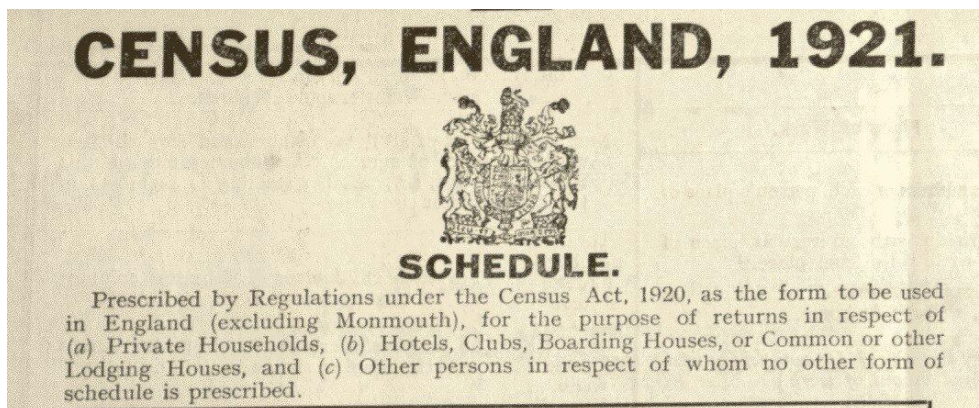


Wheathampstead in the 1921 Census

A New Source for Local Historians

On 6 January 2025, the 1921 Census was made available at the National Archives at Kew for the first time in over one hundred years. Paper copies are now too frail to be handled by the public so the material, digitised and transcribed by Findmypast and Ancestry, is available online. This census is significant because it is the last one before the 1951 census, due for release in 2052. The 1931 Census was destroyed by fire in 1942 and a census was not taken in 1941 because of the Second World War. The 1939 Register, already online, although similar in layout to a census return, provides a snapshot of the civilian population but does not include armed forces personnel.



The 1921 Census offers insight into a country reeling from the First World War, with the turmoil of unemployment and a new emerging social and cultural order. It is the most extensive census to date and has particularly interesting features: questions about employer details and place of work, 'divorce' as an option under marital status, reference to orphaned children and, like the 1911 Census, handwritten entries of residents.

This article provides an introduction to the 1921 Census for Wheathampstead, illustrating these new features and showing how it reflects on issues and everyday life of the period.

Wheathampstead in 1921

The three Administration Areas of Wheathampstead in the 1921 Census were numbered RG15/7145 – 7147 and a total of 1, 418 households were recorded. The number of existing streets was a mere handful compared with those in the village today. Many houses, including those in the High Street, were not numbered and the village retained its medieval framework before new housing estates developed in the 1930s. Entering the village from the south down The Hill, the High Street in 1921 formed a crossroad with Church Street leading to Brewhouse Hill and Bury Green in the west, and Hatfield Road, then a country lane, leading to Little and New Marford in the east. Horseshoe-shaped Necton Road was on the north side of New Marford, while Dyke Lane climbed through the trees to the south. At the other end of the High Street, Station Road turned westwards into Lower Luton Road and a hamlet called The Folly, eastwards into Codicote Road towards Welwyn, and northwards to Gustard Wood and Lamer House and Park.

Employers and Places of Work

Wheathampstead residents completing the census form in 1921 were asked about their occupation, but also about their employer and place of work. George Tilbury and Frederick Ibbott, both from Gustard Wood, for instance, worked in the grounds of Lamer House, where Apsley Cherry-Garrard, the author and landlord, employed four resident domestic servants. Samuel Ford, from Necton Road, was a 'private servant' to the Earl of Cavan.

James Hale was a gardener to William Lane-Claypon, a former Bank Director and magistrate from Surrey. Lane-Claypon originally retired to 'Four Limes' on The Hill, but by 1921 had settled in Gustard Wood with a nurse and two servants. He died there in 1939, aged 93.

Edward Sean, from The Hill, maintained the garden at the Victorian Rectory for Canon James Trengove Nance, aged 69, a widower. Canon Nance was staying in Scarborough on the night of the census and was succeeded to the incumbency at Wheathampstead later in 1921 by Alexander Baird Smith.

Labourers of various kinds worked for the farmers at Bride Hall, Turners Hall, Grove and Cross Farms, while nurserymen were employed by Fred Wright, the

market gardener, at his nurseries in Gustard Wood and Dyke Hill. A number of residents were on the staff of the Almagam Rubber Hose and Tyre Works at Pickford Mill in Harpenden before industries came to Wheathampstead in the late 1920s.



