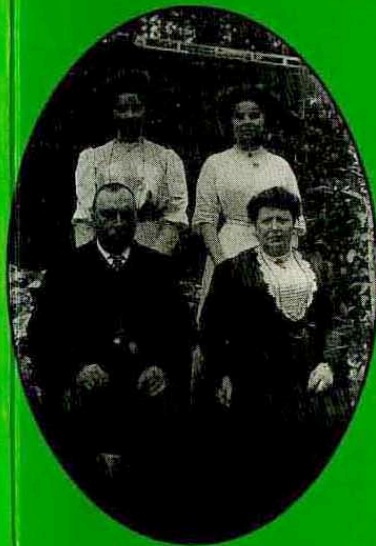


WHEATHAMPSTEAD LOCAL HISTORY GROUP



Wheathampstead Railway Recollections



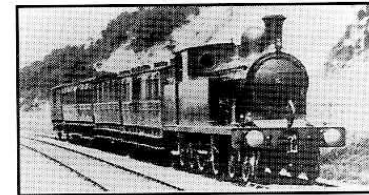
John Giles, Ruth Jeavons,
Mike Martin, Dolly Smith, Roy Smith



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*John Giles, Ruth Jeavons,
Mike Martin, Dolly Smith, Roy Smith*



Wheathampstead Local History Group

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Preface



We offer here a scrapbook of newspaper extracts, letters, recorded conversations and memories. It cannot pretend to be any more accurate than people's memories will allow. In that sense we are not in competition with the excellent book written by Sue and Geoff Woodward, *The Hatfield, Luton and Dunstable Railway* (Oakwood Press, Oxford, 1994) which offers so much more in the way of railway facts. Our aim in compiling this book has been to capture something of the pleasures and delights, some while they are still remembered, of people's experiences of travelling and working on the local railway during the hundred or so years when Wheathampstead enjoyed the convenience of its own service. This is a pot pourri of village railway memories.

Our evidence has been collected from a variety of sources: conversations past and present-day, some recorded by Daphne Grierson in the 1950s, others more recently reported by members of our history group; letters, some from as far afield as Australia, written to us in response to our questions published in the Parish Pump and local press; old newspaper accounts; census returns; and the Wheathampstead parish minute book from 1867-1945. We are grateful to all who spared their time to speak to us and were generous also with their photographs.

It has been particularly enjoyable collecting "live" information from those people kind enough to contact us with their memories of the railway at Wheathampstead. We have spent happy hours listening to tales of rail travel thirty, forty

and fifty years ago, both routine journeys and special seaside excursions, last minute dashes to catch trains and the details of the jobs and daily lives of porters, ticket sellers and the station master. Some experiences were recounted at first hand, some at second hand. The figure of Mr Gerald Lee in particular, the station master from 1934 to 1956, comes across very clearly in the memories of those who knew and worked with him. What also comes across quite forcibly is the general affection in which those who remember it hold the old railway. Everyone we spoke to expressed regret that it was eventually closed and felt that the village had lost one of its most attractive features and assets.

Whether or not the rosy glow of reminiscence is a trick of memory is uncertain, but it is clear that the existence of our own railway line provided a sort of backbone to daily life. Trains were so punctual that mothers would set their potatoes to boil for the schoolchildren coming home for lunch by the sound of the whistle. Local shops and businesses depended on the railway for the transport and delivery of their goods: livestock for the farmers and vegetables from the two nurseries in the parish at the Dyke and Gustard Wood were despatched from Wheathampstead station.

Well remembered also is the courtesy and consideration of those who worked on the railway in the 1950s. Train drivers would call down to reassure the hurrying early morning commuters as they clattered up the wooden steps to catch their trains, "Take your time!". Once the journey was under way, the driver would blow the whistle to warn anyone sitting in a carriage with an open window that the train was about to enter a tunnel so that they could shut the window and avoid getting soot and smuts in their eyes.

The axis for public transport during the local railway years seems to have gone much more from east to west, from Welwyn Garden City to Luton, rather than, as it seems now from the prevailing bus services, mainly from north to south,

to St Albans or London. Hat factories in Luton and electronics industries in Welwyn Garden City were kept supplied with local workers by the railway. Essential supplies of coal were delivered by rail direct to the village, not to mention the fish for Mr Field's fish shop in the High Street (where Village Videos now is).

So many people from near and far have responded with enthusiasm to our quest for information, and it has been a real pleasure to share their enjoyment in recollecting Wheathampstead's railway days. We hope this book will spread that pleasure a little wider. Who knows? It may yield us even more scraps of information so that we can produce a second edition, with more pictures and tales of life on the rails.

We are very grateful to all who were generous both with their time and by lending us their photographs to copy. Our only trouble has been knowing when to stop.

Ruth Jeavons,
Wheathampstead,
March 1995

Introduction

The Railway at Wheathampstead



The section of the line between Luton and Welwyn Junction was opened for both goods and passenger use on 1st September 1860 with a fete in Rectory meadow. It was a gala occasion. There were sports, amusements, a dinner and refreshments supplied at moderate price by Charles Burgess, innkeeper of the Swan. The brass band of the Herts Yeomanry supplied the music. Shortly afterwards, an excursion to London was advertised leaving Wheathampstead at 8.12 a.m. and returning from King's Cross at 8.15 p.m. The return fare was 4 shillings for a first class ticket and 2 shillings in covered carriages.

In the early days, when the railway was still a novelty, people used to walk over to Ayot Station for a ride back on the train to Wheathampstead – "to say they'd done it, you know". The railway provided particular excitement in the form of special excursions. Mr Lee, the station master, would organise Sunday School treats, and on these occasions the train would leave Wheathampstead at five or six in the morning arriving in Yarmouth about noon. "But the train was what we enjoyed most – all crowding to the window and singing and cheering at the stations, and the train stopped quite often".

The line brought business to Wheathampstead as well as pleasure, transporting both people and products to the village. Local boys would wait at the station to waylay the well-off London gentlemen who came to play golf at Gustard

Wood, hoping for a chance to caddy for them and earn a tip. Livestock was transported on the railway for local farmers. When two cows arrived one evening for a farm in Gustard Wood, it was decided to unload them on to the station platform, the cattle pens having by then been dismantled. Unfortunately, the beasts were alarmed at having to negotiate the steps down to the waiting van and panicked, racing along the Codicote Road with the porter hanging on for dear life. One newspaper account tells how other beasts, less fortunate, (three pedigree red poll heifers) got out on the line from Waterend Farm and were killed.

The Dyke nurseries and those at Gustard Wood despatched fresh salad by rail to supply the tables of London and in return received dung from the London Zoo, the unloading of which caused many a complaint from the residents of Rose Lane who were uncomfortably close to the sidings. A famous complainant on the subject of the less odoriferous delights of the railway was Bernard Shaw who, irritated by the fumes from the rubbish dump, wrote that they reminded him of "Stromboli and hell". He still got special treatment from the porters, however, who would hold up the train for him if he was late. Whether Murphy Chemicals Ltd brought much desirable business to the railway when they opened in the village in 1932 is open to debate, and Smart's works (later Inns & Co) used the railway for the extraction of gravel until 1948.

The last passenger train ran through Wheathampstead on 26 April 1965. Freight facilities were withdrawn on 26 July 1967. The station at Wheathampstead was described by one local author as "one of the most beautiful stations I have known" with a profusion of shrubs and well-cared for appearance. Although we have lost the railway and station, it is still possible to walk along the track and get a feel for the wonderful views that were enjoyed by those who travelled by rail from Wheathampstead to London.

Wheathampstead Parish Vestry Minute Book

Extracts for 1877-1890



The vestry meetings were the forerunners of the parish council meetings, and were equivalent in some ways to the Parochial Church Council which in those days had much broader parish responsibilities.

1877 Proposed by George Wood Sheppard Esq and seconded by Mr. Edward Lockhart Jnr and carried unanimously that this vestry begs to represent to the Directors of the Great Northern Railway Company that a footpath from the station under the railway bridge is greatly required to join that of the parish and earnestly requests that such footpath may be made for the accommodation of passengers.

1888 At a Vestry meeting held this day 15th November 1888 pursuant to due notice to take into consideration the unsafe and dangerous subway under the Railway near New Bridge which at times is under water, it was resolved that the Great Northern Railway Company memorialised on the subject with a view to some safer, nearer and more commodious footway being arranged for, and that pending needful alteration, the new subway should be well and sufficiently lighted up after dark.

1889 May 30th. Proposed by Mr. J. Smith (overseer) and seconded by Mr. J. Grant that Mr. Batchelor be requested to communicate with the Great Northern Railway authority as

to the closing of the subway under the Railway which today was over six inches in water thereby endangering the health of the school children and inhabitants coming from the Folly through wet feet, and to suggest that a footbridge over the Railway be made.

1890 March 13th. It was also resolved that the Surveyor be requested to communicate to the Great Northern Railway the disappointment of the parishioners that a footbridge has not been constructed over the Railway as previously requested and to enquire whether opening the gates across the Railway does not subject the Company to damages in case of accident as before.

Census Returns

Extracts



These extracts show the names of the earliest station masters at Wheathampstead and details of their families. It is interesting to see how much the families had moved around the country with the railway companies.

| | <i>Name</i> | <i>Relation to head of family</i> | <i>Where born</i> |
|------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1861 | <i>Harry Honeyball</i> | station master | Weston-super-Mare |
| | Ann | wife | Newark-upon-Trent |
| | Henrietta | daughter | Grantham |
| | Jane | daughter | Newark-upon-Trent |
| | James | son | Newark-upon-Trent |
| | Emma | daughter | Wheathampstead |
| 1871 | <i>Charles Smith</i> | relief station master | Hadley (Mddx) |
| | Ann | wife | North Mimms |
| | Anne | daughter | Colney Hatch |
| | George | son | Barnet |
| | Elizabeth | daughter | Barnet |
| | Ellen | daughter | Luton |
| | Fred | son | Wheathampstead |
| | Harriet | daughter | Wheathampstead |
| 1881 | <i>Joshua Hope</i> | station master | Hay (Breconshire) |
| | Emma | wife | Galston (Suffolk) |
| | Mary | daughter | Luton |
| | Emma | daughter | Romsey (Hants) |
| | John | son | Wheathampstead |
| 1891 | <i>Walter Wykes</i> | station master | Hemel Hempstead |
| | Caroline | wife | Holloway |
| | Frederick | son | Ulverston (Lincs) |
| | Walter | son | Ulverston |

Some Newspaper Accounts



Here is a selection of newspaper accounts of railway incidents and noteworthy events. They give some idea of the dramas connected with the railway and take us through from the start to the finish of the story.

