earth loo** 30 paces down the garden and a **well** which supplied all our needs for water. My father would draw up enough water for the day before going to work by cycle to St Albans. We had a copper in the scullery, my mother would light the fire underneath and eventually the copper would boil up and the washing would bubble away. Sometimes I would turn the handle of the **mangle**, which was a huge iron contraption.

In the east of our property was “**The Nelson**” pub where I am told my Grandfather, **Billie Freeman**, used to make his first call at 4 am each morning before walking to Stevenage to start his day’s work on his threshing engine in the fields.

To the west of our property were the **allotments** and we had a little gate in our hedge to enter our allotment.

Opposite our house was a large field which seemed to produce corn each summer, and in the hedgerow stood a large elm tree. The road was very narrow, almost a lane and we would see the horses and carts come and go up to **Wrights’ Nurseries** taking **coal** to the

greenhouses, also carrying **toms and cues** to the station to be put on the train for the **London markets**.

We would spend our summer days down at the river paddling in the water. In those days we had only a footbridge across the river, horses and carts would wade through the river. I remember the horses that worked up at the dump being brought down to the river to drink. **Tom Rolph** was the watchman at the **Dump**.

Sometimes our parents would take us through the fields to **Long Meadows** where we would sit by the River Lea and have a picnic tea.

When I got to the grand age of 5, I then started at **St Helen's School**, the **old flint school**. I had to walk along the **Hatfield Road** (now known as the **Marford Road**) about 800–900 yards there were no houses until I arrived at New Marford where the cottages started and the little shop known as **Bangs Grocers Shop**. On my way along to the shop I would pass large haystacks built on the field. On leaving Bangs shop I would wend my way along Hatfield Road towards the High Street. I would pass a few houses on my left side and on my right side was a large meadow which was known as "**Four Acres**" where **Mr Simons** would graze his beasts. Adjoining this field was the football field, the home pitch for the **Murphy** team known as "**Alvesco**" and then a little paddock, which was owned by **Fred Wright** of **Lattimores** in the High Street.

On reaching the **Swan Corner** we saw the lovely **Town Farm** house with large old wooden barns, which **Collins Antiques** used for storage and a work shop. On the other side opposite the **police houses** stood "**The Swan**" public house, the landlord being **Mr Wilkinson** and his wife and two daughters, Norah and Jean. In the Swan yard was a number of outbuildings which were used by local craftsmen, the craftsmen being **Mr Beadle the Blacksmith** who shod the horses, **Mr Matthews who repaired belts** on the binders, etc. on the farm, and **Mr Riddle the leather man**. In front of the Swan Yard was a garden where the game of **quoits** was played on summer evenings.

The pair of **police houses** were occupied by **P.C. Barker and P.C. Hunt**. It was at this point we would cross over to reach Church Street and then we walked up along by **Harry Balls** the **butcher's shop** to arrive at the **Walnut Tree** public house and sweet shop. This shop carried a good selection of sweets, so we patronised it well buying our halfpenny worth of sweets, and then crossed over the road to our school. This journey I would walk four times a day as I came home to dinner each day.

My brother **John**, being my junior by two years joined me later and we had some little friends that lived at **Marford Farm** by the name of **Blain**, whose father would deliver our milk with his cart very early in the morning.

I stayed at **St Helen's Junior School** for some years, until I reached **Standard Four** during which time I was taught by **Miss Warren, Miss Young, Miss Wade, Miss Crawley** and **Miss Sykes**. It was a lovely old school. Our classes were not too large. I can remember the **coke fires** that would warm our classrooms during the winter and we were allowed one **third of a pint of milk** to drink at our mid-morning break.

I also attended **Sunday school** which was held at St Helen's school and always managed a part in the nativity play at Christmas, usually playing the part of an angel. But sometimes I would play the part of a shepherd. It was great fun. My mother gave me a lot of support regards making dresses, etc. The play was staged under the bells in St Helen's Church. I can remember what made up for the play by the rector's daughters, **Frances and Charlotte Baird-Smith** and **Anne Smallwood**. In those days we had the lovely old rectory and very fine tennis court, and of course the church room.

