

## Dennis Toyer

Interviewed in May 2013.



*Dennis lived in a bungalow in Rose Lane, Wheathampstead.*

*Dennis*

I was born in the house we are sitting in 75 years ago on Friday, believe it or not. Yes I can remember, if we want to go and start... Before I talk about the tub railway which ran under where you're sitting, I must mention that the far end of this bungalow was burnt to smithereens in the wartime when a very large bomb crashed in the field over at Bury Farm. And upstairs I've still got some pieces of the metal somewhere which came off of it. And I was dug out of the ruins, as we might as well say, by the local fire brigade. And it was rebuilt in the wartime more or less; it was tarpaulined over more than anything and rebuilt after the war, the far end bedroom which I was buried in. So there's a start.

*Patrick*

I have heard a story about a bomb that blew a lot of plasterwork off Wheathampstead Place.

*Dennis*

That is the same bomb. It was an enormous bomb, in a note from the War Ministry they said 'a small bomb', but it was far from being a small bomb. The shell of it was at least, I would have thought, 10 feet long. Yes, it was some bomb. It blew the shop windows out in the village. I remember walking over the broken glass windows out in the village. I remember walking over the glass to school treading through that. It was quite a devastation, this whole area.

Some of the church windows, which were coloured windows, stained glass, on this side, were put back in plain glass. That was all due to this wartime bomb. About 1944, it was towards the end of the war. So it might have been up to '44, '45. Yes, so that was one of the things that did happen in this lane. And also in this house where we are sitting now, I don't know if you have ever heard of a very famous actress called Ellen Terry.

*Patrick*

Yes, I remember the name.

*Dennis*

Remember the name indeed. She stopped with my grandma to look after her in this house, and hanging on the wall just above the door in the sitting room, there's a very beautiful decorated plate, a wall plate, which she gave to grandma for looking after her. I suppose we all know why she visited this area. Well, she was quite a girl. She liked the men. And she had a, I don't know how to say this, a boyfriend or what have you.

*Patrick*

A relationship?

*Dennis*

Probably a relationship with a gentleman, shall we say, at Blackmore End. And also George Bernard Shaw, she visited him quite a lot. And she got took up by my grandfather in the limousine because he was the main man at Garden House which was just over the back here, you see. It's Garden Court now.

Garden Court was a very large house on Station Corner called Garden House. And my grandfather was the right-hand man for the good lady who owned it. I've never known her name, but I was always told it was Miss Riley. And he did practically everything. Anything had to be done they had to see Mr Snelling, which was my grandfather, to see what he thought and how much the work should be done. She relied on him an awful lot. And he was her chauffeur; and he was in charge of the grooms. Behind us here where Garden House was, was stables and coach house for the Garden House. Very large. And in the coach house at the bottom end there was a very large gas engine which was used for pumping water for a storage tank in Garden House. I wish I had been as interested then as I am now in that engine. I could have had the engine; a matter of taking it away. As the interest wasn't there in those days, probably chasing after young ladies was more my interest at that time of day, the engine got smashed up and that ended but up till then Grandpa had been in charge of the whole thing. After that it went to Murphy Chemicals and in wartime it was a billeting for soldiers and Women's Royal Army Service Corps and what-have-you. Their lorries were parked and stacked in the yard, the courtyard of the coach house here. So that lot was all taken by the military. A little bit before the end of the war, they left the whole building and it was taken over by the Murphy Chemical Company.

*Patrick*

That was Garden House but did they have Wheathampstead House as well?

*Dennis*

No they didn't. That is a totally different Murphy. One was Murphy and Son and one was Murphy Chemical Company. Because one was a brewing chemist and the other was a chemical company.

Murphy Chemicals were in Place Farm down the bottom. And also on the other side of the road in a very large house which originally was Simons; it belonged to the Simons family. An old lady lived in there called Sophie Simons, a miserable crone she was to us young lads and we were scared to death to go anywhere onto her land because she'd be after you.

Murphy and Co, Brewing Chemist, were in Garden House. They worked for the brewing industry.

And there was originally a footbridge from Garden House side over to Wheathampstead House across Lamer Lane. I think probably many many years ago the original two families

which lived in them were slightly related or something in that region. So they had a quick way to each other's property. That was the general run of it, yes.

Lamer Lane wasn't a very large road in those days. It was more or less just a cart track. Because most persons on foot would come up Rose Lane, because it was a direct route to the old cottages on the common. It comes out on Herons Farm there and then you had the Woodman pub.

