

A History of Wheathampstead Sewerage Works from 1873 to 1953

Amy Coburn, author of this account, was granddaughter and daughter of the first two managers of Wheathampstead Sewerage Works, George and Arthur Wren.

Amy was born in Necton Road, Wheathampstead in 1927, a member of a long-established Wheathampstead family. Her great-great-grandfather and great-great-grandmother were born in the village in 1783 and 1786 respectively, and her grandfather George Wren was born in a cottage opposite The Swan in 1847 and married his wife Ann in 1868. Amy's father, Arthur, was one of their nine children.

The Wheathampstead Sewerage Works were located in The Meads, where The Dell is now. This account, written in 1992, combines a history of the first 80 years of the Works with Amy's memories of helping her father. It is reproduced here exactly as Amy wrote it.

Amy was an enthusiastic local historian. She was a member of the team who researched and wrote the WEA series of books about the history of Wheathampstead and Harpenden, which can be found in the 'Sources' section of this website, and a founding member of both the Wheathampstead History Society and the Harpenden and District Local History Society, having moved to Harpenden when she married. She often gave talks at local schools, groups and clubs and she published many articles in local history journals. For residents of Wheathampstead, perhaps her best memorial is the book about her two grandfathers 'George and Henry: their lives and times in Victorian Wheathampstead'.

In 2001 Amy's extensive services to local history were recognised in an award from the British Association for Local History.

Amy died in 2016. Her son, Martin, has generously passed many of her papers to Wheathampstead History Society and this account is published with his permission.

For a fuller appreciation of Amy's life and work, see:

[http://www.harpenden-history.org.uk/page/amy_coburn_1927-2016 -
_an appreciation](http://www.harpenden-history.org.uk/page/amy_coburn_1927-2016_-_an_appreciation)

The Story of the Wheathampstead Sewerage Works.

1873 - 1953.

In 1843 under the New Poor Law Act Boards of Guardians took over from the Vestry the responsibility of the health of the community. Wheathampstead was in the St. Albans Union which then came into being.

A main drainage scheme was started in the village in 1873 when land was purchased from Lord Cowper. This land was part of a field called Janitors on the Tithe Map of 1840, and was adjacent to East Meadow which was Lammas Land. The Meads, as this piece of land was known, is at the far end of East Lane.

The overall cost of the work, including the iron fencing, some of which remains today [1992] amounted to £2,295.10.7d.

The purchase of the land cost £307.0.0., Compensation to Mr. Lattimore who was the occupier [i.e. who farmed the land at the time] £167.5.5d.; Jackson the Contractor, £962.0.0d.; Clerk of Works, £52. 2.10d.; Engineer, £105.0.0.; Iron fence and smiths work, £101.8.11d.; Pump, £7.9.0d.; these, plus solicitors fees and other small items made up the final cost.

There was a loan from the Public Works Loan Board of some £1800.0.0. and another loan of £450.0.0. [CRO 109/19/16] By todays standards the plant was extremely primitive, but without doubt an improvement on the sanitary arrangements then prevailing in the village. The days, or rather nights, of 'night soil carting' from village homes which could now be connected to a main drainage system was at an end, and could now be restricted to those houses outside the main area of the village centre.

Wheathampstead was fortunate from a geographical angle, the natural fall of the ground gave few problems and most properties in the village centre could be connected to the main sewer. It is said that one of the first 'ordinary' houses in Wheathampstead to have a flush lavatory was on Brewhouse Hill. The chain had to be tied up as so many children popped into this outside W.C. to try out this hither unknown refinement.

Most W.C.'s even if connected to the main drainage would have been 'flushed' down with a bucket of water. This practice continuing until well into the 1930's.

George Wren [my grandfather] who among his various activities in the village, which included thatching, chimney sweeping, and gardening, also included the unpleasant, though necessary task, of 'night soil' carting. When the running of the new plant was put out to tender, George submitted an offer and his tender was accepted. Thus began a family service to the community which continued for eighty years.

George Wren had a horse which was used to drive the pumping system which distributed the sludge to bays which were then treated with lime.

The Local Government Act of 1894 brought into being the Parish and Urban District Councils, sewage disposal then came under the control of the St. Albans Rural District Council.

In the 1920's major work was undertaken by the St. Albans R.D.C which resulted in the installation of a more up to date scheme. This scheme continued to work efficiently until after World War Two. The capacity of the plant was then not sufficient to cope with the increase in the population of the village, making further additions necessary. It had been

obvious for a number of years prior to this, that some work was vital if the quality of the effluent was to be maintained.

Later the treatment of sewage would be transferred to a more modern, much extended, water treatment plant at Harpenden. Incidentally it was not until 1909 that Harpenden had any sewerage treatment plant.

During the 1920's many properties in the village who still had cesspools were connected to main drainage. Houses in Necton Road were connected at that time. The cost of connecting two adjoining properties which belonged to my father, according to the bill submitted by the contractor in 1924, amounted to £18.7.6d.