Groups of women and young girls worked as finishers, machinists and hat sewers at Osborne's Hat Factory on Lower Luton Road near The Folly, while other residents had jobs in St Albans, Welwyn and Luton. All these entries reveal the distances villagers travelled to work. Those who were unemployed were asked to give the name of their previous employer.

Transport

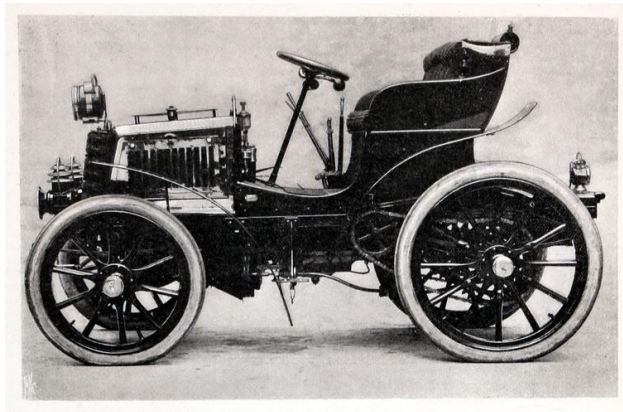


Wheathampstead Station, 1905

The railway in Wheathampstead, which arrived in 1860, was on the Great Northern Railway branch line to Dunstable and the 1921 Census recorded many types of railway workers resident in the village, including numerous

labourers and platelayers, a station master, a porter and a railway accountant based in London.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the horse and carriage was gradually being replaced by the motorcar. In 1900 Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe), the newspaper magnate whose summer retreat was at 'The Fisheries' on Lower Luton Road, was one of the first Wheathampstead residents to own a motorcar. He employed a French chauffeur and regarded the automobile as the 'vehicle of the future'.



Alfred Harmsworth's 12 hp Panhard, 1900

The war correspondent, William Beach Thomas, who in 1921 was living at Wheathampstead Place before he moved to 'High Trees' in Gustard Wood, and Dr Matthew Smallwood of 'The Laurels' on The Hill were soon seen driving around the village. Bertie Snelling was employed as a chauffeur by Mrs Emmeline Reily, the owner of 'Garden House', on the corner of Lamer Lane. In 1921 The Earl of Cavan continued to maintain a horse and carriage, with Philip Smith living at 'The Stables' as his coachman.



The 1921 Census shows several village residents who worked for Vauxhall Motors in Luton, a manufacturer that begun making cars in 1905 and supplied countless vehicles for the armed services during the First World War. George Hawkins, aged 16 from Necton Road, was employed as a 'motor engineer' there, and Cecil Gray, aged 17, was an apprentice motor body builder.

Wheathampstead in 1921 was home to a range of shopkeepers and businessmen typical of a small rural village and similar to those recorded there ten years earlier in the 1911 census. One notable addition was Charles Percival Latchford, the son of the village hairdresser, who lived with his family at Bury Cottage and set up his own business as a 'cycle agent', buying wholesale from manufacturers and selling directly to customers. Many people, particularly from the working classes, cycled to work in the 1920s and, for women, cycling offered a new freedom and independence.



Maud Lawrence of The Folly

Orphaned Children

After the First World War and the Spanish 'flu pandemic there was concern about the devastating effect bereavement was having on children. The 1921 Census was the first and only census to ask residents to indicate 'both parents alive', 'father dead', 'mother dead' or 'both parents dead' on behalf of children aged 14 and under.

The majority of First World War casualties from Wheathampstead were young, single men just starting out on life, but over a dozen were married men who left wives and children. Arthur Thomas Ansell enlisted in 1916 with the 5th Northamptonshire Regiment and died in France in 1917 aged 29, leaving a widow, Rose, in Gustard Wood and four children between the ages of five and eleven. The census stated 'father dead' beside the name of each child. Sidney Bandy from The Folly worked as a motor tyre repairer before the war. He enlisted with the Royal Field Artillery and served from 1914 until 1920. He died at home, probably from tuberculosis as a result of his war service, in April 1921 before the census, leaving a wife and four children under the age of seven. Reginald Bozier was a gardener and enlisted in 1916. A dispatch rider, he was killed in France that same year, leaving a widow in Station Road with a baby daughter. The 1921 Census reflected the extent to which some family groups had to be re-organised after the war and how grandparents and other relatives took on roles caring for bereaved children.



Not all bereaved children had lost parents as a result of the conflict. Leonard 'Len' Lambe, with his 'mother dead', had a fragmented childhood, living with various relatives. Originally from Tottenham, he arrived in Wheathampstead with his father after the 1921 Census to live with his Aunt Hannah in the cottage next to the Rose and Crown near The Folly.