You see you had two or three pubs all on this side of the common straight in front of you, like The Cricketers. Then to the right you had the Old Plough pub where the entrance to the Golf Club is. Wonderful pub that was. It's one we all went to in those days. A most enjoyable Friday evening with darts, dominoes and general sports in there.

*Patrick*

Was there a gravel pit up here in Rose Lane?

*Dennis*

Well, we are sitting in it. I will talk to you about the gravel pit. Shall we now go on to Rose Lane? OK, Rose Lane is still the same shaped lane that it was in those days of the gravel pit but the main road, the Lower Luton Road, was much closer to Rose Lane than it is now. When Cory Wright Way and so forth was built the whole lane and the goods yard was finished with. The road was widened and pushed over towards the old railway so now there is a little lay-by in front of Sunny Cottage. There was nothing there in those days because the footpath was about 2 foot 6 inches wide down to the Station Corner from this end and then the main road which was much narrower than it is today. And it was widened in the time of Cory Wright Way being built and the station was demolished. All the station and the Station House, old Mr. Lee's house on the corner, the Station Master. There were some very nasty accidents in those days on that corner. It was a deadly corner. I can remember an Italian prisoner-of-war lorry running out of control, hitting the old Station House, turning over and injuring many of them. Bringing them back from farm work, you see. And it hit the corner of the building and completely turned over. And motor-cycle accidents in those days on that corner were unbelievable. Yes, unbelievable.

Rose Lane was not as wide, the mouth of it, in those days. It was a narrow lane continuous to the main road. It just went down, not opening out. Then dead opposite the other side there was a loading bank. This was an embankment of the height of which one of the goods wagons would be level. So you'd take your cart, or these trucks which were on wheels, and it would run straight in and then would tip the gravel straight in, you see.

Straight in, and there was a siding running parallel with the main road and then it branched back into the main line after a few junctions.

Now the old rail track. It has not been dry enough this year but in the very dry season you'll see right through our garden, right the way up our field, you'll see where the actual lines went all the way up. And these were trucks on four wheels pulled by ponies. Not necessarily downhill because it was all on a slight gradient. And the ponies would bring them back up to the working place and if you look here, see the height of the earth there, then look over the bank on our far side, that's how much was extracted. All the way across.

Yes, and this land in those days belonged to the Garrard family at Lamer. Cherry Garrard. But the other side of the lane belonged to the church. It was for grazing and agricultural uses.

Literally thousands of tons of gravel were removed. It goes all the way up past the last house on this side and if you went into their grounds you will see where they had finished and the seam had run out because they turned some of the soil just up into heaps and they couldn't find any more gravel.

Into the field on this side it was good gravel at that end and so they dug deeper you see. And believe it or not, you've only got to go down a foot to 15 inches, you've got the most beautiful gravel you've ever seen, down there.

*Patrick*

The old maps going back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century show several gravel pits.

*Dennis*

It was here, most of it. Or the one just up Codicote Road, in Cory Wright Way. That was the other gravel working. Again the railway line had a branch into there. Badgers as well. There was a cottage there which belonged to the Helliwells but after that the rest of it was originally a gravel digging. And in the war time it was used as storage for all the timber that came from Canada, Norway, Sweden, all those places. It was brought to the London docks. They wouldn't leave it on the docks because there was severe bombing and it caught fire, obviously, so it was brought by our jolly little railway and backed into the siding which was originally for the gravel loading, unloaded and stacked in there with camouflage netting. I spent many hours there with my father because he was injured in the wartime and demobbed out but he was still military, working for the military, so was still a soldier and he was one of the guards. There was two or three of them. He was one of the guards which had to watch this timber, make sure it wasn't pilfered or anybody throw fireworks or anything into it.

*Patrick*

How was the gravel used?

*Dennis*

At the time of this gravel digging, they were cutting, digging and sinking a lot of new underground railways in London so this was the backfill for under the cobbled-cum-tarmac. A lot of the underground wasn't actually tunnelled, it was cut out and then the tunnel was built and it was then refilled over the top of it. Cut and cover. Old Harry Westwood the blacksmith, who I worked with as a boy, told me he could remember when he was a lad his father being a blacksmith in the village too. The picks the gravel-diggers used had to be drawn out. They had to be three feet from one cut end to the point end. Otherwise you didn't get a job. So it's 16 inches, just under, by the time you've got the headstock in. So they had to be that length before you got a job on this gravel-digging. And they were taken to their blacksmith's shop to be sharpened and drawn out. That's the technical term for lengthening a pick, you call it 'drawn out'. It had to be drawn out to three feet long.