The improvement to the sewerage system in the 1920's involved a new brick-built pump-house housing two 12½ horse power Crosley engines. Three filter beds built of clinker, two large storage tanks, with primary and secondary settling tanks, completed the scheme. Arthur Wren, George Wren's youngest son, and my father, took over as Manager of the new 'works'. The 'works' as the treatment plant was known in the village, became almost a 'show' piece.

Arthur had a love of gardening, soon a riot of colour greeted anyone who passed the gate of the 'works'. Dorothy Perkins and Hiawatha roses on rustic arches almost hid from view the 'Engine House'. Red oriental poppies, blue iris, grew in profusion, white arabis and aubrieta cascaded down flint built banks. Old fashioned roses of many varieties flourished, with many other plants each their season. In the big 'cart' shed stood the night soil cart, unused except when it was borrowed by a farmer or someone in an outlying house.

Where George had grown a few vegetables, his son, with an agreement drawn up with the St. Albans R.D.C, grew many more. Use of the land being part of his monthly salary. Arthur used methods of cultivation that he had seen used in the Middle East during his wartime service. He irrigated the land, channelling filtered water where it was needed among his growing crops. The sludge being carefully trenched away from the vegetables. Chickens were also kept, and as there was no 'day off' these caused no problems with regard to feeding. It was a 24 hour, 7 day a week job, with a two week annual holiday when a relief manager took over. There was also a little help from a labourer one day a week when 'sludging' took place.

This was usually a Thursday, the biggest pump was brought into action, and could be heard from quite a distance, and the smell was more noticeable on that day than any other. People often remarked that there was not as much smell as they imagined there would be, when visiting the 'works' for the first time.

The 'outfall' -[treated water] of the 'works' into the river Lea was in the Meads, the concrete structure is/was still there. The Lee Valley Conservancy took regular samples of the effluent and only once had cause to complain. Two samples were taken , one being retained on site in case of problems. A long row of sample bottles of clear water, sealed with sealing wax and 'red' tape were lined up in the engine house as a testimony to the efficiency of the 'works'. [Note: the spelling of the river and the Conservancy are different - Lea and Lee, for some unexplained reason]

It was with great pride that years of efficient work were acknowledged in the High Court, when my father was called to give evidence in 1948 in the case of Brocket v the Borough of Luton. With his friend, Mr. Tom Spacey, Manager of the Harpenden Sewage Works, [and who had a similar record, and who

had also taken over from his father] they gave evidence of their life long knowledge of the state of the river Lea.

The 'channel' - the outfall to the river Lea was one of the best place for catching minnows, sticklebacks and tadpoles and was a favourite place for children to play. The occasional trout found its way up the outlet pipe into the final settling tank, and some lived there for quite a time before ending up on the breakfast table.

During the summer months there was often very little water in the river Lea. During the 1930's, after a long dry spell, the river could easily be forded without getting one's feet wet. There was little water entering from the 'works' at that time, as much needed water was being used to grow vegetables. The river was a clean sparkling fresh stream, with may-weed in summer, and even the odd cray-fish to be found under the stones.

Murphy Chemicals were probably the biggest headache to my father as Manager, although their chemists were co-operative if a spillage occurred causing chemicals to get into the drainage system. They then quickly alerted him so that possible damage to the 'life' necessary to the correct function of the filter beds was averted.

There were no facilities on the 'works', no fresh water, no 'rest room', no telephone in case of emergency. Luckily no accident occurred, but there was always a fear that a child would be tempted to climb the inadequate fence and fall into a tank.

From time to time a request was made for a house to be built adjacent to the works but this was rejected. So, when there

was a storm in the middle of the night, a trek across the fields from the house in Necton Road where we lived became necessary. The 'pumps' had to set going, sluices opened up, thus preventing foul water getting in to the Lea. Sundays, Christmas Day and Bank Holidays were all geared to the needs of the 'works' and to turning on and off the filter beds.

Houses in distant parts of the village not connected to the main sewer were visited, when necessary, by a motorised cesspool emptier, which discharged its noxious load into a manhole just outside the gate to the 'works'.

A testimony to the efficiency of the drainage system in the village occurred about 1940. The headmaster, Mr. Housden, of Wheathampstead school lost £4.10.0. in notes. He was concerned about the loss but felt that all his staff were irreproachable. He recalled using the school lavatory on a Sunday evening - and although he thought it most unlikely that the money had fallen out of his back pocket where he remembered putting it - he went to see Arthur Wren early on the following morning - just in case. Both men felt it was a very remote chance that anything like a pound note would come light. Nevertheless my father said he would 'keep an eye open'.

Much to his surprise one pound note duly arrived quite shortly after Mr. Housden had left. This was rescued, washed and dried. On the Monday afternoon I took a sealed envelope, with a pound note inside, back to school, strictly instructed to say nothing about the matter to my school friends. The following day two more pound notes arrived through the system, little the worse for their travels. A week later the ten shilling note arrived in the 'screen chamber' rather battered, but not in so bad a condition, that once washed and dried, the local bank manager, much amused, could not change it for another. The remaining pound note never came to light, but Mr Housden was

much relieved, and my father interested that the main drainage system was in so obviously good order.