8th September 1860 OPENING OF THE HERTFORD, LUTON, AND DUNSTABLE RAILWAY

This line, which has been leased to the Great Northern, was opened for general traffic on Saturday last. The first train started from Dunstable at 7.55 a.m. arriving at King's Cross at 9.30 a.m., doing the distance in 1 hour and 35 minutes, a distance of 32 and a half miles. The Great Northern Company have engaged to erect first-class stations at Dunstable, Luton and Hatfield, besides smaller ditto at New Mill-end, Harpenden and Wheathampstead. Saturday was quite a gala day in the towns and stations between Dunstable and Hatfield, crowds assembling to witness the approach and departure of each train.

23rd January 1875 ALARMING ACCIDENT ON THE GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY

On Tuesday evening an accident occurred to the train leaving Dunstable at 7.18 at a spot situate between

Some Newspaper Accounts

Wheathamstead and Hatfield which, though sad enough, might have been productive of much more serious results. The line between Dunstable and Hatfield consists of a single line of rails, and worked upon the staff system, it would appear perfectly safe from the risk of collision. Though a collision may seem impossible, yet it is now evident that by trains following each other in quick succession, an accident may occur. In this instance, after leaving Wheathamstead the passenger train ran into a coal train with such force as to throw the passenger engine off the rails and down the embankment. From what we have been able to learn, it would appear that the accident occurred at a spot where there was a heavy ascent and not far from a sharp curve in the line. The driver of the coal train was unable to accomplish the ascent, and had placed fog signals on the line, with the intention of warning the passenger train which he knew must be approaching. After doing this, however, he appears to have run his train back a little in order to make a fresh start, and had gone over the signals that had been placed upon the line. Whether he had succeeded in starting or not is not certain, for just then the passenger train came on full steam round the curve and dashed into the coal train. The force of the collision snapped the coupling, the engine rolling down the embankment, the boiler exploding at the same time. The driver of the passenger train, a man named Payne, jumped off, but the fireman rolled over with the engine two or three times. Both driver and fireman are injured, the latter very severely. Beyond this we do not hear of any others, though it is evident that in such a collision, the passengers must have received a severe shaking, if they escaped bruises or internal injuries.

**19th June 1900 POINTSMAN KILLED: ACCIDENT ON
THE LINE**

A fatal accident occurred on the Great Northern Branch line to Luton in the early hours of Wednesday morning, when Amos Hawkins of New Marford, Wheathampstead, was killed. A part of the line between Wheathampstead and Harpenden had been re-laid and the deceased, who was a hard-working and highly respected man, was employed on night duty as signalman. It is generally supposed that he was placing a fog-signal on the line when he was knocked down by the up goods train, and so fearfully injured that death ensued before medical aid could be obtained.

**26th June WHEATHAMPSTEAD,
ODDFELLOWS FUNERAL**

Mrs Hawkins and family desire to thank all those who sent letters of sympathy in their recent bereavement [advt.]

On Monday the funeral took place at the Parish Church of Mr Amos Hawkins, a report of whose death occurred in our issue last week. It will be remembered that the deceased met with his death whilst acting as a flagman on the Luton Branch of the G.N. Railway. After the inquest, which was held at Hatfield on Friday last, the body was conveyed by rail to the deceased's home at Wheathampstead. The funeral cortege left the house soon after half-past two, and was met at the church by the Rev. H.T. Harwood Jones, who read the burial service. As a mark of respect in which the deceased was held, nearly every house had the blinds drawn or shutters up, a large number of the residents also standing at the graveside. The coffin which was of polished elm with black fittings, was completely covered with wreaths and crosses, and was borne by six of the deceased's fellow workmen.

Several of the members of the "Grove Lodge" also attended, amongst whom were bros. O. Odell and R. Smith, trustee W. Gray, N.G. O. Hampton, O.G., and W. Gatward, sec. The whole of the funeral arrangements were satisfactorily carried out by Mr H.E. Dunham of Hatfield.

23 August 1963 DERAILED TRUCKS SMASH BRIDGES

Five escape flying metal and debris

Three women, a man and a train guard miraculously escaped serious injury on Friday when a goods train became partly derailed at Wheathampstead.

Wagons smashed two bridges sending rubble careering into roads below and flinging pieces of jagged metal through the air before coming to a halt with two of its wagons poised on the edge of an embankment above storage tanks containing ammonia and oils.

Grace Miller and her friend Doreen Norton were in their caravan home parked beside the line when the crash came. Miss Miller was sitting at a window when a piece of metal hit the caravan at window height just three feet away from her.

It pierced a hole in the outer skin of the wall. Said Miss Miller: "We heard a terrific crash of metal hitting the caravan. We rushed out and saw the train throwing up clouds of dirt and metal".

Mrs Celia Helliwell, of Codicote Road, and Mr Edward Munder, of Sunnybank, Luton Road, were standing talking in Waddling Lane which the line crosses, when above them the derailed wagons hit the brick parapet, demolishing it.

Rubble poured over the side into the lane only yards from the couple.

Said Mrs Helliwell: "The train was making a horrible metallic sound as it approached. The next thing I knew, the parapet came crashing down".

Train halted

The train came to a halt just past the bridge. Mr. Munden rushed to help the guard, Mr. H.H. Ruddock, of 21 Boundary Lane, Welwyn Garden City, who was shaken but unhurt.

The accident happened at 7.15 p.m. The diesel locomotive pulling 11 empty wagons, one loaded wagon and a brake van, was travelling along the branch line from Dunstable to Hatfield when the last three wagons, including the loaded one, became derailed as the train rounded a curve and began to mount the incline leading up to Wheathampstead Station.

The train continued for about 500 yards with the derailed trucks careering along the heavy wooden sleepers. The sleepers were broken and splintered like matchwood. Many of the metal chairs fixed to the sleepers to hold the rails, broke and were tossed about in all directions.

Some smashed panes of glass in nearby greenhouses owned by the Murphy Chemical Co., Ltd., where Miss Miller and Miss Norton work. They had only recently moved the caravan which was newly painted to the side of the track. As the train entered Wheathampstead Station the derailed trucks hit the floor of the bridge carrying the line over Station Road. Rubble poured into the road but no one was passing underneath. The damage left a hole in the floor of the bridge.

On embankment

The train came to a halt on the section of the embankment beside another part of the Murphy Chemical Co., Ltd., where the storage tanks stood.

A spokesman for the firm, who was called to the scene, told a reporter that there was little danger of the two wagons which had finished up poised on the edge of the embankment toppling down and hitting the tanks. Even had they

done so, and the contents of the tanks, which were not full, spilled out, no danger would have been caused.

Customers were having a quiet drink in the Railway Hotel public-house opposite the station when the tremendous noise and vibration caused by the train passing through the station set glass jingling.

Said the licensee, Mr. Alfred East: "It was fortunate the train stayed on the embankment".

The wagons were back on the rails within a few hours of the accident but it took railwaymen until Sunday evening to repair the buckled and broken track.

Passenger services (which are proposed to be withdrawn altogether after this year – the line is one due to be axed under the Beeching Plan) were replaced on Saturday – there are no trains on Sundays – by a direct bus service from Welwyn Garden City to Harpenden, via the Lemsford Road and Luton Road.

A shuttle train service was operated between Harpenden and Luton.

Friday 30th April 1963 BEECHING AXE FALLS

Buses get a mixed reception

Six people boarded the 7.25 a.m. at Wheathampstead, but they did not include Mr. G.J. Soane of Lower Gustard Wood who has used the line for nearly a quarter of a century and is one of the few local residents who has used it to travel right through to London every day.

Mr. Soane, who is vice-chairman of the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Passenger Association, which opposed the closure, and a member of Wheathampstead Parish Council, happened to be on holiday.

"I think everybody feels disappointed at the closure", he said later in the day. "Our hopes were buoyed up by the

report of the Transport Users' Consultative Committee. I am not really satisfied with the way the thing has been done, because we got the impression that the report considered that hardship would be created and there was no way of alleviating it."

Mr. Soane said he was undecided how to travel to London, although he was inclined to favour walking the mile to Wheathampstead, catching a bus to Harpenden and then getting a train from Harpenden Central Station.

5th November 1965 PEDIGREE CATTLE HIT BY TRAIN

Three valuable pedigree heifers were killed at Wheathampstead early on Tuesday morning after straying on to the railway line.

Two were struck by a goods train travelling towards Luton, and the third fell to its death when in fright it jumped over the parapet of a bridge carrying the line over a footpath east of the station.

The three animals were among 30 Red Poll heifers owned by Mr. A.J. Sherriff of Nashes Farm, Sandridge, which got out of a field by the side of the railway line.

Mr. Sherriff, who farms part of Waterend Farm, Wheathampstead, said he thought that the animals got on to the railway after a level crossing gate was left open. The accident stampeded the other animals, some of which ran off through the station goods yard, while the others got off the line at Black Bridge.

Mr. Sherriff's men collected 17 of the animals from Lamer Park, Wheathampstead later in the day and two others were found in an orchard in the grounds of Murphy Chemical Co., Ltd.

Mr. Sherriff found another two along the railway line and got them back into the field. Six beasts were reported to have been seen in the Batford area on Tuesday evening, and train drivers were warned to go slow.

Four of the beasts were found at Home Farm, Delaport, Wheathampstead on Wednesday and were collected yesterday evening (Thursday).

The last two were seen near Leasey Bridge by a level crossing keeper and were found in the vicinity yesterday (Thursday).

All the animals were part of a herd of Red Poll cattle owned by Mr Sherriff who has won many prizes with his animals. They were valued at about £150 each.

Herts Advertiser (1967) BRIDGE GOES BUT ROAD FEARS REMAIN

The old railway bridge over the High Street, Wheathampstead, was removed in a few hours by British Railways workmen on Sunday.

But the removal of the bridge – part of the former Luton-Welwyn Garden City single track line – has caused alarm.

Residents believe that the High Street will now develop into a "race track" and that road hazards will increase.

The owner-manager of a High Street men's outfitting shop, Mr. Stuart Bishop, who is a committee member of Harpenden and District Chamber of Trade, said: "Heavy vehicles are now speeding through the village. They do not observe the speed limit, and cars are also picking up speed. The road is turning into a regular race track," he said.

An order which bans parking in the High Street is likely to come into effect soon, and residents believe that it will further encourage through-traffic to travel faster.

Voices from the Past



In the 1950s Daphne Grierson enjoyed listening to her older friends talking. Fascinated by their accounts of their youth and village life at the turn of the century, she took the trouble to write down what she heard. The result is a unique and vivid collection of voices from the past, several of which may be recognised by their successors who remain in the village today. She captures the intonations and mannerisms of the speakers and brings them to life in an extraordinary way so that one feels one knows the speaker personally. The conversations are full of the detail of everyday life. They offer an extraordinarily direct way of entering into the spirit of late Victorian Wheathampstead.

Lady Daphne died in 1994. Wheathampstead history group would like to record their gratitude for the gift of her collection of voices from the past. It is a charming collection and an invaluable record of times long gone. One day we should like to publish it in full.