My father was in the building trade, working for **Tom King** of St Albans. He used to cycle to get to and from St Albans five and a half days a week.

During this time all we had along the roads were **oil lamps** to light our way and of course, **no footpaths**. The lamp lighter would arrive to attend to the lamps which were often out owing to high winds.

Our village high street was very different then. At the top of the high street we had the **Ship house** where **Mr Seabrook** the church organist lived. (At one time this was a pub.) Next door was **Mr Baisley** with his **clock shop**, with a clock in his window. And just to the rear was **Frank Newberry** busy mending shoes. He had a wooden hut with a glass front, a good viewpoint for the village. We would go up a little alley and up about four steps to reach this wonder of **snobbing shoes**. Alongside was **Goodalls**, the shoe shop where we bought our **shoes**. And next door was **Garretts the Bakers**. Further down the high street we had the **post office** and **Dairy** which was run by **Frank Chennells**. **Miss Carter** lived quite near in the **White House**. Then we came to the hardware shop and barber run by Mr Latchford who done the hair cutting. Next was the **Bell and Crown**, and **Len Rowe's Green grocery** shop. And of course, I must not forget **Jenners outfitters** and the **fish shop**. We then had a row of houses with their front doors opening out onto the high street. Some very old people lived in these houses and it was known as **Workhouse Yard**.

We then arrived at **Mrs Collins'** shop and her **petrol pump** which she wound up by hand. And then the **Newsagents**, **Mr and Mrs D. Pearce**. Across the road was **Tingey's** the **grocers** and **Tom Westwood** the builders with his **shop and builder's yard** adjoined by **Cyril Wren** the **wheelwright**. And across the road was the **telephone exchange** manned by **Mr and Mrs Crook**. And lastly the **Bull Hotel** and the **Mill and Mill house** where the **Titmuss** family lived.

As I grew up things began to change. I was allowed to have a cycle and I joined the guides. There was talk of **council houses** being built in the Hatfield Road and sure enough it wasn't long before work started. Trees, hedgerows and haystacks disappeared, the road was widened a little and the houses started to appear. It took some time to complete this phase of houses as there were so many. This all happened **1934–1935**. My brother and I spent a lot of time watching these houses being built.

We were now old enough to go to **Devils Dyke** which was lovely in those days with bluebells and huge blackberry bushes loaded with fruit in the summer. And eventually we found our way to **Nomansland Common**. But our favourite place in the summer

was **Doctor's Corner** on the **River Lea**. We spent many happy hours there as the river was fit for bathing and paddling in those days.

By this time I was nine years old and beginning to think about going up into the **Senior School** which was built on the **Wick**. Most of the scholars **bought a brick at half a crown** and our initials were put on the bricks which were placed midway up the wall around the **Assembly Hall**.

We had the **railway** at this time and we were taken to Luton by train which was a great treat. We would watch from our window the **rubbish being dumped in Highway Field**. The engine would arrive with many trucks and many tons of **London rubbish**. It was lovely to see the passenger trains pull in to the station and trundle over the bridge on their way to Harpenden and Luton. A sight that we all missed very much [when the railway line was closed by Dr Beeching, presumably].

We had a goods yard. **Mr H. Hawkins** had a **coal siding**, and also **Mr Batchelor** who was a **coalman**. **Wrights Nurseries** sent their **toms and cues** from that goods yard to **London** markets. We had **Feathers Cooper** on the platform and **Spider Hewson** in the goods yard. And **Mr Lee** was the station master and lived in the house adjoining the station. A while lapsed and **Cobbs'** houses were started. We lost our allotment next door and then six houses were built in Hatfield Road and a driveway at the side for entrance to one larger house and six double-gated back entrances. Our village was starting to grow. **The Cobb** houses changed tenants quite a lot.

The first **Catholic Church** was in the larger **Cobb** house. **The Catholic priest, Father Armitage**, lived there along with a number of trainee priests, **none of whom could speak our language**. At night we could see the Virgin Mary lit up on the altar. It was a lovely sight.

