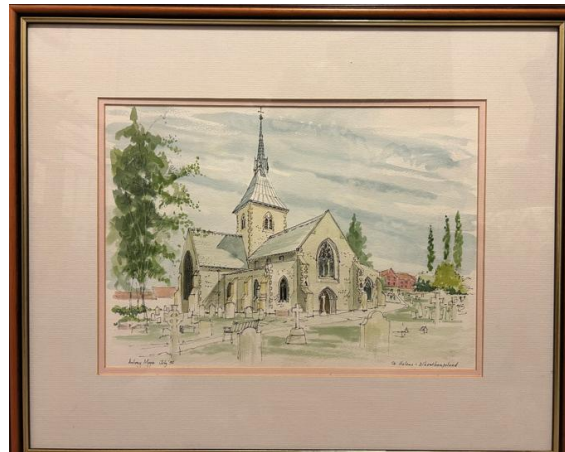


Patrick McNeill talked with Shirley Knapp on 3 February 2026.

Shirley's daughter had contacted the History Society to ask if we might be interested in a painting her mother had of St Helen's Church. It was painted by Antony Moyes in July 1990.



We gratefully accepted this gift and arranged for Patrick to visit Shirley to talk about her memories of Wheathampstead.

Shirley

I first started visiting Wheathampstead in my early childhood. I was born in 1935. I used to visit my grandfather, Charlie Beech, with my mother and my sister. He lived in Marford Road. My grandmother, Emily, came from Old Welwyn. She was Emily Nash before she married. They had nine children. They were Maud, May, Aida Lillian (my mum, known as Betty), Eleanor (Nell), Stanley, Reginald, Ursula, Audrey, and a boy who died very young. They had lived in Necton Road but grandmother had died when I was about five so grandfather was on his own. Miss Baxter who taught at the Wheathampstead school lived next door.

I would go to Wheathampstead with my mother on the train. My mother helped to look after him, doing what she could, you know, cleaning, cooking... My mother's sister Ursula actually lived with him during the war. Her husband was in... I'm not sure... maybe it was the Navy. He was called Harold Smith. And his father, I didn't know him at all, was at one time vicar of Wheathampstead, I think.

Patrick

Were your granny and granddad originally from Wheathampstead? Did they grow up there?

Shirley

My granddad was, but my grandmother, Emily, was from Old Welwyn. That was a large family. She came from Mimram Walk.

Patrick

What was your grandfather's work?

Shirley

Oh, he had worked on the railway but he had retired and now he was a volunteer fireman. I've got some very good photos of the firemen. And my grandfather was also part of, I think it was in the 1930s, the sort of minstrel group, the black and white minstrels that was run by a man called Bert Cobb. Yes, Grandpa was quite musical and I remember he used to play the piano at home quite a lot. And the accordion. He used to play the spoons, play tunes with spoons. I loved that. He really was quite musical. And my mother played the mandolin and the accordion, and piano as well.

He used to go to The Swan pub. Quite often, which is at the end of the road, on the junction.

My grandpa had quite a good garden at the back. He was known mostly for his music and going to the pub.

Anyway, I used to go with my sister and my mother and we would also visit an uncle and aunt, Amy and Reg, who lived in Conquerors Hill. I'd go from Marford Road up to the shop near Necton Road and opposite Conquerors Hill. This was in the war years and after the war.

They were mostly girls in that family, but there were two boys. One Reginald and one Stanley. So they were my uncles. Stanley was in the army and lived outside of Wheathampstead. Ursula worked for Helmets.

I didn't know the family that well but I was always interested in the fact that my mother knew quite a lot about Cherry Garrard who went with Scott to the Antarctic. I used to think, "Well, how on earth did you get to know that?" Later on I found a book, it's a lovely book that I enjoyed, about two characters, George and Henry¹. One was a chauffeur. And I think how she came to know the family was probably through them because they lived in Necton Road or thereabouts.

Patrick

Can you remind me, what was your mother's first name?

Shirley

Ada Lilian, but she was always called Betty. She went to St Helen's School. I had some letters. I had the letter that the headmaster wrote when she left, as a reference to getting a job. She was very conscientious and quite a good pupil². And also there were letters from the church about her.

Patrick

So you came to Wheathampstead on the train from Welwyn Garden City. Can you remember anything about the journey, what it was like?

Shirley

The journey was first of all through Sherrards Wood in Welwyn Garden and then on to Ayot station. There was a fire and Ayot station was burned down. But what I remember most was, on the cold days in winter, the stationmaster at Wheathampstead had a big fire in his room

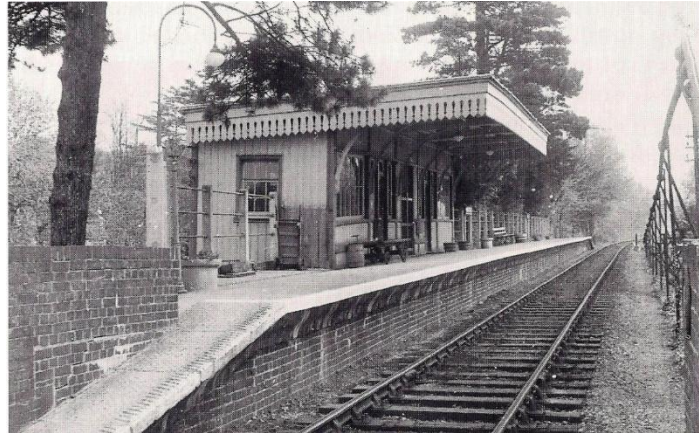
¹ Mary Amy Coburn (1992) "*George and Henry. Their lives in Victorian Wheathampstead*" Wheathampstead Local History Group.

