

Out and About in Wheathampstead

Wheathampstead Village Sign
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Dianne Payne examines the structural local history of Wheathampstead and provides a template for wider comparisons.

The rural village of Wheathampstead in Hertfordshire, situated about four miles from St Albans, lies on the River Lea. The village and surrounding land has a long history and in ancient times was owned by the Crown. The earliest record is a charter of 1060 from King Edward the Confessor, who granted the area to the Benedictine Monastery of Westminster Abbey, which took over the land and controlled Wheathampstead for the next five hundred years.

The village corn mill, which ground the grain grown by local farmers for use in the village and a wider market, was powered by the River Lea. Surveys of the mill made by Westminster Abbey in medieval times referred to tithes of sweet wheat being sent to London by the millers four times a year. The mill was re-built in the sixteenth century and throughout its history the river and the mill were the lifeblood of the village. Today the River Lea, no longer a source of power for the mill, is a natural habitat for wildlife, a tempting haunt for anglers and a popular spot for recreation and picnics on The Meads. The mill, now minus its water wheel, is silent and the building houses retail outlets.

The River Lea near Wheathampstead Mill and The Bull Inn
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St Helen's Parish Church
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St Helen's Church in the centre of the village, cruciform in shape with an attractive spire, is Grade I listed and dates back to the thirteenth century. A striking landmark, the exterior is built of flint rubble, or Totternhoe clunch, with flint facings and limestone dressings. There was no suitable building material in the immediate area and it is thought that the medieval builders used stone from the Midland quarries shipped down the River Ouse to Bedford and from there conveyed by horse and cart along the Roman roads to Wheathampstead. By the end of the eighteenth century St Helen's was in a poor state of repair. The building, apart from the tower, was covered with plaster and decaying buttresses had been patched with brick, slate or anything else available. The restoration of the church in 1865 saw the plaster stripped from the outside walls revealing the original flint facing in its former glory. Wheathampstead National School, with its belfry and flint walls, opened nearby in 1862, complementing the style of the church and creating an attractive addition to the village. This is now used as offices.

Many main streets in English villages retain medieval buildings, often much altered over the centuries. The medieval core of Wheathampstead, part of the Westminster Abbey estate, consisted of a small number of fifteenth and sixteenth-century houses and cottages clustering round St Helen's Church. Those remaining in the village today include the timber-framed Bull Inn near the banks of the River Lea, Wheathampstead Place, Crown House (originally The Bell Inn), The White Cottage, The Old

Wheathampstead National School
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Rectory in King Edward Place, and former manorial properties at Bury Green.

Wheathampstead is fortunate to have a fine example of crinkle-crinkle walls, built originally around the garden of the Victorian rectory. Undulating, serpentine walls of this kind provide their own stability and remove the need for buttressing, they maximise the surface area exposed to the sun and are ideal for growing espalier fruit trees.

In 2020, the Parish Council created a community garden within the walls, a beautiful, wildlife-friendly and tranquil space for both local residents and visitors. A Boules Court is available to the public and the crinkle crinkle walls around the garden provide the only publicly accessible example in Hertfordshire.

Wheathampstead station opened in 1860 on a line from Hatfield to Dunstable, linked to the direct mainline from Birmingham to King's Cross. The railway brought immediate change to local life-styles with freedom to travel further than anyone could have imagined. Everyone could now have access to coal for fires, fresh fish was available from Yarmouth, industries could transport raw materials and finished goods and 'Specials' took children on day trips to seaside resorts. Local businesses benefitted, with straw plaits sent to Luton for the hat makers there, while villagers travelled to Luton or St Albans to work in hat factories or in other trades. Wheathampstead was an important area for growing tomatoes and cucumbers, so elephant dung was transported by train to the village from



The Crinkle Crankle Garden

The Crinkle Crankle Wall

London Zoo to serve as a fertiliser. Produce was then sent back into London to be sold in Covent Garden.

In 1963 the Beeching Report identified unprofitable railway lines and stations across the country were closed. The last passenger train stopped in Wheathampstead in 1965, the tracks were removed and the station lay forgotten for over 40 years. Re-discovered in 2009, the station platform has since been restored, developed and maintained, creating a small outdoor museum and a popular visitor attraction. Features include a section of track with a 12 ton wagon, a passenger shelter in the style of the original buildings and a full-sized oak carving of George Bernard Shaw, the station's most famous traveller, who regularly cycled from his home in Ayot St Lawrence to catch the London train. The most recent addition, unveiled in August 2021, is a replica of Thomas the Tank Engine, named Terri the Tank Engine after Terry Pankhurst, a talented local engineer, who built it, supported by a team of local helpers.

Wheathampstead Heritage Trails, available online, are a series of walks aiming to highlight the local history of the district and encourage visitors to get out and enjoy it. The walks all start at the free car park in the centre of the village and pass several places where food and drinks are available.

Wheathampstead has its roots in the past and I have spent the last year looking back on the village where I live, researching its history and attempting to



view it through an eighteenth-century lens. In past times human behaviour in rural communities was intimately linked to the church calendar, to food and to weather, aspects of life significant in the history of market towns and villages nationwide.

While my focus was primarily Wheathampstead, this research could provide a template for other eighteenth-century studies, as much of the background material applies to rural settlements across the country.