The following extracts have been selected for their connection with the railway.

TOM SPARROW

We had no post office here, so all letters and telegrams were dealt with on the station, and my father, who had been Yeoman of Signals in the Royal Navy and went with the first ship that had steam, he came to Wheathampstead as signalman at the station, and he did postal duties because he'd learned signalling – morse code and that. Now supposing there was a message – a telegram, that's to say, – for

Voices from the Past

Gustard Wood, well all the boys would play about outside the station and wait for the bell to ring. (There was a gong which announced the trains.) Then they'd run to take the message. One and six if it was to Nomansland, sixpence to Gustard Wood. And walking, of course, they went. No bikes. Or the boys used to wait for the ten ten from London when golfing gentlemen came down, and carry their clubs up to Gustard Wood. And those that weren't generous didn't get their clubs carried.

The golfing people hired a waggonette at the station to take them up to Gustard Wood. There was no bus service then, you know. Lintot, that was the name. He was the first man to run a private bus from St Albans to Wheathampstead. Harry Lintot. It was a motor bus and it used to come into the station, turn around, wait a few minutes and then go back again. Three or four times a day. Those buses started prior to the First World War. Harry Lintot knew just who to expect, and he would wait for everybody. Nobody was left behind. Fourpence single, eightpence return. And I reckon that was a better service than we've got today.

GEORGE WREN

Grandfather – my father that is – we always called him Grandfather, he remembered the last coach going through from Luton to St Albans, and the first train to run through Wheathampstead. There were some people, he said, walked over to Ayot station to ride back on the train – to say they'd done it, you know. At least, that's what he told us.

NURSE AMY HAWKINS

Nurse Hawkins trained in London and gained her midwifery qualifications there. Wheathampstead's midwife for nearly 30 years, she was proud to boast, "one thousand and four hundred cases

and never lost a mother". Older folk in the village still remember Nurse Hawkins cycling round the village with her black bag. They used to think she was taking the babies to their parents in it! Several of our contemporary speakers were delivered by Nurse Hawkins. We have quoted her at length because we couldn't resist her account of training as a midwife in London early this century. What she says is so interesting. And, after all, how did she get to London?

I felt quite a foreigner going to London for the first time. Yes, by myself. I had to enquire my way by underground, and I didn't say the names of the places right, it seemed, but I got there in the end. Three months I was there to learn maternity work, at this house in the East End of London. July, August September and a very hot summer. What I shall never forget is the good air I breathed coming home in the train as it got towards Wheathampstead. That air, coming off the fields after breathing the air of East London! Oh lovely!

Training to be a midwife in London

Hard work it was, very hard work, with no days off and that sort of thing. But I liked it very much indeed. I always liked it, and I was young and strong. I could scamper in those days. We had to find our own uniforms – three print dresses, twelve aprons, white caps (a good number of them, I forget how many), coat and cape, blue bonnet with strings, strong black boots.

It was all a bit strange at first, and it took us a few days to sort ourselves out. Eighteen we were in the class, but I had a nice room to myself and very good food. Breakfast at half past seven, and then we'd start off on our rounds at eight thirty. We were taken out by a trained midwife first to nurse the mothers and babies, and later on we would help with the confinements. Sometimes we would have to get through four

or five cases in a morning. Dinner at mid-day, and then we had lectures in the afternoons, more rounds again afterwards, and then tea. Then out again on nursings, and so back to supper and straight to bed with lights out at nine o'clock.

Generally we walked to our nursings. Sometimes it was trams. I got to know the districts all right. Poplar, Stratford, all of them. Sometimes the doctor would give us a lift in his cab. I can tell you I was proud of myself after I'd been going out only a fortnight on nursings and they said I could go out by myself. That was because I had learnt bed-making and that sort of thing with the G.F.S. (Goodfellows Friendly Society) here in Wheathampstead.

Very often we came across some terrible houses, tenement blocks they'd be as a rule. You would have to climb hundreds of stairs to get to the right room, may be, or perhaps it was some basement place. And in all that stifling hot weather. One place I'll never forget. There was just the table, and on the table a lump of salt, a piece of margarine with no paper on it, some left-over bloater and a bit of bread. Very few people had anything to make a fire with, and many's the time I've searched around for an old box to split before I could start heating some water. Sometimes we would be confronted with a case where the mother had no baby clothes at all. The Home provided them when that occurred. Kindness was very great in those days. We would take a money box along with us for contributions and the patients would sometimes put a penny in.

MRS E. REMEMBERS THE "OUTING"

The real name of this speaker was never divulged, so anxious was Daphne Grierson to preserve the anonymity of her friends. We should be grateful if anyone has an inkling as to who might be speaking and can tell us.

After Maying the children would start putting by their money for the Outing – so much each week marked up on a card. The Outing! Dreamed of for weeks beforehand, lived over and over again afterwards. Yarmouth or Skegness as a rule, at least that's what the Folly did, the Sunday School, I mean to say. Of course people didn't go for holidays to the sea like they do now. Well how could they? Families were much bigger in those days and nine or ten children was quite common.

And it was really an adventure to go in a train. In fact I think I looked forward more to the train journey than to the seaside!

Sunbonnets, petticoats and button boots

The excursion was from Wheathampstead. No I don't think we went to London. We went Cambridge way, I should think. Perhaps that's why they chose Yarmouth. You didn't have to cross all over London. But I don't really remember. I only remember the excitement, and having our hair plaited up tight the night before to make it stand out stiff. Then we had two rows of ribbon and sunbonnets and our new frocks, got new at Whitsuntide for the Anniversary at the Chapel. (We always kept it a secret what colour they were going to be.) The skirts would be starched and frilled and embroidered, and we had frilled petticoats underneath and drawers with frills too, and then black stockings, of course, and button boots. My word, we looked forward to taking those boots off on the sand and going in the sea for a paddle. Paddling in the meadows here was all right but not half so good as the sea! Yes, and then putting on our boots again before we came home. You didn't have to forget your button hook. Oh, yes! We always had our best clothes for the outing. The boys wore caps and long stockings and boots, and some of them knickerbockers. And they'd put on clean collars.

Five or six in the morning the train would leave, and as we hadn't slept much for excitement the night before we'd be ready to jump up that morning. I suppose we got to Yarmouth about twelve. I always remember we hadn't much time there, or so it seemed. But the train was what we enjoyed the most – all crowding to the window, and singing and cheering at the stations. And the train stopped quite often. Much slower the trains were in those days.

Pasties and bloaters

My mother used to make us up parcels of food for our lunch: big meat pasties and cherry pasties, and we'd have them when we were hungry – as like as not in the train before we got there. Some of the mothers came too, because we were a lot of children and needed some looking after I can tell you. Sometimes the grown-ups came back with boxes of Yarmouth bloaters. We were tired, I remember, coming home, some of us going to sleep in the carriage, and tired the next day, Sunday. We always went Saturday and there was no Sunday School the next day so that we could have a rest before Monday. Do you know I don't think I can remember a wet day for the Outing? Summers were mostly fine in those days.

TERMINO (CHARLIE) COLLINS TALKING TO FENWICK OWEN

How the railway helped a poacher

Do you remember Jimmy Wright and the pheasants? We've often had a laugh about that, all of us. What you've got to remember is that poaching was a regular trade in those days. If you could find a nest full of china (eggs, that is) – big uns, which means pheasant's eggs and little 'uns,

which means partridge's eggs – you could get sixpence each from a man at Luton, and that meant something.

Well, look here. The magistrates used to charge so much for birds, so much for eggs. And Jimmy Wright, he got a box full of eggs and he'd taken it up to the station. He catches sight of a plain-clothes man and he runs back and opens the box, and bless my soul if he didn't jump on all the eggs so they couldn't be counted, and broke the whole lot and got himself covered with egg. That's given us many a laugh.

Yes, and the other time when he made as if he was seeing his wife off at the station and he had the portmanteau along with him. And if only they'd known, it was full of pheasants! I don't know. That's Jimmy Wright, good old boy, and I had great respect for him.

S.G. DOLLIMORE

What follows is part of a much longer account of village life between 1890 and 1930 written by Mr Dollimore who is referring both to his own memories and to information passed down from his father and aunts.

The railway was the hub round which the village revolved. Eight passenger trains ran daily in each direction with goods trains spaced between according to the volume of traffic. The railway premises were constructed to last almost forever. There was a goods shed capable of holding goods wagons of the enclosed type; these would bring in the produce for the grocers, etc. and were delivered twice daily by the draymen. The coal merchants rented an area where they would unload the wagons and store the various grades of coal separately. The nurseries at the Dyke would collect their coal and horse manure sent out from London with the occasional truck load of soot, and in return the railway would

take their produce – cucumbers and tomatoes – to the wholesale markets of London.

Stacking hay for tunnels

Other self-employed men would act as hay and straw stack builders. The hay stacks were cut into rectangular shapes about 3 feet by 2 feet and compressed in a press which they towed around with their pony and cart. These men were employed by hay and straw merchants, and in due course these rectangular shapes would be loaded into open railway trucks for transport to London to feed the thousands of horses working in the capital. The railway was very fussy about the loading of these trucks. After loading and covering with sheeting, the trucks would be hauled by the shunting horse and placed underneath a suspended swinging frame. If the load managed to pass beneath this hanging gauge without touching the sides, it was accepted. If, however, it did touch it would have to be unloaded, the reason being that any obstruction could cause a derailment or blockage under or in a tunnel.

Clerks and porters

The passenger side and goods by passenger train were controlled by a booking clerk and two porters supervised by the station master resplendent in a gold braided uniform and peaked hat. He used to meet the first class passengers from their carriages and would rush up the steps to the platform to control the departure of the train. There was a signal box adjacent to the goods yard. The railway's permanent track, banks and hedges were kept in good order by the plate layers who would also be part of a gang working on the main line. Permanent track laying was carried out on a Sunday, for which the railway company paid time and a half wages. All

railway employees had a uniform or industrial working clothes and an annual holiday with free travel vouchers enabling them to enjoy a holiday on the east coast, because resorts there were on the company's lines.

As a boy I found the railways interesting, providing me with a lesson in geography. The engines were painted in apple green and inscribed G.N.R.. Passenger carriages were stained a rich mahogany colour and brightly varnished. Most goods trucks were privately owned by the colliery companies with the name boldly painted, such as Worksop Main, and other colliery names in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Staffordshire and Yorkshire. Many of these just passed through having come on to our line through the junction with L.N.E.R. at Leighton Buzzard en route to east Hertfordshire and north London. Trucks and goods vans would carry the names of the railway companies owning them, and there were several different railway companies at this time. Both passenger and goods trains were backed up by a brake van, and the brakesman's task was to apply the brakes when the train travelled down an incline, thus avoiding the engine being propelled by the weight of its own load – the engine having been designed to haul and not to brake.