‘Homes Fit for Heroes’

As servicemen returned home there was a need nationwide for accommodation. Under the ‘Homes Fit for Heroes’ scheme, initiated by David Lloyd George, six pairs of two or three-bedroom houses were built in Wheathampstead, known as ‘Brewhouse Hill Cottages’ in the village and ‘Lea Valley Cottages’ on Lower Luton Road. In the 1921 Census they were referred to as ‘Council Houses’



Brewhouse Hill Cottages

Ironically, it is easier to trace fatalities from the First World War than to identify those who served and returned home, because approximately two thirds of soldiers’ service records stored in a warehouse were completely destroyed by German bombing in 1940. The 1921 census returns of those living in Brewhouse Hill Cottages demonstrated this. ‘Homes Fit for Heroes’ would almost certainly have been rented by former forces personnel but there is only evidence of wartime service by two of the six residents.

The occupants of Council Houses 1 and 2 were William Ogden, a booking clerk for the Great Northern Railway Company, and Albert Wilmot, a junior clerk at the Electricity Power Supply Company in Wembley. John Beaumont, with no occupation, lived in number 3 and George Barnes, a builder’s merchant and his family shared number 4. However, number 6 was occupied by Edward Chapman, who served as an Acting Corporal in the Labour Corps from 1914 until 1920. After the war he was employed as a grocer’s warehouseman in Harpenden High Street.

Council House 5 had an unusual and unexpected occupant, a 'bacteriologist', Dr Percy Heath Hobart Gray, born in Virginia, USA in 1891. His father was British so when Percy Gray came to the UK as a student when he was 19, he took on dual citizenship. He studied at Oxford and London universities before the war and then enlisted with the Sherwood Foresters in 1916. He served in France until 1918, latterly as a lieutenant in the Royal Berkshire Regiment. In 1920 he joined the staff of the Bacteriology Department at Rothamsted Experimental Station in Harpenden, founded by Sir John Lawes. The 1921 Census showed him living at 5 Brewhouse Hill Cottages with his wife and son, fully entitled to a 'Home Fit for Heroes'. In 1929 Percy Gray and his family left the UK to settle in Canada where, for 30 years, he taught students training in bacteriology. He also took great interest in butterflies and moths and published numerous papers about his personal collection.

Wheathampstead School



As the Log Books of St Helen's Church of England School in Wheathampstead show, Thomas Clark was the Head Master from 1891 until 1927. Initially he lived in School House, part of the school building erected in 1862, but by the census of 1911 he and his family occupied 'Sunnyside' at the top of The Hill and his elder daughter, Louisa, was working under him as a teaching monitor.

The 1921 Census was taken following the war years, a period of disruption, staff turnover and sickness. The school had continued to function but Thomas Clark was placed under considerable strain. As early as 1912, he suffered a nervous breakdown and was absent from school for several months. He had to deal with bereaved and frightened children, those whose fathers were dead,

reported missing, badly injured or who died at home. For many families home circumstances changed and Thomas Clark must have faced additional pressure with changes to the curriculum as a result of the 1918 Education Act, raising the school leaving age to 14. Between 1919 and 1922 an unnamed person made the Log Book entries and the HMI report in the year following the census was the worst ever.



Thomas Clark and his staff in the early 1900s

Sydney Dollimore lived at Lamer Farm Cottages with his parents, Arthur and Martha Dollimore. He started school in 1918 and recalled the staff at that time. Thomas Clark was 'an austere man, always immaculately dressed, a proficient artist and played the violin and piano equally well. He was always present at Matins on Sundays, keeping a sharp eye on erring pupils'.

Robert 'Bob' W H Seabrook, was Assistant School Master in 1921, living with his wife and a large family on the High Street. He was an excellent musician organist and choirmaster at St Helen's Church and served as the Parish Clerk.

Charles 'Charlie' Hampton, aged 56, who had taught at the school for 30 years, lived in School House with his wife and three daughters. Known as 'Hoppy' on account of his gammy leg caused by gout, he still managed to play cricket for the village eleven. He was a strict disciplinarian, liberal with his use of the cane.

