

Wheathampstead Hits the Headlines

A Remarkably Long Life

Local history and family history are closely allied and those researching the history of their family are often able to contribute to the history of an area, town or village where they have or once had connections. In 2001, Brian Joyce contacted residents and former residents of Wheathampstead, asking them for anything they had written about the history of their family or for their memories of life in the village. Responses came from all over the world and form part of our local records, now assembled into a separate webpage - [Memories](#).

Two contributors, researching independently, discovered that members of the Swain, Munt, King, Archer and Catley families were descended from William Carter (1738 – 1817) of Gustard Wood, who married Rebecca Jeffries/Jeffery in 1764. Many of these families had ongoing connections with the village and some are familiar names in the churchyard.

The British Newspaper Archive Collection shows that in 1834 the *Herts County Press*, the *Essex Standard County Advertiser*, and other newspapers across the country published details about William Carter's wife, Rebecca of Wheathampstead, providing additional information to the research of these family historians. From Saturday, 5 July 1834 onwards, a range of newspapers contained the following article:

Rebecca Carter died on the 19 June 1834 at a cottage in the village of Wheathampstead, Herts, in the 104th year of her age. She retained all her faculties entire up to a short period before her death. She never had occasion to use spectacles, yet she could see to thread her needle, and do all her household work, up to her 102nd year. She has been a widow about 16 years, and died in the parish of her birth, from which she had never travelled at any one time above ten miles. She was the mother of a large family, several of whom lived around her, yet she always, since her husband's death, lived alone until the last year of her life. Her strength continued so long as to enable her to do haymaking, and other field work, up to about her 90th year. It ought to be

mentioned, to the honour of the worthy Clergyman of her parish, the Rev J Downton, that he not only allowed her a small stipend since she ceased from labour, but for a long time paid every personal attention to the comfort of his aged parishioner.

Rebecca Carter lived in a small Hertfordshire village but her remarkably long life was very unusual at that time and would, therefore, have been of interest to newspaper readers across the country. The Rev. Joseph Douton was for 27 years the curate to George Pretyman, the notorious pluralist and absentee Rector of Wheathampstead, and well deserved the specific reference to his pastoral care of Rebecca Carter, which he also extended to many other residents in the village.

Who Stole the Family Silver?

Driving along Lamer Lane, a traveller from Gustard Wood to Wheathampstead passes an attractive dwelling called Delaport Lodge. This, together with Delaport Coach House and Home Farm, not visible from the road, is now the only major building that remains of the Delaport estate.



Delaport Lodge

Delaport probably took its name from James Delaport, who purchased land in Gustard Wood in 1663. In the eighteenth century the small estate was held by the Sibley family and was taken over in the 1860s by George Upton Robins, a

solicitor, and his family. After his first wife died in 1875, George Upton Robins married again the following year. By 1891, he and his second wife, Emma Flora, had four children between the ages of 7 and 13 and employed six female servants and a butler in Delaport House, and a family to run Delaport Farm.



Delaport House

Servants of wealthy families were required to prepare and serve elaborate meals using many kinds of silverware and to keep all the items polished. In addition to silver cutlery, wealthy families owned silver containers for food, tea and coffee serving sets, salt-and-pepper shakers, bread trays and baskets. Silver vases, candlesticks and other decorative objects were used on dining tables to enhance place settings and make meals special occasions for families and guests.

In 1889 there was a burglary at Delaport House, serious enough to merit a report on 20 April in *The Times* and subsequently in newspapers up and down the country.

The Hertfordshire county police have received information of a serious robbery which took place during the early hours of Thursday morning at Delaport, Wheathampstead, about five miles from St Albans. The house is occupied by Mr George Upton Robins JP and is rather secluded. Nobody appears to have heard the burglars, who secured over £150 worth of plunder (over £9,000 in today's money). There are evidences that the robbery is the work of experienced hands, who must have gone about their business in a singularly cool manner. The only clue, on which the police have at present to work, is that two men

took the first morning train from Hatfield to London on the Great Northern Railway, and that each of them had a large black bag, which appeared to be very heavy. The house was almost stripped of silver, 69 articles of solid silver being taken away, as well as 30 silver-plated articles and a dozen knives. The most valuable items are half a dozen presentation mugs, half a dozen salts, teapot, pepper-castors, table and dessert spoons, forks, three trays, coffee-stand, candle-sticks and a large silver kettle.

The Morning Post concluded that Hatfield was a very convenient place to make for after the robbery as there were four miles of lonely roads between there and Wheathampstead. By 27 April, *The Illustrated Police News* gave further details of silver items stolen, including a teapot with a crest on top, a sugar sifter, wine strainers, mustard pots and napkin rings.

No further reports were forthcoming so, as far as we know, the burglars got away with their valuable hoard and the Upton Robins family lost their family silver.

Sources:

Times Digital Archive

British Newspaper Archive

Mary Kelsey, *Encyclopaedia of Food and Culture* (2003)

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