CONTEMPORARY RAILWAY RECOLLECTIONS



The following are edited extracts from letters or conversations.

ARTHUR MILLER

Arthur Miller, who lives in Tudor Road, sent us a letter remembering his friend. Prior to the commencement of the 1939-45 war Arthur joined the Herts Yeomanry based at St Albans. (He lived at Bushey Heath at that time.) One of his colleagues in that yeomanry was George Julian Swallow who, at that time, would have been sixteen or seventeen years of age.

Marrows on the tracks

I remember that George was a member of the Wheathampstead station staff – no doubt in a very junior capacity. He used to say that, apart from attending to the oil lamps and such, he used to tend the marrows which they grew between the railway lines. Oh yes, a great leg puller was George. Sadly, he was killed in May 1942 near an Italian fort (Fort Capuzzo) in the Western Desert somewhat east of Tobruk, together with five other lads in the same incident.

When my family and I moved to Wheathampstead in 1985, I saw George's name on the war memorial and later

noticed that there is a marker stone for him in the church yard. You can imagine the memories which that evoked.

(Editor's note: John Matthews thinks George was a porter who used to live on that corner of Cherry Tree Lane which was demolished in the widening of the Lower Luton Road.)

What follows are extracts from conversations with George and Bob who were schoolboys and choirboys together in Wheathampstead in the 1920s. These fragments hint at the sort of entertainment boys found to amuse themselves in those days before television took over.

GEORGE HAWKINS (born 1904)

Mischief in the railway yard

Do you remember that trick we used to do in the station yard? Where the weighbridge office was, just inside the yard? If you climbed up on the wooden fence opposite you could reach the chimney. So when they got in there to weigh something we used to get a wet sack, put it on top of the chimney and smoke them out. If you stood on the top rung you could just reach this chimney.

BOB SEABROOK (born 1903)

The surprise parcel

When I found a dead rat once I made a nice little brown paper parcel and dropped it just outside the station. Somebody comes out, picks it up and puts in his pocket. I'd like to have seen their face when they got home! Cor! The pong of a dead rat!

We found a truck load of sweets once. They didn't sell a sweet in the village for months after that. Toffees, boiled sweets, etc. We collected them in toy wheelbarrows and carts.

LES LAMBE (born 1913)

Born within the sound of Bow Bells, Les came to Wheathampstead at the age of eight to live with his aunt in a cottage next to the Rose and Crown at the Folly. He dazzled the drinkers there with his speed and agility on the roller skates – London's streets must have offered excellent terrain for practising – and he surpassed the local lads among whom roller skates were something of a rarity.

Pickled sleepers

The speed of the railways soon attracted Les, and he took a job with the L.N.E.R. at Luton Hoo in 1935 as a lengthman and platelayer responsible for walking and checking the track between Luton football ground and Benny Coles's Mill at East Hyde. He earned 38 shillings a week working from 8.00 a.m. till 8.00 p.m. All repair work was done by teams of men, so when rails or sleepers had to be taken up and replaced there was a lot of lifting, heaving and shoving to be done. Old half ton sleepers would be lifted with an implement like a hoe and replaced with new "pickled" pine sleepers soaked in creosote so that they would resist rot. Rails would have to be set into "chairs" with four bolts to each chair. "They wanted some pushing in", as Les remembers well. When the ballast needed replacing, it would need to be shovelled out of the trucks and smoothed to a flat finish. Gangs of between 50 and 200 men would be specially taken on to repair a section of track, working for three weeks for say £1 a day. "Marvellous money! A pound if you worked all day Sunday. There was no tax in those days..." Thirsty work it must indeed have been, with beer at four-pence a pint a necessary refresher.

In charge at Luton Hoo station: royal visits and air raids

Les eventually ended up in charge of the station at Luton Hoo, as booking clerk, signaller, crossing gate keeper, and porter. He always knew when the Queen Mother was visiting, as the housekeeper or butler from Luton Hoo would come to meet her at the station. Les had special permission to stop any train at Chiltern Green to allow members of the royal family to get on or off the train from London. As to the Werner estate at Chiltern Green through which the track passed, Les recalls that "for each ton of coal that passed through, the L.N.E.R. had to pay a toll of a halfpenny", and, moreover, "they never gave their railings to the war effort." Perhaps the aristocracy were exempt. Another of Les's war-time memories is of a heavy air raid over Luton during which he was forced to take shelter with his lorry load of high explosives among the rhododendrons at Luton Hoo.

Prisoners-of-war

Transporting prisoners-of-war between London and Edinburgh was one of Les's jobs during the war. Not a pleasant job, especially when the trains got bombarded with stones thrown by people in towns along the way. One of his prisoners was a Russian soldier being forcibly repatriated. Knowing he was being sent home to certain death, the poor man committed suicide by means of a razor blade he had previously somehow inserted secretly under the skin of his wrist. Les was horrified to think that a man he had taken care of had done such a thing – and how it had happened was beyond him, considering that all the prisoners were strip searched before embarkation.

On a different note, but also during the war, Les attended night classes in first aid run by the St John's Ambulance Brigade in the Royal waiting room at Hatfield station. These

did not finish until late evening after the last passenger train for Wheathampstead had left. To get back to Wheathampstead, Les had to beg an unofficial ride on a goods train travelling back to Luton with spare parts for Vauxhall Motors. As the train neared Wheathampstead station, the driver would have to slow down, tooting the horn and waving a lamp when it was time for Les to jump off.

Working at Wheathampstead

Les's main aim was to get a job at Wheathampstead, and this he was able to do after the war when he became a lorry driver, transporting all over the district the goods that had arrived on the railway. One of the items he specially remembers delivering was the Irish spring water specially brought in for "Sir" Bernard Shaw, as he was known to locals.

Mr Lee the station master is recollected in characteristic pose taking out his large and splendid watch to check that the trains left on time. "Mr Lee always used to see off the 8.50 a.m. passenger train to King's Cross." Another duty which Mr Lee took most seriously was the careful counting in and out of the drums of chemicals for Murphy Chemicals. Mistakes here could be dangerous. The drums of DTT and other deadly chemicals were sent up the track to "Olympia", not the one at Earls Court, but the biggest warehouse among the Murphy storage buildings, now demolished to make way for developers.

JOHN MATTHEWS (born 1915)

At least three generations of the Matthews family have lived in Wheathampstead. John's grandfather, Alfred, was shepherd to Dolphin Smith who farmed the land at Mackerye End and lived at the Dolphins on the Hill. James, John's father, was born there and worked as farrier behind the Swan when Percy Wilkinson was

landlord. One of John's early memories as a village lad is of standing at the forge watching his father at work while the sparks flew. "You'll have to get his knees covered up," the landlord advised John's father.

Apart from a short spell away during the war, John has always lived and worked in the village. The range of jobs he has done is considerable: general farm work, delivering milk for farmer Blain at Marford Farm, postman, verger at St Helen's (for 25 years) working for Peter Titmuss at the Mill, and also, in 1956, porter at Wheathampstead station. John's knowledge is vast and his memory excellent, particularly where trains are concerned.

The train timetable

There were twelve passenger trains a day, the first of which was the 7.00 a.m. workmen's train, a heavy eight coach train which had to reach King's Cross by 8.00 a.m. This was the only direct train to King's Cross, and the fare in 1956 was 3s 5d. The next train at 7.30 a.m. took workers up to Welwyn Garden City to work at Murphy Radio, Welgar and other factories. One snowy morning, John counted 75 people using this train. There would have been more passengers in good weather, presumably. The "city gents' train" was next at 8.32 a.m. These passengers had to change at Welwyn Garden City to get to King's Cross.

If a train was bound for London, it was known as an "up" train, if in the other direction, to Luton or Dunstable, it was a "down" train. The 8.45 a.m. was a down train from Hatfield to Luton with not many passengers, followed an hour later by the 9.45 up train to London. There followed a long interval until the 1.40 p.m. down train to Luton, and a longer interval until the 4.03 up to London, changing at Welwyn Garden City. Bringing factory and office workers home in the evening were the down trains to Luton at 5.25 p.m., 6.02 p.m., 6.33 p.m., and 7.33 p.m. in the evening, with the last passenger train reaching Wheathampstead at 9.08 p.m. Presumably if you

wanted to stay up in town to see a show you would have to make other arrangements about getting home.

Goods trains passed through every half hour from Luton between 2.00 a.m. and 6.15 a.m.

Mr Lee and other station staff

"One of the old sort", is how Mr Lee the station master is remembered by several people. John recollects the exact words used by the Rev. Roe on the occasion of Mr Lee's retirement. "A railwayman of the old school who was always punctual, reliable and courteous." He hailed from Woodbridge in Suffolk where he had worked on the Great Eastern Railway. John remembers him looking "very smart in his uniform", checking the time with the guard on his large watch before permitting the departure of a train - always on time, but not before. His watchword to ensure the train's safety was, "Always watch for the tail lamp." If that hadn't broken away, the coupling was still strong and all was well.

Mr Lee was organist and choirmaster at St Helen's church and founder of the village youth club. John remembers a conversation in the vestry after evensong one Sunday while Mr Lee (by then quite elderly) and Mr Nott, the churchwarden, were disrobing. Mr Nott lived in Rose Lane close to the sidings where he must have heard a good deal of wheezing and shunting from some of the engines, particularly those with a Westinghouse braking system. "I think, Mr Lee, that those engines have been on the railway as long as you have."

Mr East and Mr Humphrey were guards working on the railway. Both were Wheathampstead men who moved to Hatfield to stay with their jobs. John Dawes, known to all as "Dicky", was the engine driver. "If you could stand on a footplate when the train was going at speed, you could stand anywhere", John remembers him saying.

The journey

"A pretty ride" it was through Sparrowhall past the keepers' cottages to Ayot St Peter, then through Sherrardswood to Welwyn Garden City. Particularly at bluebell time. The passengers would have enjoyed glorious views from the steep banks overlooking the river Lea and surrounding countryside. In winter the snow would sweep across the track at Sparrowhall making it, on one occasion at least, impassable.

It was always quite a pull up the steep gradient to Ayot St Lawrence either way. The engines would have to get up steam starting quite a distance back from the incline at the gatehouse at Sheepcote Lane. Coal trains which could easily carry one hundred tons of coal, would need an extra "banking" engine to assist them up the steep gradient. The fireman would have to "fire up" to get the trains to do the heavy haul to Sparrowhall. Past New Bridge, however, and down to Luton, the track was flat and the driver could open up the regulator and apply power (or "get up steam"). The next station going "down" to Luton was Harpenden East (the station house is still there, now converted into a home opposite Pinney's garage), then Luton Hoo (just a halt), then Dunstable Rd Luton. The track ran side by side with the Bedford-St Pancras line from Luton Hoo, and at Leighton Buzzard it linked up with the main line from Euston.