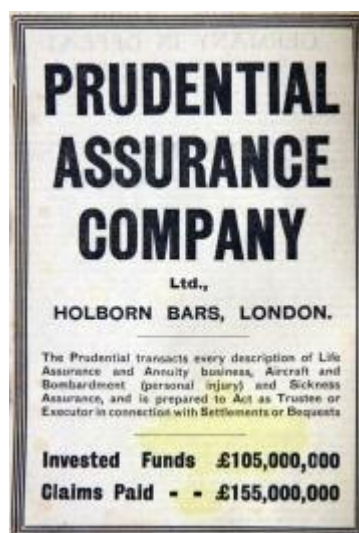
Adelaide Young, aged 42, an unmarried schoolmistress, lived with her widowed mother at 'Gable House' in Church Street; Dorothy Allen, a younger teacher, travelled in from Welwyn; and Mr Grindley came once a week from Harpenden to teach the boys carpentry.

In 1921 William John 'Johnny' Housden, who succeeded Thomas Clark as Head at Wheathampstead in 1927, was living in Hitchin and teaching at St Mary's Serrion School there.

The pupils attending the school in 1921 were scattered with their families throughout the census. The label 'in whole-time education' applied to each one is a noteworthy comment on the disrupted schooling during the war time years.

Changing Roles for Women

With millions of men away from home during the war, women filled manufacturing and agricultural positions. The raising of the school leaving age to 14 gradually resulted in more girls of all classes being better educated. By 1921 social and cultural changes were under way and more women worked outside the home. Some girls from Wheathampstead were employed as shorthand typists, while Bertha Clark, the daughter of Thomas Clark, the Head Master, and Stella Seabrook, the daughter of the Assistant School Master, were both clerks at the Prudential Assurance Company in London.



Nurse Amy Hawkins from Necton Road, who worked with Dr Matthew Smallwood, qualified in midwifery in London and for 30 years cycled round the village attending to her clients.

Among the more affluent women in Wheathampstead, some had gained professional qualifications and roles. Dorothy Owen, the daughter of Joseph Fenwick Owen, the builder from Gustard Wood, who was at home on census

night, was a musician with a Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music (LRAM) and worked at the Guildford School of Music in Surrey. Cecilia Mary Hutchinson of 'Sunny Cottage', now 20 Lower Luton Road, was a Professor of Singing, teaching privately and at the Royal College of Music in London. She was born in India, where her father, an army officer, was killed in the Indian Mutiny. She studied in France and Italy and, while living with her husband, Lieutenant Colonel William Lacy Hutchinson in Kensington, had a successful professional singing career, performing in concerts and festivals throughout the country and at the Crystal Palace, the Royal Albert Hall and Covent Garden Proms. Her husband died in January 1920 and she moved to 'Sunny Cottage', a six-bedroom house in Wheathampstead, which she shared with her step-daughter and a servant, who had two young children. The handwriting on the 1921 Census form matches her signature on her photograph taken earlier in her career. Cecilia Hutchinson died in 1925 at the age of 73 and was buried in the churchyard at Ayot St Lawrence. Her grave inscription reads: 'So shall I join the Choir Invisible'.



Divorce

The divorce rate rose dramatically during and immediately after the First World War, opening it up to all classes of society, so there was an option in the

1921 Census to state divorce, indicated by the letter D on the form, as a marital status for the first time. Evidence is difficult to spot among nearly 1,500 residents in Wheathampstead village so the number who wrote 'D' is currently unknown but is likely to have been small. While divorce was becoming more common, in a community where many local people were relatively poor, it would have been difficult for women to maintain themselves without independent means.

Retirement and Pensions

Among those who identified themselves as 'retired' in the census were several residents, aged between 64 and 75, with a range of previous professional and business careers. George Nash, aged 70, a retired grocer, lived on The Hill. Born in Wheathampstead, he followed his father, John, into the grocery business and had been an employer since at least 1891. He was, therefore, likely to have been one of the prosperous tradesmen in the village.

Edward Gray, aged 72, also living on The Hill, had been in regular employment as a bricklayer with the railway for at least 30 years. Bricklayers were in great demand and among the better paid tradesmen, so some would have been able to take retirement.

Charles Russell was born in Sissinghurst in Kent, where he was a licensed victualler and ran an inn selling food, ale, beer and wine. By the 1911 Census he was living in Wheathampstead, age 54, 'with no occupation'. He and his wife lived in the appropriately-named 'Vine House' on The Hill.

George Edwin Thomas also retired to Wheathampstead and by 1921 was living with his wife, daughter and son-in-law in Station Road. Aged 64, he was a retired mathematical instrument maker and had previously worked as an optician in Bexley, Kent.

Emily Gilbert was born in Gustard Wood, where her father, a tailor, died when she was very young. Her widowed mother was a straw plaiter so was extremely proud when Emily, aged 23 in 1871, became a teacher and was then appointed Head Mistress of the new school in Gustard Wood, which opened in 1875. By the 1911 Census Emily had retired and was living with her brother,

William, a retired coach driver. In 1921, aged 73, she was the only one of the sampled group of five retired residents from the census in receipt of a Pension.