² The school logbooks record that Ada Beech was awarded first prize in Class 1 (the top class) on 25 November 1923.

and he'd invite us in. And as soon as the train came, he'd go out and shout "Whemstead! Whemstead!". Very loud.

Patrick

I'd like to show you this photograph of the station platform. (*shows photo*)



Shirley

Oh, yes. Oh, that brings back memories. The office was in there. Yes, I have a very good memory for that. The stationmaster was such a nice man. I can see the train coming in and I can see him going out, standing there and then shouting...

Patrick

What sort of uniform did he have? Did he wear a cap?

Shirley

I don't remember that.

Patrick

But you do remember "Whemstead!", "Whemstead!".

Shirley

And the station changed in my later life. Well, it closed down just before... I don't know when it was... I think it was called Ayot Greenway.

Patrick

Yes, that's right.

I've shown you a photograph of the station in the old days and you've said you remember that it closed. So I hope you'll be pleased to see this. (*shows photo*)

The station had become derelict and ruined but about 15 years ago we found the old ruins and we've restored the platform. And this is what it looks like now.



Shirley

Oh, that looks fabulous. And the blue engine. That's fabulous, isn't it?

And the train used to go to Luton and Dunstable.

Patrick

Did you ever take the train all the way to Luton?

Shirley

No, not ever. Just to Wheathampstead.

Patrick

So, at the end of a visit to your grandfather, would you walk from Marford Road back to the station?

Shirley

Yes, we walked from Marford Road. It was at Marford Road that my aunt used to give us tea after we came back from music lessons. And we walked with her up to the station. Yes, I do remember that.

Patrick

Oh, you had music lessons? I'd like to ask you about that in a moment.

Let's think some more about you walking from Marford Road back to the station. Would that take you down the High Street?

Shirley

Yes, there was a funny little turning off, just before you got to the station. We used to go along there sometimes to visit someone we knew in the bungalows. I can't remember the approach, but I know that in later life I realised they'd left the station very high up but when I was a child it wasn't.

I remember the antique shop on the corner near The Swan pub. Collins. And the Swedish houses at the bottom of Conquerors Hill, I remember those. I think I remember the police houses opposite The Swan. There were police houses there. And there was a fish and chip

shop which my aunt and uncle took over after the war. For a short time. In the High Street. Her name was Smith. Ursula Smith. Audrey was the youngest one. My mother's older sisters, one was in Luton, her name was Maud. I think the second one was May. And she was married to a Dollimore. And my aunt lived mostly in Cornwall, so she was a long way away.

I don't have many memories of the village and the shops but I remember the butcher particularly. I think there was a baker's somewhere. I think it was higher up the road.

Patrick

Do you have a picture in your head of the butcher's shop?

Shirley

Yes, vaguely. It was behind the mill.

My mother, one time, I don't know how long before, she worked for the butcher, in a little office, she was the accounts lady. You put money in an overhead system and then it would zing up to my mother and she did the accounts. This was in the butcher's. I can't remember his name. I've got a very good photo of him. And she worked there for a while, I think, in the early days, but she also worked at Brocket Hall. She was a lady's maid or something. She used to go on holiday with them up to Scotland. With the family, with Lord Brocket and the family. So she was living in Wheathampstead but working at Brocket Hall. I don't know how she got there because it was quite a way. Maybe on a bicycle? Or maybe she lived in.

But certain things I do remember, like Devil's Dyke and Marford, and I used to love running up and down the hills. It was a big adventure in there, in Devil's Dyke. It was near to Conquerors Hill; we used to play in there. Marford Road is a bit different now. There's a community hall which wasn't there.

And we used to play also by the old bridge in the village. We used to go down to the water there to paddle and then go along to the river further along in the Meads. That had the unfortunate effect that my sister developed polio and they said that the water was very possibly the source.

Patrick

I'm so sorry to hear that. And you were saying that you had music lessons? Was that both of you?

Shirley

Yes, piano lessons. But unfortunately we didn't inherit the musical talent. It was only for two or three years. I was better at the theory than the music but I have great memories.

Patrick

Were those lessons in Wheathampstead?

Shirley

No, there was this place near Batford and The Folly. My sister Val and I used to go on our own after school. The station was quite a large part of our outing because we used to go to the station and get on the train. It amazes me now I think about it. We'd go on the train to Wheathampstead, get off and wait at the bus stop. We're going to go to the Cherry Trees area. We'd get off the bus at the Cherry Tree, walk along a short distance and then we went

into where the music teacher was. I don't remember exactly. It was between Wheathampstead and Harpenden. I can't remember the teacher's name, but she lived next to Gypsy Petulengro at the bungalow at The Folly. We had a couple of years going there. It amazes me the journey that we took.

We did occasionally cycle from Welwyn Garden to Wheathampstead. Quite a long way. And I remember on one occasion, my sister and I decided with two friends to go to Wheathampstead. And we accidentally met my aunt and she was horrified to see us on our bikes. "What are you doing here? Just the two of you.". That was quite an occasion.

Patrick

Now, let's talk about the painting which I like so much. That's of the church. Did you go to the church?

Shirley

We weren't regular churchgoers, no. I went to my uncle's funeral when he died about ten years ago.

I do remember the Westwoods. The family. The blacksmiths.

Patrick

Do you remember the smithy? At that time it would have been behind the Bull pub. There was the Bull Yard and the smithy would have been there.

Shirley

No, I don't remember that but I know my father's family lived in there in his early days before he married. I think he lived behind the Bull pub along a lane there. East Lane.