Pleasant though the views would have been, travelling by train was not like sitting in a car, says John. When travelling at speed, the carriages would roll about and you'd be heaved and tugged all over the place.

Tunnels

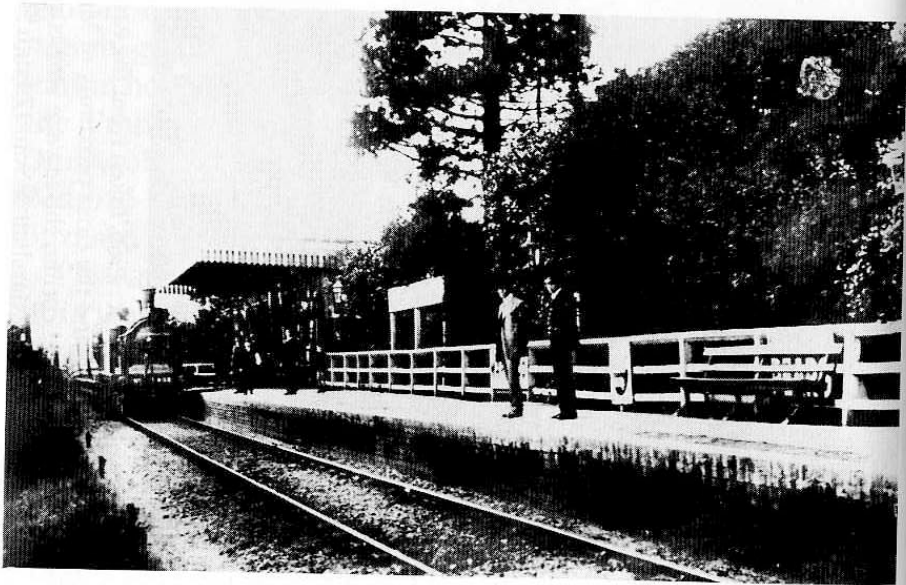
Alarming to tell, but when a driver went through a long tunnel (particularly Snow Hill tunnel, now re-opened for Thameslink) he couldn't tell whether he was on or off the



1 An aerial view, c. 1966, taken from the east, showing the railway line stretching away towards Luton and the close proximity of Murphy Chemicals to the line. See also, in the bottom left hand corner, the sewage works and the river Lea. (Courtesy, Bishop Marshall & Son, 17 High Street, Broxbourne, Herts.)



2 A fine view of Wheathampstead station, c. 1905, showing staff and passengers with a steam train approaching from the Hatfield direction.



3 Wheathampstead station, c. 1900. Train approaching from the Luton direction.



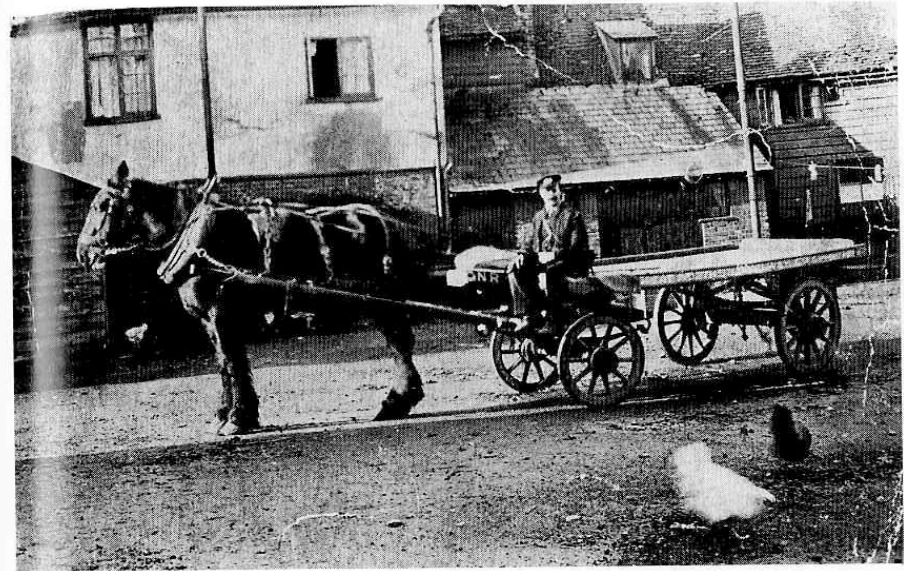
4 A scene of lively activity at the Railway Hotel (later the Abbot John) taken from the railway bridge, c. 1905. (Courtesy, Sam Collins)



5 A pony and trap outside the Railway Hotel, c. 1905. (Courtesy, Sam Collins)



6 The Bolding family in the garden at the back of the Railway Hotel, c. 1908, showing the railway embankment in the background. The Boldings succeeded the Collins family at the Railway Hotel during the First World War. Trixie Matthews' mother, Evelyn, is one of the daughters in this picture. She married Arthur Fossett who, it is claimed, introduced the first petrol pump in the village outside the Railway Hotel. She was an accomplished singer and pianist, entertaining with her music and singing the soldiers stationed at Garden House during the Second World War. (Courtesy, John Matthews)



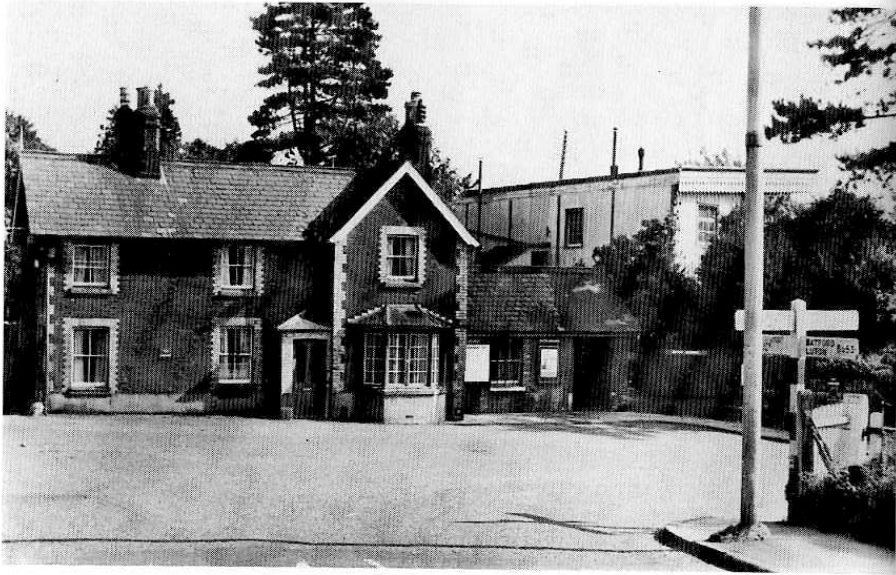
8 Mr "Feathers" Cooper delivering goods to customers in East Lane by means of the station goods delivery cart, c. 1920. (Courtesy, Mr Izzard)



7 A view looking up Station Road towards the railway station in the early 1900s. Gilbert the Baker (parties catered for) on the left and, centre picture, a station porter delivering a portmanteau by hand barrow.



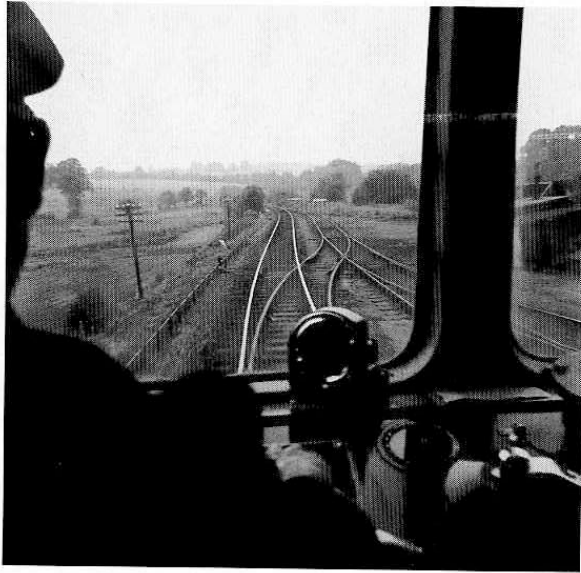
9 The station master's house Wheathampstead, c. 1932, viewed from the corner of Lamer Lane. The notice board belongs to the Great Northern Railway at this time. The lamp shed, where they used to light the lamps, is on the right hand side of the road.



10 The railway station and station master's house viewed from the corner of the Lower Luton Road in the 1960s.



12 A view from just before the bridge of the station master's house, coal office and Wheathampstead station. The train is approaching from Harpenden. (Courtesy, Alan Willmott)



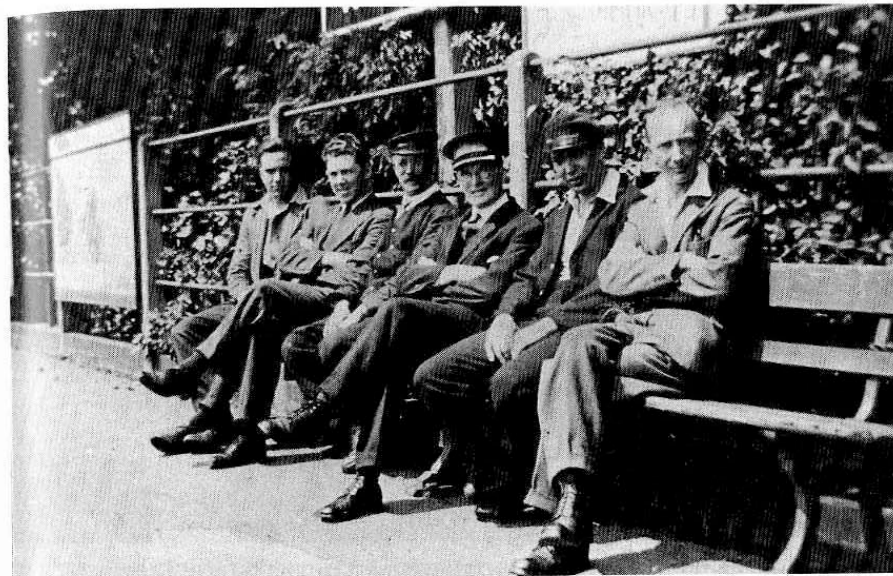
11 The view from the driver's cabin, September 1962, as the train leaves Wheathampstead looking towards Leaseybridge with the cattle pens on the right. (Courtesy, Sue and Geoff Woodward)