It's the levering up of the amount you push up. You see they didn't want to have a spoonful at a time. They wanted a shovel full. So the amount you push back on that pick brought quite a good lump of gravel from the soil, from the area.

*Patrick*

Did they wash the gravel here?

*Dennis*

No, the gravel wasn't really washed because it was in such a good grade, shall we say, that it just simply went as a hoggin for the backing of the roads you see. It wasn't decorative surface. No. No. It was for topping up and for surfacing on, hard surfacing on top of it. But that was dug from here and where you are sitting now, as I said the railway, it was about two feet wide, the gauge, and it ran from all the way down from the workings to across the road, over the loading bank and into the trucks. Into the 10 ton trucks. And this roughly would be about 1880, 1875, 1880 up to just about the turn of the century. I would have thought it would have been about 1895 that was the last workings of this gravel pit here.

These seams, as they were called, run out quite quickly and you get probably three or four dozen or more men picking away at that every day so you are moving a fair tonnage. You're moving a lot.

*Patrick*

The censuses show some gravel-diggers lived in the village in the 1880s and 1890s, and quite a few up at the Folly.

*Dennis*

Yes that was the working area you see. Folly Fields and so forth. After the workings closed, the area was a very popular walk in the late 1920s for listening to the nightingales, believe it or not. They used to come out from the village and further afield. Especially here, there were large elm trees all the way up the side which, obviously, we all had to have felled because of Dutch Elm and what have you. But the nightingales used to frequent these, I should say, quite a lot. And summer evenings especially from this month of the year, it was a very popular place to walk to listen to the nightingale.

So we'll carry along up the lane a little further. This house where we are was built in 1922. Grandfather bought this land off of Cherry Garrard. My grandfather was Bert Snelling. That is a Norfolk name. He came from Norfolk to work at the house here. That's how he met Grandma who lived down in the village.

My father was born in East Lane but then they moved to Luton. His father was a farrier, blacksmith-cum-farrier again and he worked for J. W. Greens, the brewing people, in Luton. I think there was too many blacksmiths, farriers, in this area so he moved to the town.

*Patrick.*

Can we talk about the forge now?

*Dennis.*

Well, Harry Westwood, the old blacksmith, I worked for as a schoolboy. It was his parents who were behind the Two Brewers and it was when his father was more or less just about retiring that it folded up there and moved across the road to the Bull Yard.

My father was very friendly with Harry's son Alf. Then I got very friendly with Alf and well, we were mates for many many years but previous to that I had to work, I didn't have to, but I worked with the old man, the old Harry Westwood, the blacksmith.

*Patrick.*

Harry Westwood senior?

*Dennis.*

Senior, who was I suppose one of the best, not because I worked with him, the best blacksmith's work I've ever seen any blacksmith ever do.

*Patrick.*

Both father and son were Harry?

*Dennis.*

They were. They were both Harry yes.

Incidentally, the Westwood family practically made up the Wheathampstead Fire Brigade in those days. There were so many brothers. Lionel was another brother. There were dozens of them as in all families in those days. There were so many of them but all the family had always been involved in, or very nearly all of them, with the metalwork side of life.

The early 1950s, 13 or 14 I started with him. And probably the first job I had he said "come and help" would be to pump the forge. No electric fan forge, this was a hand bellows forge with a cow horn on the end of the lever pole.

There were sheds, barns and goodness knows what behind the Bull but the blacksmith's forge was right smack on East Lane so the doors opened straight out onto East Lane.

A pair of sliding doors and you just stepped out, you were onto East Lane. And the Bull car park, there was a gateway into the Bull car park about 14,15 feet wide and then the blacksmith's shop. So from the end of the building as it is now, the Bull, came the gateway, came the blacksmith's shop and that ran all the way along to the fire station in those days. And after the fire station left, we took it over as the sheet metal workshop.

My good friend, the son, he did all the wonderful sheet metalwork in there. Car repairs, bodies and so forth. Welding up car chassis in those days which used to rust away. That was done in the old garage where the fire engine was stationed.

*Patrick.*

So what was going on in the area that is now the free Parish Council car park?

*Dennis.*

There was a bungalow. Wooden bungalow running parallel again with East Lane and some allotments and an old gent in there. Very lovely old couple, the Potter family, Bill Potter. And this bungalow used to have a veranda to it and summer's evenings Bill and his wife used to sit in their two chairs, one at each end and watch the people go past to the Bull. But that then went up to the Mead Hall then. And that was the garden and the house now... 10, whatever it is Loufenway, that was, yes Hardings that is now more or less situated on the grounds of the bungalow.

*Patrick.*

Going back to the forge in the Bull Yard, the one that you worked at, were you doing a lot of wrought-iron work, and still farriering?