On reaching the age of eleven I am in **Standard Four**, **Miss Sykes** being my teacher, and I am now going into the **Senior School** in the **Wick**. This was all very different, much more modern. My teacher was **Mr Styles**. I was in **Standard Five** with two more to go, 6–7 standards, then started more lessons, **cookery, science** and many others. I wasn't able to do much in the way of sports or games as I had a heart problem at that time.

We had a very nice **Practical Centre**, where the **girls** done their **domestic science** and the **boys woodwork and ironwork**. Our headmaster was **Mr Housden** who kept a keen eye on us.

We now had **motor cars and buses**. Our life was starting to change. Then we had **gas lamps** along our roads. So I carried on with my schooling, moving up to standard 6–7: **Miss Sloe** in Standard 6 and **Mr Meads** in Standard 7, and in **1940 I left school**. It was an unhappy year for me. My father died in April 1940. I left school in July. My mother managed to cope with our sad loss. I started work at the **laundry in Welwyn Garden City**.

My brother and myself were **confirmed in December 1940** at **Harpenden** parish church by the **Bishop of St Albans**. From **1939-1945** we had the war to cope with. We had to manage on **rations**. There were **ration books** and **gas masks**. The men folk in the village

joined the **Home Guard** or the **Air Raid Wardens**. The young men were called up for **National Service**.

The **Eastern Command** was billeted in **Wheathampstead Garden House** being their headquarters. The **Officers'** mess was at the **Mead Hall**. The officers were lodged at various houses in the village.

There were lots of troops on **Nomansland Common** and we had a **searchlight at Ayot St Lawrence**. We had some good times with the troops around here. We had military dances. **Charlie Chester** came to the village a number of times with the **ENSA concerts**. We all had to grow what we could in our gardens. Regarding vegetables, the slogan was "**Dig for Victory**". Many people dug up their front lawns to make way for vegetables. Our local **fire engine was manned mostly by girls**, the fire station being in **East Lane** opposite **Woodley's** shop. We had an **air raid warden's hut** in the field in Marford Road, and in the village high street we had an **air raid shelter** (where **Ushers** shop is now).

By this time I had left the laundry at W.G. City and started work at the bakery working for **Mr Hall** helping on the round. I eventually passed my driving test and took over delivering with the van. Mrs Hall and I carried on while **Mr Hall** was away on active service abroad and in this country. He later returned to the bakery with the rank of **Captain**.

I spent 40 happy years working at the bakery. I met with all sorts of people and saw all sorts of sights, but in **1984 Mr Hall sadly died**. To me that was the end of a wonderful era.

During the war years a charity committee was formed. **Mr Tom Nichol**, the farmer at **Beech Hyde Farm** played a big part in the running of fetes and auctions to raise money some of which helped to build the **Memorial Hall**.

World War II ended in 1945, followed by the ending of the **Japan war in 1946**. There was rejoicing in the village. We danced in the High Street outside **Collins Antiques** showroom to records and people sang through the microphone. Later the boys started to come home from the war. Some never returned.

It was lovely to forget our **gas masks** and **ration books** and the **blackout** we had had all through the war years. As time went on we were able to rid ourselves of **petrol and clothing coupons**. We still had **prisoners of war** around. Some were based at **Lemsford** and some at **Mackerye End**. They were employed mostly by farmers. I can remember a few prisoners at **Nichols [Beech Hyde] farm** and a couple of prisoners at **Lambs [Marford] farm**.

By this time my brother had left school and started work at **Dawnays at W.G. City** and later joined the **LNER** as a cleaner, and later became a driver.

The **Hatfield Road** was still very narrow and very up-and-down-hill. On getting over the top of the first hill by the **Nelson** we came to "**Dirty Bottom**" and then up the next hill and down to **Water End** turn, and then on along the road to **Cromer Hyde**, and on the

left **Brocket Hall**, which was a **maternity home** at that time, and then on towards **Lemsford and Hatfield**.

We then had another big change. **Hatfield Road** was widened and was now known as **Marford Road**. **Cooper Bros** did the job. The road was made level and much straighter and we had a footpath to walk on. And, of course, a lot more traffic. All this happened **July 1962–1963**. By this time we are getting much more modern.

August 2012