As well as growing vegetables there were other plants grown on the 'works'. There was a long lavender hedge, this was cropped each summer, and sold in bundles, for three pence, six pence, and to one lady who had a standing order, for two and sixpence worth. I stood to gain, for I always had, for some reason best known to my father, the 'lavender' money. This was not for sweets or anything frivolous, but to go straight into my Post Office savings bank book.

Many vegetables were grown, and during war-time, when onions were in very short supply, my father had to introduce his own rationing system. Potatoes were grown and stored for winter, there were regular customers for vegetable all the year round. There was no wasted ground at the 'works', all was utilized to the full. A small hand cultivator made the work a bit easier, but there were long hours of hard back-breaking work to keep the ground in good shape and productive, and the environs tidy and in good order.

As a child and teenager, I spent many hours 'down the works', I liked gardening, and although stone picking and weeding can be monotonous, I preferred it to doing other things and I was at least out of doors in the fresh air and there was a lot of space to play. There were necessary restrictions of where, and where not, I was allowed to go. After all the 'works' was quite a dangerous place. But it was great to be allowed to turn off the filters, to open sluices and when I was old enough stop the engines. Indeed during war-time it was essential that someone knew how to do those things in an emergency, with father in the Home Guard. Much as I should have liked to, I was not allowed

to start the engines. This entailed cranking the engine with a large handle, and there was a chance that it might 'kick-back'.

There was one rule, never to be broken. In the engine house one never stood in line with the leather belts that drove the engines. There was only one place to stand and that was in a corner, there anyone who chanced to look in, was ordered to stand.

The 'works' were lined with willow trees, which my father planted. These were allowed to grow to some size, then they were cut down to provide pea and bean sticks, the rest became firewood. Willow has the tendency to 'spit' when burnt, but it was a cheap and useful source of firing for our family. And, as father said, with the cutting and sawing, he was kept warm twice over.

There were several apple trees that had grown from seed, they were interesting apples, of no known variety, but pleasant in flavour. There was also a plum tree which was most productive. For years many pounds of plums were picked - green, they made excellent jam. The 'suckers' were, of course, true to type, and one grows in our garden today, bearing as did its parent plant, a good crop most years.

During the 1939-45 War, the 'works' was used as a dump for the aluminum pots and pans which were collected for the making planes. It was sad to see the new pans that had been specially bought for this purpose, and one wondered how many were eventually used as it was suggested they would be. There was also a large number, some hundreds, of five gallon petrol cans for possible 'emergency use', not defined. These were never used and just rotted away in time.

It was during the war that rabbits were kept, the number of poultry had to be reduced because of lack of feeding stuff, and rabbits were housed in the chicken houses. They became a very useful addition to many a dinner table augmenting the meagre meat ration. The eggs that the hens produced had to be sent to a packing station, otherwise no food allowance for them was made. There were many requests for eggs, then on ration, but only in case of illness would father let friends have any. Mother had to make do with mis-shapen and undersized ones !

In the spring new families of chicks were hatched, this was always an added delight. There were problems when a fox or stray dog got among the poultry and caused loss, and when a fox killed two ducks that I had as pets, I was more than sad.

Always interested in wild life, the wagtails who yearly built nests in the edge of a filter bed, were especially welcome to my father. This filter bed was always golden in summer time with a small sedum. One year a cuckoo was found to have taken over a nest, this proved of much interest to Sir William Beach Thomas, a keen naturalist and writer, who then lived at Place Farm across the river. Any strange or interesting plant was discussed with him, to the mutual satisfaction of both men. There were always plenty of birds nests in the spring, swallows in one of the chicken houses, and a robin who found a comfortable site in the rafters of the tool-shed for several years.

One small incident that caused some amusement to my father, was an occasion when he, out of sight behind a laurel hedge, heard a passing lady remark to her husband "Oh! what a smell!" - Without showing himself, father said "And, yours comes here too!". There was no reply, just a haughty grunt. The husband however was amused as he told my father sometime later.

Doctor Smallwood, the much loved and respected village doctor, had a mild joke, that he and my father were the most necessary men in the village. Both being at the beginning and the end of things.

When my father retired in 1953 new housing devopments were beginning to take place in Wheathampstead, and more were envisaged. It was therefore essential that the 'works' should be extended to cope with the increased demand. His retirement thus coincided with the next phase in story of the 'Works'.

It is, I think, fair to say that my father took a pride in his work, there was satisfaction in ensuring that a good effluent was maintained. Satisfaction that the work was entirely necessary for the health of the community. Glad that he was able to work with nature, watch the seasons change, grow and produce food, proof indeed that life is a cycle.

Mary Amy Coburn - April 1992.