*Dennis.*

No, he finished with that. They were repairing cars, tractors, farm implements by the dozen. And we repaired in there because there wasn't the garages like today to go and get your car. There was no Jessamine Garage, or the one along the Lower Luton road. None of those

were in existence. They were all repaired in the Bull Yard by Westwoods. And they were wonderful mechanics as well as constructing engineers. They could practically do anything. If it couldn't be welded Alf didn't want to know. He was absolutely fantastic at welding.

Alf was the son and Ted was the other son of Harry. They are the ones we are actually talking about as the blacksmiths.

Harry Junior was not the most easiest man to work with, because I suppose I learnt an awful lot from him. But as I, as you say, graduated with him I was allowed to do the striking cos he was now, I suppose 74 or 75 years old. The striking is the heavy hammer work. He would hold the steel, iron whichever we were using from the forge and tell me to hit it there. To spread it, to draw it, to do anything he wanted to do, to bend it even. And I would have to hit it and his words were "Go get it Denny", and he pointed where he wanted it hit but that wouldn't be the right place. Never the right place. Never the right place and you know it was where he'd previously told you. But it was just their way in those days. Old chaps being so awkward. But you learnt an awful lot from him. And I've seen him do some of the most wonderful, wonderful forge welding. This is something that is very difficult to do, to unite two pieces of steel by getting them sparkling red hot in the forge and then beating them together and forming a long length.

Yes, you merge the metal, you beat them together more or less in a molten state. And you can imagine the pumping I had to do with the hand forge to get the steels, irons, which ever you like, up to the temperature for the welding. And you had to really shift. And you had to move very quickly before they went off the right temperatures to unite them. And if you join them wrongly you got to cut them apart again. Put back in the forge and put them back on the anvil but this time you would have a cutting tool in the anvil and they would be rested on top of the, it's like a chisel, top of a chisel, fits in the beak of the anvil. No it doesn't, it fits in the toe of the anvil. The beak of the anvil is the tapered piece and it fitted in the end piece there. Then put 'em over the top of this big chisel and hit 'em on the top with the hammer until they parted again and you started again.

And Saturday lunchtimes his treat for us boys, that be his two sons and myself, was take us over to the Bull, to the public bar and buy us each a Guinness, a bottle of Guinness. I was only probably 14 years old but it wasn't even the kind of beer that I liked but I daren't say I didn't like it because he would growl and he'd be so severe with his growling that I had to have it "It got the muscles up" and it was good for you. It made me a strong enough lad to give his iron enough beating.

*Patrick.*

What prompted Alf and Ted to close that forge and to move?

*Dennis.*

That was nothing of their doing. It was the Bull wanting to expand the business. It was J. W. Greens at that stage and then various other brewing companies took it. They needed more parking because they were going to conjure up much more custom to their pubs and so there was nowhere to go and the Parish Council very kindly put up a building and let to the village industry which was quite a good thought for those days. Wasn't the normal run of the mill. So we were quite well ahead, or the councillors were, who were on in those days, to think "right well this is another business we are going to lose out of the village so for the sake of a little bit of land in that corner we will give them a building".

*Patrick.*

So essentially they were evicted along with the other people in Bull Yard?

*Dennis.*

They were more or less, yes. They were told to find new property. In those days there was various characters living in the cottages and they used the sheds for, well I don't really know because they were barred and bolted and we never did see in those. They left and the sheds were knocked down and the old fire station was knocked down. The whole thing was cleared to what it is today. There is one little story that I can remember so clearly. We used to have a little old stationary engine. The old workshops had electric lighting but not power so we had to start this little stationary engine which was made about the turn of the century – it was just like an old cannon on four cast iron wheels – and it ran on paraffin. We used to sharpen an awful lot of mowers and shears, scissors, horticultural, agricultural, you name it, and once a week we used to have to start this little engine and use the grinder which it ran. We spent all day grinding various tools. This old engine used to miss an awful lot and backfire. The exhaust pipe ran up the outside and through the ivy which had built itself right up the side of the old building. Working away in there one day and there was frantic banging on the doors and Alf saying to me "What is that banging?". I went to look and there was a gentleman standing at the door who says "Excuse me. Do you know you're on fire?" So we said "No, we're not on fire". "Yes, you are." Well, in this ivy over the years millions of birds had nested and the engine had backfired and set fire to the whole of the ivy. The whole lot was in flames. *[laughs]* As a young lad, I could see the funny side of it. Not thinking of what could happen, of the whole building going up in flames but all fun. We had to call the newly-formed fire brigade from Marford Road to come and put us out.