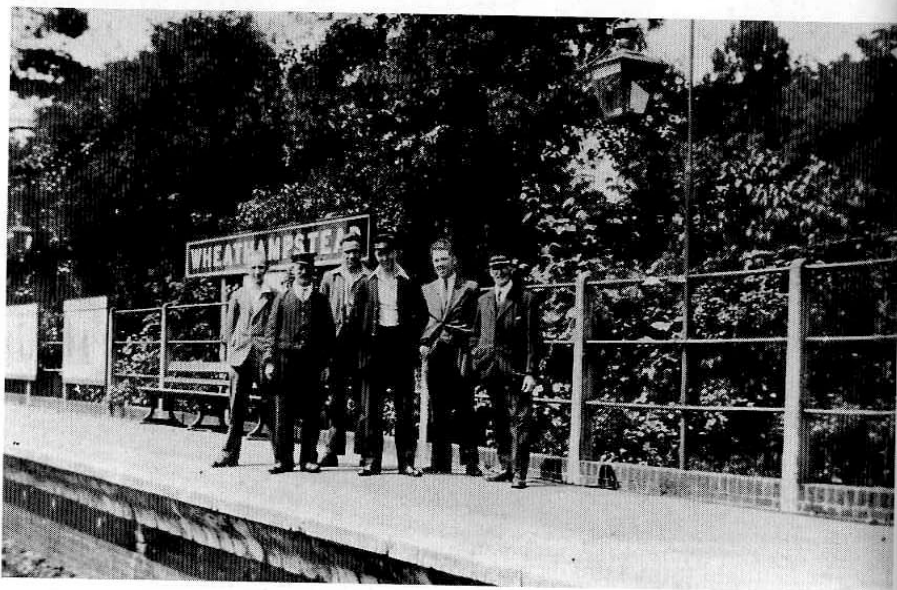
13 The Hatfield train, bunker first, coasts into Wheathampstead station, 1948. Note the steep gradient. (Courtesy, Alan Willmott)



14 Wheathampstead station staff in 1956. Maurice Munt presenting retirement gifts to station master Mr Gerald Lee after twenty-two years of service. Charlie the "checker" (goods traffic) at the end on the right, John Matthews next to him, and Evelyn Hawkins standing behind Maurice Munt. A goods clerk behind her on the left.



16 Station staff seated in the 1950s.



15 Station staff on the platform at Wheathampstead station 1950s. Mr Lee at the end on the right. Mr Cooper second from the left. Do you know who the others were?



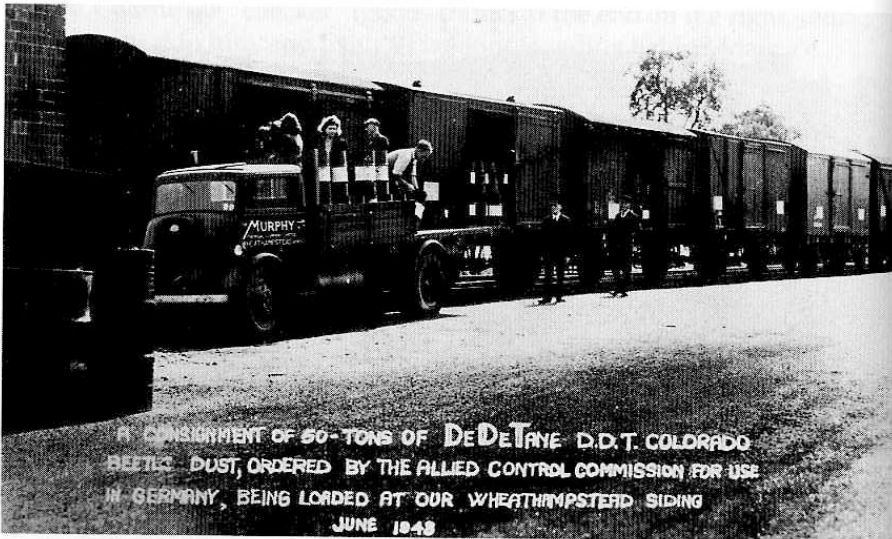
17 Top row, left to right: Mr French, Lloyd and Sid Arnold, Mr Lee and Bob Wilding (porter). Seated: Freda Swain (right) and friend. This photo was taken in the station goods yard. (Courtesy, Mrs Marilyn French)



18 A Stephenson Locomotive Society special train pausing at the Ayot signal Box, April 1962. (Courtesy, Sue and Geoff Woodward)



20 Marford crossing keeper's house at the top of Sheepcote Lane, 1960s. (Courtesy, Owen Owen)



19 A consignment of De De Tane, (DDT) Colorado Beetle Dust, ordered by the Allied Control Commission for use in Germany, being loaded at our Wheathampstead siding June 1948 [original caption]. The railway link was essential for the operations of the Murphy Chemical company.



21 The "up" train (a diesel) coming through the bluebell woods at Ayot, 20th June 1960.

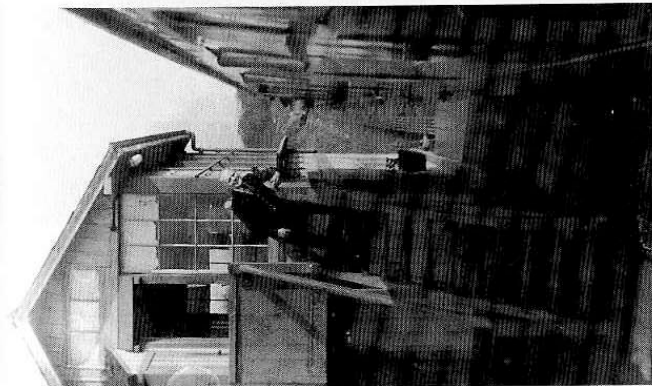


22 The back garden of Marford Crossing, with Mrs Elizabeth Emma Owen and pet cat. Also shown the special arrangement for collecting the water supply after the well was contaminated. (Courtesy, Owen Owen)



23 Mrs Owen and friend in the garden of the gate house, ten feet away from the railway line. (Courtesy, Owen Owen)

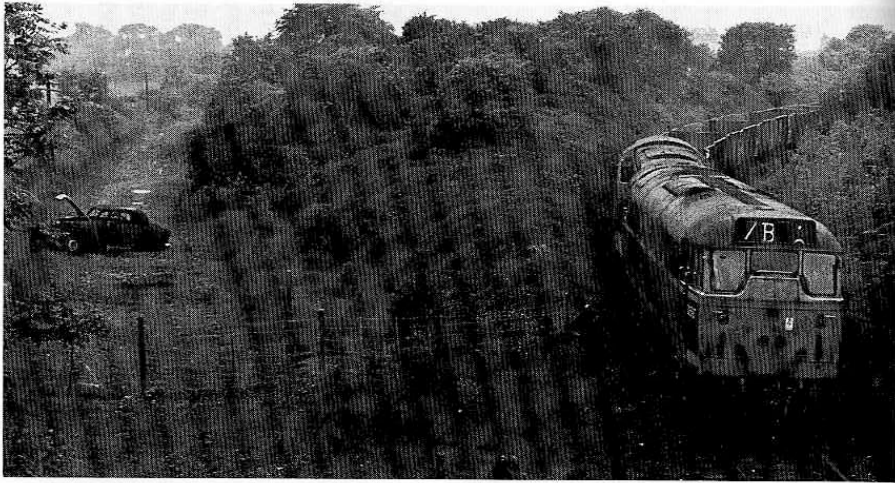
25 Ayot signal box after the line had closed. The track is still being dismantled. (Courtesy, Roger Meads)



24 The Ayot signalman taking the single line token from the driver of a diesel locomotive unit. (Courtesy, Sue and Geoff Woodward)

26 The line at Blackbridge, a wooden construction used as a cattle crossing by livestock at the Lamb's farm. The weight restriction used to be 1 ton. Taken in 1965. During Farmer Blain's day, Marford Farm continued on the north side of the railway line with several fields on which both pigs and cattle were kept. There was hay making there too. (Courtesy, Roger Meads)





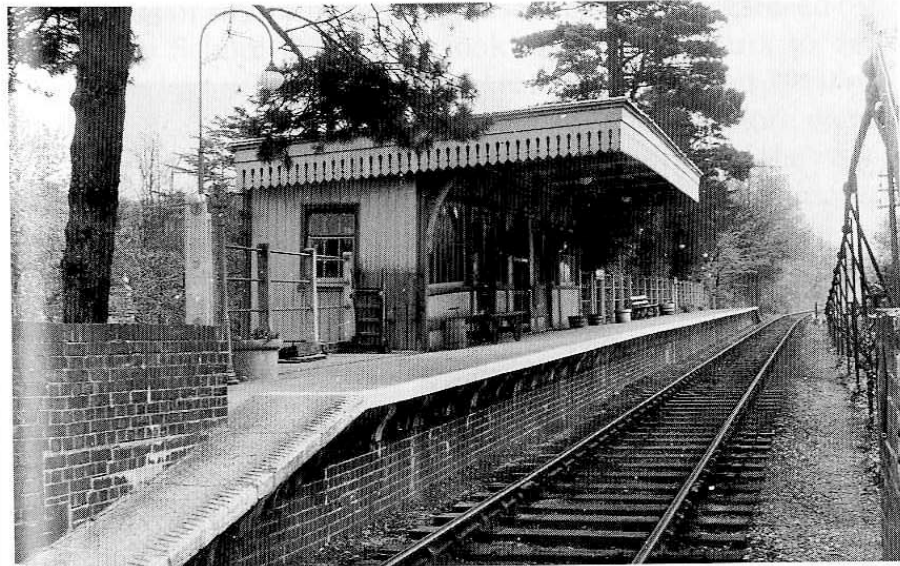
27 Known as the "dustbins", the empty refuse train to Ashburton Grove (near Finsbury Park) leaves the Dump at Blackbridge and joins the Luton branch line on 31 May 1969. This was the last part of the line to be closed, in 1971.



28 Wheathampstead goods yard on the last day of passenger service, 24 April 1965. (Photographer David Percival, from *The Railways of Hertfordshire* F.G. Cockman.)



29 The station master's house in dilapidated state at the end of its life, 1966.



30 Wheathampstead station just after closure. (Courtesy, Sue and Geoff Woodward)

track, so thick was the smoke and so dark the tunnel. The condensing gear intended to help reduce the smoke and steam in tunnels was not always applied as the drivers found it difficult to turn off. Instead, as a courtesy to the passengers, the driver would blow the whistle as a warning for them to shut the windows and keep out smoke and smuts from the carriage. "You were for ever getting up and down..."

Steam finally gave way to diesel in the 1960s, after which time smuts and soot were no longer the same problem.

