



# Wheathampstead History Society

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## News and events

- On 12 June, the WDPS hosted a Q & A meeting where Mike Peters of Jarvis Homes outlined plans for renovating **The Old Bakery** as part of a wider redevelopment plan for the area around the building. Most of those attending were reassured.
- There will not be a meeting in August. Our **next meeting** will be on **Wednesday 17 September** when Tony Berk will tell us about **The History and Origins of Harpenden**.

## Murphy's

Many older residents of Wheathampstead will remember "Murphy's" but, for those who have moved to the village in the last 30 years, it may be just a name. So, what was "Murphy's"?

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were two companies based in the village, Murphy & Son and the Murphy Chemical Company. Official histories and personal memories often confuse these two. Both took their name from Albert John Murphy who started as a sole trader selling brewing materials in 1887. He formed a limited company with a Mr Lonsdale in 1911 but changed the name of the company to Murphy & Son in 1918, based in Nottingham. See

[www.murphyandson.co.uk](http://www.murphyandson.co.uk)

Having become increasingly involved in developing and selling the chemicals needed in brewing, Mr Murphy developed an interest in horticultural and agricultural chemicals. He



bought Wheathampstead House in 1928, initially as a private residence but then making it the head office of Murphy & Son with its research

laboratories. He registered the Murphy Chemical Company as a wholly-owned subsidiary of Murphy & Son and began to build a factory in the area behind Wheathampstead Place that is now occupied by Melbourne Mews, Palmerston Drive, Dawes Lane, Pikes Leap, Waddling Lane and the south side of Mount Road.

In about 1930, Murphy bought Garden House (sited where Garden Court is today) which became the registered and administrative offices of Murphy Chemical. Next, in 1932, Murphy Chemical bought Wheathampstead Place from Sir William Beach Thomas and set it up as their research department. Over the following years, the company bought other premises and a number of orchards in the area which were used

to test the various pesticides, insecticides and fungicides, including DDT and other now-banned substances, that the company produced.

The company became a major employer in the village but not without controversy. In 1981, The Pump recorded complaints about "noxious smells" from the works and heavy lorries blocking the High Street. Local anecdotes tell of workers coming home after a shift at Murphy's with strangely coloured hair.

Murphy Chemical was bought by Glaxo (later GSK) in 1956. They sold it on to Dalgety in 1977 who promptly made 30 of the 300 workers redundant. Under the Dalgety brand, the factory continued to produce agricultural chemicals but within a few years Dalgety had changed the main focus of its business and the Murphy factory in Wheathampstead was closed in about 1983.

Murphy sold Wheathampstead House in 1989 and moved Murphy & Son's technical team and laboratories to Nottingham where the company continues to flourish.

Sainsbury's bought the Murphy Chemical site with the intention of building a superstore. Following a campaign of objections by local residents, including the setting up of WDPS, the planning application was refused and in 1999 Sainsbury's applied to build up to 150 houses on the site. Permission was granted subject to the site being decontaminated of the chemical residues left by Murphy Chemical. This was done and the houses we see now were built in 2001/2.

The area that is now Melbourne Mews was so grossly contaminated that it needed more thorough decontamination. A reedbed filter system was installed but by 2014 it became apparent that this technique was showing no demonstrable improvement. Jarvis Homes received planning permission for housing in 2019 and contracted Sanctus Ltd to decontaminate the site which they did between 2019 and 2022 using bioremediation techniques ([tinyurl.com/mpnfzs2u](https://tinyurl.com/mpnfzs2u))