*Patrick.*

What year did the forge move down to the new building in the Meads?

*Dennis.*

It would be in the early '70s.

The Meads at that time was a pretty overgrown place. It was a play area for kids. There was beautiful elm trees to climb. There were the pigs at the bottom end again, with John Matthews. And he cultivated a bit of it. Murphy's end, which was the better soil, just the other side of the river where the new forge is. He had swedes and stuff in there for the pigs. The other end was, as I say, the pigs and pigsty. Ah, that's a point there, Eddie's good lady Carol, was my playmate for many years. Her and I spent many happy hours together.

She'll remember being down there with me. Yes, it wasn't too long. It was a jettisoned petrol tank from a bomber which I found up in the gravel pits. A bit further on from the ones in Cory Wright Way. Dragged it all the way to the Meads, chopped the top out of it and we used it as a canoe. Because it was a perfect shape. It was a jettisoned tank from a bomber and her and I used to spend many happy hours paddling up and down the river.

The Meads was just derelict grassland really and a bit of grazing but not of the best quality, coarse reed type of grass and millions of molehills, and of course the sewerage works. There used to be the duct out with the fresh water coming down just a little bit further on to where that new bridge that crosses it. Bit further over was the channel where the water came out into the river.

George Wren run the business for many years. He actually meant something in those days, not just being the sewerage working man but he was, you know something of the village, sort



of thing. Because people knew that if they kept that site clean they would be healthy, I think they gradually got to that way of thinking.

Now, we've not really hit on Rose Lane. Talked about this lane, about when the houses were built and what have you.

Now how do I start it? At the very top of the lane. I think we will have to work from there. The very top end where Richard Dawes is and the Dell, the house. That was originally two cottages, cos my grandmother lived at that end. She lived there but then my mother came along and she didn't like walking down this lonely lane to school and complained to grandfather, her father which was my grandfather, about having to come down here alone. And grandfather then looked into it and bought this piece of land and, as I said, this was put up in 1922. But it's quite high from the ground. Where grandfather came from in Blofield in Norfolk he used to fear flooding and it worried him to death. This cos it was the Fens.

And it worried him to death, about water, so he had the bungalow built high up. Much higher than normal. OK it was a bit more costly because of the extra brickwork, what have you, to lift it but it gave him peace of mind to live here. And that is why the bungalow is probably 16 to 19 inches, although we are on the slope and very unlikely to have water close up here as far as this from the river, it was always in his mind. And as I say at this time they were two cottages at the very top. No other houses in the lane.

And opposite was the machinery barn for, in those days, gosh can't think of the name of the farm. Not Herons Farm the other one. Where Sammy Collins lived. It's gone ..... and I've done hours and hours of work repairing the place over the years. Yes that's gone. That all belonged to those and then it was all sold off in ..... Delaport. Home Farm, Delaport. And then it was sold off to Herons Farm and what have you over the years. Then in about 1928, '29 some of these other houses were started to be built in the lane, and this went up to the '30s, middle '30s, and they filled the lane up as it is today. Some very large houses. They've gradually grown. They weren't that size originally.

... but the top above here originally the Garrards used to live. Garrards, who were the bakers of the village at the top of the High Street where the houses are on stilts up there, that was Garrards bakery. Lovely bread. Lovely bakery and shop. And they lived up there. And that was in a wooden bungalow, very similar to Bill Potter's in East Lane. There was quite a few of that type of those bungalows built around this area. Timber. In the First World War in the back field by my fence, the second fence, was a green gun emplacement and army site was there. Smack in the middle of this field. You must remember then these trees were nothing then but just a little bit of scrub land. And the concrete is now deteriorated but it was a gun emplacement and we're not sure if even a very early searchlight part was on there as well.

That's why they dug out the railway bridge. They dug that out. I found that out from an old friend a long while afterwards when we were started on that but he said, well, you know why it swoops down. They couldn't get the gun barrels under. I said "Never thought of that" he said "Ya" that's why. Then he passed away poor old chap I didn't glean enough out of him. And it was done by the, not the highways, but the Royal Engineers and it was done over an evening's work sort of thing. They dug it out and no one took no notice and that's why you've got that sudden scoop out like this.

The guns were brought here and there was another on Gustard Wood Common as well. But there was definitely one there, emplacement. There's only little bits and pieces left there now.

*Patrick.*

So the houses in Rose Lane were built mainly in the '30s and gradually extended.

*Dennis*

And various other persons taking them over and this is how we are now. But this one has been in my family ever since it was built; we've been here ever since.