Favourite journeys

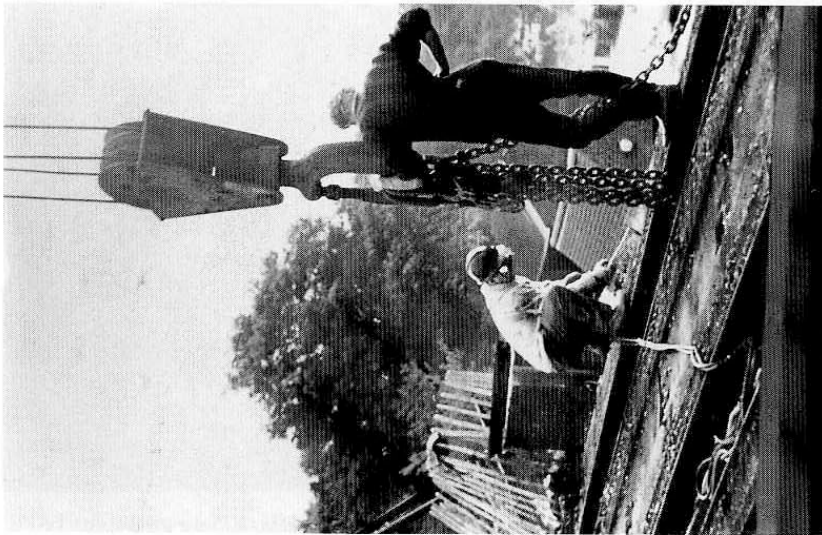
A special family excursion on the Eastern Region to Southend via Fenchurch Street on Sundays would cost 10s 6d return. John used to enjoy the whelks. Skegness was a popular resort too. For Sunday School visits to Hunstanton a special train was hired – the latest with two tank engines. Hundreds of children went on these excursions organised by a Sunday School teacher. It took about four hours to get there, starting off at 8.00 a.m. and returning at about 10.00 or 11.00 at night. Candy floss and walks by the sea shore were "wonderful", and often provided the only outing of the year for many people. Then when they all returned late at night, John remembers the enormous crowds of parents waiting to meet their children and take them home to bed. Such outings were an improvement on going to Bricket Wood in a big horse brake, in John's opinion.

Horses by train from London

Having grown up with horses very much as a main theme, John remembers with particular fondness the horses that arrived in Wheathampstead by rail. There used to be a big horse market at the Elephant and Castle in London where Peter Titmuss's grandfather for one would go to buy horses,



32 Ready for lift-off! The final moments of the railway bridge. (Courtesy, Barry Wood)



31 The dismantling of the track on the Station Road bridge, 1967. (Courtesy, Barry Wood)

also Mr Freeman. Once the deal was made, the chosen horses would be walked back through London to the station at King's Cross from where they would travel in a special horse box attached behind the engine of a passenger train. It was easier on the animal's nerves here as there was least lurching about. (What the horse would have thought of all the flames of the fire box and noise, being taken so close to the engine, we cannot know.) There was a separate compartment within this horse box for the accompanying person.

On arrival at Wheathampstead the horses would be unloaded at the New Bridge loading dock. The fields around Wheathampstead were a welcome relief for horses needing a rest from the hard stones of London streets. The London General Omnibus Company used to send horses to Wheathampstead for a rest, and John remembers a particularly useful horse sold to Peter Titmuss by McVitie and Price. He also recalls the horse that was used for shunting coal wagons into the sidings.

Cattle and sheep were transported to and from Wheathampstead by the hundred when John was a boy in the 1920s. Hay also for feeding the London horses. There used to be a special gauge for measuring the loads of hay to ensure they were the right size to get through the tunnels. This was where the Wheathampstead club is now. John also remembers taking delivery of chicks from Yorkshire.

Coal, cars and hats

Enormous amounts of coal were delivered by rail, mostly from Yorkshire, enough to supply two coal merchants in the village at least: Herbert Hawkins and Harry Batchelor who had their offices in the vicinity of the station.

Every morning an empty train would go to Vauxhalls at Luton where the empty wagons would be filled with crates of machinery and spare parts for cars for export. The train would take these to Southgate station.

On a much smaller scale there was a special "hat" train with box wagons full of hats from the factories at Luton.

Staff and keys

Travelling along the route was a bit like a baton race. To enter each new section the driver needed a staff. This was a long piece of metal with a round end. There was also a key to operate the points. Fireman and driver would share the work of operating these two essential pieces of equipment, the purpose of which was to ensure safety by avoiding two trains at once in the same section.

An emergency

One morning the 8.32 up train failed and got stuck at the station when there was known to be another train travelling in the same section at Sheepcote Lane. To avert potential disaster and warn the oncoming train, station staff had to rush and place detonators in front of the stationary train as a signal to the oncoming train to do an emergency stop. There followed some highly complicated manoeuvres to replace the engine on the "dead" train, with a fresh one sent up from Hatfield.

Thirsty work

The fireman's job was thirsty work. On the journey from Kings Cross to Newcastle, he might have to shovel 8 tons of coal at speed. The train got thirsty too and would get through about 4,000 gallons of water on the journey from Kings Cross to Edinburgh, scooping it up from troughs along the route - the nearest were just beyond Hitchin.

A game that was often played by local lads (lasses too, perhaps?) was placing a penny on the rails at Sheepcote Lane to see it flattened by a passing train.

ALICE SMITH (born 1911)

At the age of sixteen, Alice went to learn millinery as an apprentice at a Luton hat factory, Sanders and Brightman's in Bute Street. She earned 5 shillings a week. She bought a cheap railway ticket, valid for three months, that cost 12 shillings. Alice's father, Montague Freeman, was a plate layer on the railways.

JACK THORNTON (born 1924)

Jack was born in the village and moved to Harpenden, where he now lives, when he married in 1950. He wrote to the history group with his memories here reproduced in full. Among Jack's earliest memories is that of going on the Sunday School outings to Hunstanton.

These started off in a small way, but after a few years they became village outings, almost the whole village turned out. The train was so long it had to pull up into the station several times to get all the people aboard. Going on a corridor train was an event in itself. When we returned at night, another engine had to be attached to the rear coach to push us, as the gradient from Welwyn Garden City was so steep.

My next memory was going to London for special occasions, usually at weekends. We caught the midnight train home from King's Cross and changed at Welwyn Garden City for the local train. This was an excellent service for those days.

We used to watch the coal trains shunting about in the railway yard ready for the coal merchants to load up their horse and carts, later their lorries, for deliveries to the local residents. I remember Mr Hawkins from Necton Road was our coalman.

There were sheep and cattle pens also in the station yard,

and local farmers would send their stock away by train, or perhaps receive stock from elsewhere.

One practice, which was of course very dangerous, was to put pennies on the line and wait until the train ran over them to see what sort of pattern was made.

During the war, railways were used extensively for transporting war materials, not least our railway. We used to watch the tank trains from Luton transporting tanks that had been made at Vauxhall Motors. Murphy Chemicals were supplied with materials for their industry by rail. They also used rail for transporting their finished products.

When I went into the army, I was stationed at Bury St Edmunds for a time. It was never necessary to buy a ticket home as the station staff knew all the local lads and just waved us through, or just ignored us, knowing we hadn't got a ticket.

My happy memories of railways were of coming home on leave, the train doors banging and the guard blowing his whistle and waving his green flag. You knew then that you were really on your way.

My saddest moment was seeing the last train leave Wheathampstead station, the end of a great era, the end of a great service which had served the village for so long.

After the war I went to Welwyn Garden City to work, as did a large number of local residents. I was never a good riser and many mornings I would wave to the engine driver as he crossed the bridge and I was running to the station to wait for me. I would have been late for work many times had he not done this.

I was always happy travelling by train, and still am, although it is vastly different today compared with trains in those days. Steam trains were always noisy and dirty. Getting up a good speed took ages, and putting one's head out of the window was asking for trouble: either getting a dirty face or coal cinders in your eyes from the engine. One

good point about travelling by train was the guard's van. There was always room for large packages, cases, and cycles, and even pigeons were transported in their baskets and released at stations down the line. There were always interesting things to see on a railway journey.

ELSIE SMITH

Sunday School excursions

Elsie's father, Mr W.J. Hunt, was a Sunday School teacher and Secretary at the Folly Methodist Church for several years. (He was also Managing Director of Almagam Mills, Batford, where they made tyres for army bikes during two world wars.) Elsie submitted the following as her contribution to our collection. We print it in full.

Those who were resident in Wheathampstead in the early 1930s will remember the United Churches Sunday School outings my father arranged. A remarkable feat of inter-denominational organization in those far-off days. Sunday school children from Batford Methodist Church joined in with those from the Folly Methodist (the Congregational church as it was then named) and St Helen's church. Several hundred scholars, their parents and grandparents, babes in arms, uncles and aunts all swelled the numbers. As long as there was a seat and the fare was paid, you were welcome.

The outings were to Hunstanton, Skegness, Yarmouth and Felixstowe. The long train came up from Luton and stopped first at the L.N.E.R. station in Harpenden North. My father checked everyone was present, then allotted everyone their seats, joined the train himself and came on to Wheathampstead where the station platform was packed solid with excited youngsters. Once again, every name was checked and when all were safely on board, he climbed aboard himself, the whistle blew and the train began to depart. We travelled

direct to our destination – unusual in those days when it was more usual to have to make connections because of the various railway companies involved in running the track. The trains were re-routed at Welwyn Garden City and we didn't leave our seats until we arrived. What wonderful co-ordination there was in the railway system then to make such a trip possible.

The outing was a big responsibility for my father, but everything was very well organized. There was never any bother or anyone lost. After about two and a half hours' travelling, out came the sandwiches and lemonade. Then it seemed no time at all until we were at the coast. On arrival, each church group was told which restaurant had been booked for their tea, how to find it, and at what time their sitting was. It was also emphasized that everyone must be back at the station at a set time for the return journey.

Straw plait and cattle, watercress and bricks

Cattle from local farms destined for Smithfield Market were shepherded on to a large, fenced, concrete base in the station yard and then into trucks. On other occasions newly arrived animals were sometimes driven down Station Road to Simons' slaughter house.

Osborne's of Luton owned a hat factory which stood next to the Methodist Church in the Lower Luton Road. Mr Frank Pearce used to bring large hanks of straw plait to this factory where machinists worked it into various hat shapes. Mr Pearce then packed the hats into boxes and wheeled them on his bicycle along the Luton Road to Wheathampstead station where the train conveyed them to Luton. Here they were trimmed ready for the shops.

Crates of watercress from the Lea Valley beds at Castle Farm were sent directly up to Covent Garden by train. Coal also arrived direct from the pits for the local coal merchants.

My husband, Leslie Smith, a retired local builder, remembers

bricks arriving in trucks from the Peterborough area and then being delivered by horse and cart to local building sites. He also recalls that truck-loads of manure from London brewery stables were unloaded in Wheathampstead station goods yard and delivered by lorry to Wright's nurseries in Dyke Lane.

Mr Cooper

There was a gated railway crossing down Cherry Tree Lane, which used to be known as the Slad by locals. In the gate-house lived the Cooper family. Mr Cooper in his early employment by the L.N.E.R. was engaged in delivering parcels by pony and trap. He had an allotment at the end of the station yard and his daughter Lilian, now Mrs Izzard, tells me that on Sundays and Bank holidays he used to go and feed the horses and clean out the stable. Later on he served as a porter at the station. While he was engaged in this work Mrs Cooper had to leave off her housewifely duties to open the level crossing gates to traffic whenever necessary. Cars would stop at the crossing and toot their horns.