This sample gives a flavour of the wide range of retired professionals and tradespeople who lived alongside the labouring community of the village, in a variety of circumstances,

The Old Age Pension Act of 1908 provided a non-contributable pension for those over 70 with yearly means not exceeding £31.10s. The weekly pension amounted to 5s per person (7/6d for a married couple), the cost being borne by taxpayers generally. The level of benefit was deliberately set low to encourage workers to make their own provision for retirement, but some people wept with gratitude when they obtained it. A resident did not receive this pension unless a magistrate deemed him to be 'of good character' and anyone already in receipt of poor relief was excluded.



Mrs Eliza French, an Old Age Pensioner, outside her cottage c.1911
now *Folly Edge*, 192 Lower Luton Road, next to *The Rose and Crown*

A Short Tenancy at Wheathampstead House

Wheathampstead House was built in 1872 on the corner of Lamer Lane for John Olive, the wealthy Rector of Ayot St Lawrence. In 1921 this 'dignified

small mansion' with 13 bedrooms, grounds and pleasure gardens, was owned by Frederick Rudolph Lambart, the 10th Earl of Cavan, who had a distinguished military career and in 1920 unveiled the War Memorial in the village.



His first wife, Caroline Inez Crawley, died that year and as they had no children and he had appointments in London and Aldershot, he had no need of a spacious home then, so he rented it out.

The 1921 Census showed it occupied by Elena Williamson, born in Valparaíso, Chile. At the time of the 1911 Census she and her son, Stephen Guthrice Williamson, aged 10, were visiting London with a large party of tourists. Her husband, who was British with business interests in the UK and Chile, died in 1919 and Elena came to live in Wheathampstead House while Stephen was studying at Trinity College, Cambridge. Her two daughters, aged nine and eleven, lived with her along with a governess and six servants.

Lord Cavan married again in 1922 and he and his second wife, Hester Byng, had two daughters. Nevertheless, in 1924 he decided to sell Wheathampstead House to two local builders and the Williamson family moved on. They remained in Britain and Elena died in Bognor Regis in 1967 at the age of 92.

Precise Ages and Inevitable Errors

The 1921 Census asked residents to state their age in years and months, rather than just in years as in previous census returns, so Reuben Dunham gave his age as 80 years and 9 months. But his address, 'East Street', recorded by the enumerator, is an error. In 1899, 'Reuben Dunham of East Lane, Wheathampstead' was indicted at the Old Bailey for attempted murder and sentenced to seven years in Dartmoor Prison. After serving his time, he returned to Wheathampstead and the 1911 Census also shows him living in 'East Lane', and this is still its name today.



Reuben Dunham with the Wheathampstead Fire Brigade c. 1912

Errors in census returns were inevitable and not at all uncommon, perhaps because of the lack of knowledge of an enumerator or because oral information was misheard, misremembered by a relative or indistinctly written. Errors could also be the result of a resident's deliberate ploy to safeguard his social standing or as protection against the stigma of illegitimacy.

Conclusion

The 1921 Census is a key document, containing a wealth of detail and tracing almost every individual in Wheathampstead village. It provides a snapshot of families living together on the night of the census, sometimes with more than one generation of the same household and includes lodgers, servants and visitors, many of whom might otherwise be forgotten.

It captures residents with pre-war roots before the influx of newcomers and offers an understanding of the lives of villagers in the context of social and cultural change. It records those who were born in the village, those whose ancestors lay buried in the churchyard, and those who migrated from other towns or cities and from abroad.

It provides an important sampling framework whereby various village groups can be identified and monitored, and in some cases it can bridge the gap between entries in the 1911 Census and those in the 1939 Register. It captures the lives and experiences of short-term occupants, whose residency falls between the decades and those who retired to Wheathampstead in their later years.

The 1921 Census shows the geographical position of the village and the influence of transport, conveying residents by rail into London, by motor vehicle along faster roads, and by bicycle on their daily journey to work. It shows that all these modes of transport generated businesses and employment.

The random sample of residents featured in this article is just a fraction of the 1921 population of Wheathampstead and further research could be linked to other sources, such as contemporary newspaper articles and recorded memories of local residents. To every Findmypast or Ancestry enquiry there are intriguing questions relating to other missing pieces of the village jigsaw. By following consecutive entries along specific streets, small cottages can be traced alongside medieval or larger houses, shops, pubs and businesses, demonstrating the diversity of the village that formed the basis of the community that is Wheathampstead today.

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