



Wheathampstead History Society

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News and events

- Our **next meeting** will be on **Wednesday 16 April** when Patrick McNeill will tell us **The Story of Wheathampstead Station** from opening to closure to restoration.
- Harpenden History Society Public Lecture: **Medieval Harpenden: The Plague and its Consequences**. 8pm, Tuesday, 1 April. For details, www.harpenden-history.org.uk/

From STW to SPS

The recent disruption caused by the burst sewer pipe is the latest chapter in the chequered history of waste treatment in Wheathampstead.

Until the 1870s, houses and cottages depended on cesspits and "night soil carting" to dispose of their waste. The first step to modernization was taken in 1873 when the Rural Sanitary Authority purchased just over an acre of land in The Meads from Viscountess Palmerston with the express purpose of building a sewage treatment works (STW). The new plant, very basic by today's standards, was open by 1876. George Wren, who had been carting the night soil, was appointed manager. His grand-daughter, Mena Pearce, later described the works as "two small sedimentation tanks ... Vic the horse had to go round and round, driving an endless chain ... The end result of the process was an almost colourless liquid which trickled away across the ground."

As early as April 1877, a report to the RSA from Dr C.E. Saunders, Medical Officer of Health, condemned the works as "...the utterly futile attempt at sewage treatment such as is exhibited at the tanks at Wheathampstead...". He wrote in detail about the inadequacies of the works and made many recommendations for how to improve them. The report was referred to a committee but not before Mr Blain had asserted that "Dr. Saunders knew nothing at all about the subject".

In September 1887, following an outbreak of scarlet fever in the cottages in East Lane, the Vestry met to discuss problems with the sewage works. It was decided that, rather than spend £100 on a new donkey pumping-engine, £30 should be spent on using more efficient chemicals, improving the outfall from the filter beds, and using the underground gravels to "assist the filtration". It was hoped that these improvements would "carry the water into the river in a pure state".

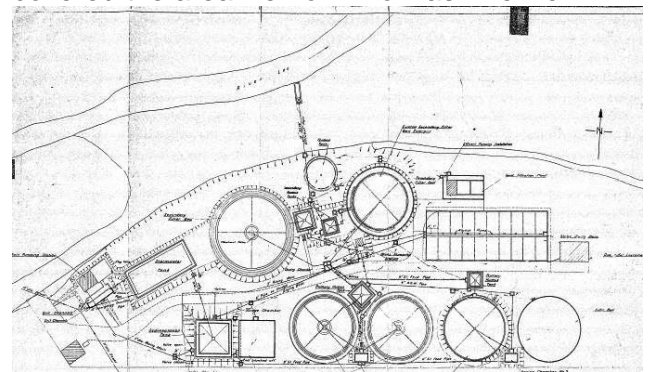
At first, only a few houses in the middle of the village were connected to the STW but more were connected over the years. The works were expanded in 1923 with the purchase of more land

and George Wren's son, Arthur, took over as manager, a post he held until 1953.

In December 1945 the County Medical Officer of Health reported to the Parish Council that the river consisted almost entirely of effluent from the Luton, Harpenden and Wheathampstead sewage works. Water from the river should not be used for bathing, paddling or boating unless sufficiently chlorinated. It was resolved that warning notices should be fixed along the river.

In 1948, when Lord Brocket sued Luton Borough Council for polluting his lakes with sewage, Arthur Wren gave evidence in court that the pollution was not coming from Wheathampstead.

More improvements were made in the 1950s and 1960s so that, by 1969, the works completely covered the area we now know as The Dell.



In the early 1970s, it was decided that the STW should be converted into a pumping station (SPS) to take the sewage up to the recently-expanded treatment works in Harpenden. The Parish Council, which had bought The Meads in 1937, agreed that a footbridge could be built across the river from which the new 12" rising main would be suspended. The new main followed a route up to Codicote Road and then along the old railway line to Harpenden; it was operational by late 1978.

The Parish Council bought the site of the old works in 1983 and the land was restored to create The Dell. The restoration was awarded first prize in the Rural Section of the Hertfordshire Conservation Awards In 1991.