The historical sources I used included maps, land and building surveys, farm leases, house deeds, vestry minutes and overseers' accounts. Sources relating to village residents and human experience included baptismal, marriage and burial records, apprenticeship indentures, poll tax and electoral rolls, settlement certificates, bastardy bonds and records from the courts of the Quarter Sessions

and Assizes. In the absence of surviving diaries or significant letters from the period, the most personal documents were the 'last wills and testaments' made by eighteenth-century residents. These documents allow us to hear voices directly from the past and appreciate the emotional bonds that existed within nuclear families and marriages of equal partnership. Some wills had accompanying inventories and together these threw light on the lives and social status of the deceased, both men and women.

Social networks of people within a village are difficult to capture, particularly at a time when there were no census returns or trade directories but the Wheathampstead Militia Lists, covering the period from 1758 until 1786, provided virtually an annual census for the second half of the eighteenth century. These lists showed the village

and its surrounding hamlets to be populated with the yeoman farmers, artisans, retailers, servants of the gentry and labourers who lived there. Militia Ballot Lists are available in several forms for many counties across the country. Used in conjunction with other sources they provide valuable information about eighteenth-century residents and rural experiences.

I also used the perhaps unlikely online source *London Lives 1690–1800 – Crime, Poverty and Social Policy in the Metropolis*, www.londonlives.org. Entering ‘Wheathampstead’ into the keyword search, I accessed the database of Abstracts of Wills proved at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, giving names of village residents I might not have found any other way. I also accessed the Fire Insurance Policy Register 1777–1786, detailing names, properties and businesses in the village. By entering the name of your village or town you may be able to access these sources and possibly more. The full text of Wills proved at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury can then be accessed at the National Archives or through Ancestry.co.uk or Findmypast subscription.

Among published contemporary sources, I used *The Diary of Thomas Turner 1754–65* edited by David Vaisey (1984). Turner, an educated shopkeeper from East Hoathly in Sussex, offers a rare and detailed portrait of everyday life in a mid-eighteenth-century English village. Rev James Woodforde, in *The Diary of a Country Parson 1758–1802*, gives insight into the social interactions of a village clergyman with both the gentry and the local farming community. Both these men give plentiful examples of the food they ate at home, in company and at inns and alehouses.

Online sources I found useful included the Clergy of the Church of England Database 1540–1835 (CCEd) launched in 1999; www.historyofparliament.org; The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, www.oldbaileyonline.org; British Weather from 1700 to 1849, www.pascalbonenfant.com; and Peter Higginbotham’s excellent website www.workhouses.org.

There is also a wide range of secondary sources – reputable books and online articles on almost every aspect of eighteenth-century village life, from Jon Stobart’s ‘Retail revolution and the village shop (1600–1860)’, *Economic History Society*, 28 November 2017, to Nicola Vernon’s ‘...subjects deserving of the highest praise’: farmers’ wives and the farm economy in England, c. 1700–1850’, *Agricultural History Review* (2003).

My aim was not just to view Wheathampstead through an eighteenth-

Wheathampstead Station platform with carving of Bernard Shaw

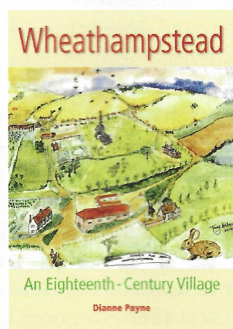


century lens, but also to put village life in the context of a wider world, showing how national events and trends in agriculture impacted on it and on those who lived there. I considered aspects such as the re-fashioning of medieval buildings in eighteenth-century style, the Great Storm of 1703, the impact of the eighteenth-century Lottery, the introduction of tea, coffee and exotic foods as a result of the slave trade, the range of literacy in a rural village, and the impact of the Poor Law and the ‘Bloody Code’ on village society.

Wheathampstead is a small village with relatively limited eighteenth-century sources but the topics I was able to cover indicate the possibilities for villages or market towns with more extensive historical records of the eighteenth century – a much neglected period. These topics included the characteristics of a village with a mill; landowners with business and social connections in London; the parish church and its eighteenth-century monuments, gravestones and graffiti; the wealthy rectors and their relationships in the parish; the social hierarchy of village life; seedtime, harvest and the mixed farming in the area; the range of artisans

and retailers; food, health and life-expectancy; education and literacy; the women of the village and their ‘silent presence’; the parish vestry, apprentices and paupers; and crime and punishment. The overall theme was continuity and change, with a final focus on the village as it is today, where the thread of history remains unbroken.

Dr Dianne Payne’s PhD Thesis was: *The Children of the Poor in London, 1700–1780* (2008); and her publications include three previous articles in *The Historian* – Child labour in eighteenth-century London (2009); An eighteenth-century gap year (2010) and Smithfield’s Bartholomew Fair (2011); along with *The Story of Bushey in the Age of the Steam Train* (Bushey Museum, 2011); *From Hartsbourne Manor to Frying Pan Alley* (Bushey Museum, 2012); Curator of Bushey WW1 Commemoration Project and Exhibition: *A Village Remembers* (2014); *Bushey during WW1: A Village Remembers* (Bushey Museum, 2015) and *The Story of the Folly, Wheathampstead* (2017).



Dianne’s research and ideas are now available in her new book *Wheathampstead: an eighteenth-century village*.

RRP £15 + £3 p&p, size 12”x 8” with 140 pages and 170 illustrations. Published independently, any profit will go to charity.

If you would like a copy please email your name and address to: dianne.payne14@btinternet.com