

PAM MURRAY

I remember the first time that I came to Wheathampstead as if it was yesterday.

It was a drizzly, damp, miserable day when my mother, her little dog Vic and me, a fourteen year old, with my kitten in a box with holes in the top, got off the bus outside the church and wandered down the village looking for someone to ask the way to Marford Road, although I think in those days it was called Hatfield Road. We went into the wool shop to ask and also to get a ribbon to tie my hair back, it being fairly long, soaking wet and hanging in rat's tails. I don't think I had ever felt so miserable in my life. I had had to leave all my friends and the home and surroundings that I had always known and here we were in the middle of the country knowing no one and having nothing.

Twenty-four hours before, we had been living in a fairly large comfortable old Victorian house in a pleasant suburb of London, and although we had had some air raids and had to go into the Anderson shelter in the garden most nights it wasn't too bad, then the night before we found ourselves in Wheathampstead we had a most horrendous air raid and lost most of our belongings including our home, luckily we were in the shelter at the time so suffered no actual physical harm.

The firm that my father worked for in London had been severely bombed a few weeks before and had relocated to St. Albans. The 'Guv'nor' hearing that we had been bombed out ourselves sent a van to pick us up and we were literally dumped in St. Albans with nothing but the clothes we wore, the animals and little else. My mother made some enquiries about accommodation and we were directed to the Salvation Army who said that an elderly couple in Wheathampstead, a Mr. and Mrs. Hudson, were offering a room in their home in return for help in the house and garden. So that is how we came to be in the village. On the way round to this house, no 14, Marford Road (I think it was 14) we had to pass the police house that was on the corner opposite Collins Antiques, where Ted Barker, the village copper was in the front garden. We asked him if he knew of anybody that would look after my kitten. He very kindly said he would and gave it a loving home for many years. I couldn't stay at the Hudson's but was found accommodation with Mr. and Mrs. Cecil Allen in Mount Road by Murphy Chemicals. Mr. Allen was the local coal merchant, he also had a Ford Pilot, which he used as a taxi. A Miss Doreen Collins, a schoolteacher at the senior school, was also staying there.

Although I was past school leaving age at the time, I was able to go to the village school for a while as I hadn't been able to go to school in London for a year or so, as most of the other children were evacuated and the schools were taken over by the army and other wartime organisations. I didn't enjoy my time at the school in the village, as it seemed as if the teachers and pupils alike had a down on those 'filthy Londoners'.

When we had been in the village for about a year my parents were able to rent a cottage in Necton Road from Mr. Titmuss so I could then live at home with them. The cottage was very basic with gas light and the toilet, one of three in a row, up the yard. I used to wait for ages to make sure the other two were empty before I 'went'. The cottage had no bathroom but a big brick copper at the end of the scullery that we had to heat the water in. It was heated by a fire underneath the copper and, because of the coal shortage, we had to burn whatever we could lay our hands on, like old shoes, old books, bits of wood etc., before having a bath in a tin bath that used to hang outside on the wall. The scullery was a single storey lean-to. It had a shallow stone sink, which I still have as a sink in my garden. It really seemed like living in the dark ages after our house in London, but we were only too grateful to have somewhere of our own to live.

After leaving school I went to work at Murphy and Son at Cavan House (*Wheathampstead House*). I was only there for six months and then went on to do a nursery nurse's training, first in St. Albans and then in Welwyn Garden City. I used to get the train every morning. It was quite a walk from Necton Road to the station and invariably I left it a bit late and by the time I had run up the slope to the station and then puffed my way up the old wooden stairs to the platform I would collapse in a heap in the carriage, the door of which being held open by the porter, whose name I believe was Reuben. He used to look over the bridge to see if anybody was running up the hill to catch the train and if there was he would hold the train up until the 'runner' arrived. Mr. Gerald Lee the stationmaster lived in

Station House with Mrs. Ling his housekeeper. Mrs. Ling used to belong to the Red Cross and some of my teenage friends and I used to go along to the Red Cross hut in Codicote Road where we had classes in first aid. We used to wear the Red Cross nurse's uniform and really fancied ourselves.

I met my husband in Welwyn Garden City and we were married at St. Helen's in 1945 (using Mr. Allen's taxi for the occasion). My son Nigel was born a year later at the Red House in Harpenden (again using Mr. Allen's taxi to bring us home). By this time the war was over, the men were mostly demobbed and apart from them getting a job our priority was to get a house.

In those days we used to live our lives in the village. Hardly anyone had a car and, apart from the occasional trip into St. Albans, mainly for clothes, we had no need to go out of the village. We had plenty of shops. I remember them all, but especially Lorna Rowe's tiny little shop. Just after the war she had the first delivery of ice cream in the village for six years. We all queued up for an allocation of one small brick each. Boy, did that go down well!

We used to buy corn and meal for the chickens from Titmuss' mill. Practically everybody kept a few chickens because, if I remember rightly, the egg ration was only one a week (or it might have been only one a month). Simons the butcher's was where we used to go for our meagre ration of meat.

One of the highlights for us mothers with young children was the fortnightly trip to the baby clinic held in the Mead Hall in East Lane, where we had the babies weighed and collected the national dried milk powder and bottled orange juice for them.

We used to go for long walks, sometimes taking a 'picnic' (a bottle of water and a sandwich). On one of these walks with my friend, we came across a potato clamp being opened by some German prisoners of war that were working on one of the farms and, as potatoes were rationed (as practically everything else was), we persuaded them to let us have a few, so out came the kids from the pram and these dirty muddy potatoes were put in the bottom of it, covered by a blanket, and the kids put back on top. We felt like criminals all the way home and it didn't do much for the pram either but a good scrub and nobody was any the wiser. Those potatoes tasted better than any that we ever bought from the shop.

[extracts from Pam's memories, recorded in 2003. She was born in 1927, came to the village in 1941 and lived here for 35 years, before moving to live in Northamptonshire. She died in 2006. The complete account can be found on the WHS website - <http://www.wheathampsteadheritage.org.uk/history-society-memories.asp>]