Station staff

At one time the station master was Mr Lee. He was organist at St Helen's church. The booking clerk was Maurice Munt. Mr Les Lambe used to drive the station lorry.

JOHN A. SPREAG (born 1937)

In response to a questionnaire in the Parish Pump John sent us a letter all the way from Wellingborough, Northants where he now lives. Although now registered blind, he took the trouble to send us a long and interesting account of his memories of Wheathampstead written in the beautiful copperplate which he must have learnt at St Helen's. Here are some extracts.

I was born in Wheathampstead in 1937, just a few doors away from you, at no. 49 which belonged to my grandparents, the Austins. If you look at the iron gate at the front you will see my grandfather's name, W. Austin. Soon after I was born, my parents and I moved half way up Necton Road to no. 19 where I spent twenty-one years of my life. After the death of my mother [Rene] I married and moved back to 49 which I rented from my mother's sister [Doris Austin] who by that time owned the house. I lived there for the next eleven years.

Happy memories of working on the railway

I worked there from 1955-7. As a child I always looked forward to my train rides and enjoyed watching the shunting of goods trucks in the yard. I first travelled to Luton with my parents to visit my father's parents once a week. As I became older I used the railway sometimes as often as once or twice a week to watch Luton Town play, or to attend Luton Technical College.

It was fantastic travelling by train in those days, so sad that they have gone now.

I only remember the railway in wartime vaguely. I remember the windows on the coaches and station being covered in tape and the glare from the open fire door when it was pitch dark.

Mr Lee was there when I was there, though he retired shortly afterwards and was replaced by Mr Briggs or Bridges. In the office there were three gentlemen: Cyril and Bob, whose surnames I cannot remember, and the head clerk, Maurice Munt. He was a character. The yard foreman was Charlie Smith. Harry was the yard cleaner. He used to be a guard until he lost the lower part of one of his legs in an accident. I believe he slipped and a wagon wheel went over his leg. Then there were the three porters and shunters:

Evelyn Hawkins, whose father Hugh was a platelayer, John Matthews and myself. John and I used to do alternate shifts each week. The late shift from 12.00 till 9.00 p.m. meant that we took over the ticket office until the last passenger train at 9.00 p.m.

Mr Lee was a lovely man, well known and liked by everybody. He was a good boss and a true gentleman, also very much involved with the church.

Topping up the oil lamps

My personal happiest memory was travelling on the foot-plate of the Saturday morning goods train to the level crossing gate at Leasey Bridge Lane. There I would top up the oil lamps on the signals, clean them and then enjoy a lovely walk back to the station. You can picture the countryside and hearing the birds singing. It was wonderful.

NORMAN PAYNE

To school by train

My earliest recollection of travel on the line was just before the last war, when instead of stepping into the carriage I slipped down between it and the platform at Luton causing a minor panic with Mum and Auntie.

My mother was the youngest of three sisters educated at East Hyde School (now the Village Hall) who used the railway to work in Luton. As young mothers they travelled between their homes using the Luton Hoo, Harpenden East and Welwyn Garden City stations with the pram in the guard's van.

I started at the brand new Manland School in Harpenden at the outbreak of war in September 1939. The route from the Lower Luton Road went under the railway subway and

across a meadow to a kissing gate. I enjoyed endless games of cricket with the Aldridge boys from station house in that meadow which was grazed by two horses who pulled carts to move coal from the station to nearby tomato-growing nurseries, also to the Almagam Rubber factory across the Pickford Bridge.

Until old enough to cycle, we often visited my auntie in Welwyn Garden City by train and enjoyed the bluebell woods near Welwyn golf course. My father was an LMS signalman two and a half miles towards Luton. Our family was entitled to cheaper "privilege" tickets, provided these were purchased about fifteen minutes before the train was due. Often we had to sprint to the station whose staff we knew, particularly Mr Stanley Munt, signalman and pillar of Batford Methodist Church, and the Aldridges (Mr Aldridge was a relief signalman) at Station House.

I often visited Mr Munt's "box" close to Station Road bridge and learnt the tablet system of operating the single line steam railway. Whereas my father had four tracks as well as sidings in his "superior" box at Chiltern Green with upwards of 80 trains in an eight hour shift, the Dunstable-Hatfield stretch had perhaps ten trains a day, so Mr Munt was able to do letter-writing in his capacity as Trades Union Secretary and Church Secretary while at work, and to chat with passers-by.

One morning I was in the box when the post lady delivered a long-awaited letter from Mr Munt senior, a prisoner-of-war with the Japanese – a moving occasion.

In addition to cleaning the windows and levers, a black-leaded stove for cooking and heating was always kept glistening clean.

This railway was particularly busy in the 1940s and 1950s with commuters to Luton and "Welgar". Workmen's tickets were sold for early morning travel to King's Cross. I cannot recall "special" trains, except for an occasional train for

Luton Town football supporters (or opponents) which went straight to the siding near the Kenilworth Road ground. Tanks made at Vauxhalls presumably came through with other wartime equipment and munitions (much more tonnage used the LMS line through Harpenden.)

I witnessed the poignant departure one summer evening of a local soldier after a weekend leave. Thankfully he survived the war.

In the summer of 1949 or 1950, I was at school in St Albans when the all-timber Ayot Station burnt down. Ten years or so later, when working in London at the British Rail Estate Depot I discovered that a colleague lived at Ayot Station house. By this time rubbish trains from London were emptying at Blackbridge Tip. The railway was operated by a few small tank engines which number-spotters of steam locos soon "capped". These were replaced by diesels. Two or three times when I was a London commuter this route was used as an alternative way home.

One pleasurable use of the line was to accompany my girl friend home from her Luton school.

I worked for an estate agent in Luton. Mondays being rent-collecting day, I took my bike on the train from Harpenden to Dunstable town and collected first in that area, then afterwards in Luton. The full rail fare in the mid-1950s was only a few shillings.

Another pleasing use of Harpenden East Station was to send off a parcel of my army uniform on completion of National Service!!

OWEN OWEN (born 1926)

Life at the Marford crossing keeper's cottage

Owen lived at the Marford Gate House, where his mother was crossing keeper, from 1939 until 1955. His recollections were taped

by John Giles following a visit to the site of his old home in the summer of 1994. The following are some edited extracts.

An ideal place to bring up youngsters. It kept us off the streets. A lovely place to live as a teenager! A marvellous playground, a mile from the village and a quarter of a mile from the nearest house, the Lamb's farm. A very enjoyable place to live in. It brings back very happy memories. I've no regrets about living there at all. It was a very safe place to live then.

There were wooden blocks that kept the rails on the sleepers. Workmen would walk along the line at regular intervals checking them and giving the blocks a bang with a wooden hammer. They used to shrink with the dry weather. Apart from that it was generally very quiet.

The disused gravel pit with ponds used to make a nice hunting ground for rabbits, and there was a very lovely view of the river winding in the distance making a figure of eight. I'd lean over the fence on a Saturday afternoon looking at the river and think, "I don't fancy going out." But I knew that if I was going to find a wife she was not going to come up to the house looking for me. I'd have to go out looking for her. I did eventually find my wife, Olga, in St Albans. I'm very pleased I was that much adventurous.

The dump

The rubbish dump was a big valley when we first arrived in 1939, then later when filled in with rubbish the land rose to a height of 40 feet.

A mixed blessing, the dump. It was dangerous, glass all over the place. How our poor dog didn't get cut, I don't know. He used to get bitten by rats now and then. That used to make him very fierce.

The dump did used to get set alight from time to time.

Whether this was internal combustion or sparks from the trains I don't know. The fires used to burn for weeks on end. Sometimes we'd help to put them out. They'd leave a big hollow and you'd be walking along and fall in if you weren't careful.

The watchman would chase us off if he saw us but he turned a blind eye to us taking a bit of wood. A lot of the rubbish was from bombed out buildings in London, and there were plenty of bedsteads made of good pine. We made a shed out of some of it. We were glad of the tomatoes, rhubarb and marrows that grew from the peelings and waste on the dump, as well as the wild elderberries and crab apples.

There were a lot of flies. We'd have to get the flit gun out before a meal and use that on them. We'd have to sweep them all up and get them out before we could eat.

There were loads of rats, hundreds of rats. Some of the dump went back to the 1920s. We used to go ratting. You'd take a stick like a hockey stick. It's very difficult to catch a rat in the open.

We found a rat in the kennel once. It must have made friends with the dog.

We went rabbiting too. Part of our food was rabbits. We'd put snares out for them. You were allowed to catch rabbits in any month with an "r" in it. We once saw fifty rabbits dead from mixematosis. We used to put them out of their misery with a blow to the neck. After the mixematosis I've never caught rabbits again.

The garden

We had a well in our garden. I used to love the cold water that came out of the well. We used to wind the handle and get the water up.

The garden supplied us quite well, and we were always

feeding it leaf loam. It needed a lot of feeding because it was on gravel. We grew carrots, potatoes, beetroot, onions and runner beans in the garden. My mother would salt down the beans and we stored other vegetables in sand and ashes to feed us in the winter.

Shopping and special supplies, courtesy of the railway

Mother had a pass to go along the line from the village station to the house. This meant she didn't have to go along the rough old lanes and farmer's fields. It was a tedious job shopping and carrying the paraffin for the lamps. Mother would have one can a hundred yards ahead, a shopping bag somewhere else. We'd meet her and complete the operation.

There was a lot of coal dropped around the gate house area. We were grateful for this gift from the railway. With our straight chimney we could burn anything.

Once a 140lb bag of oats fell off the train. We tidied it up for them. We had oats for breakfast for months. The dirty oats went to the chickens.

Domestic arrangements

There was no electricity and we used paraffin lamps for lighting. The wick goes funny sometimes and soot goes all around the house. All the cobwebs go black. I've had a few distressing times like that. After the war we got a petrol driven generator with two 12 volt batteries, so had 24 volt electricity in the house. This enabled us to have a semi rotary pump put down the well, so we had a supply of cold water to the house. We'd have to charge the batteries up once a week.

There was no sewerage or mains water, and eventually the well got contaminated so that we weren't allowed to use it. The water table got contaminated by chemicals from the

dump and we couldn't use well water, even after boiling it. The train used to stop every two days and a three foot high churn of water would be delivered from the guard's van. Very heavy. Since the cottage belonged to the railway, I suppose it was up to them to supply us with water. It was not as good as the well water, but it saved us carrying water up the lane from the farm house.

Bathing

There was no bathroom or toilet in the house. The toilet was quite a few yards from the house on a hill. The bath was hung up on a hook on the wall in the kitchen. It was a big bungalow bath. We had to get two baths out of each bathful. Rain water was kept in a tank and filtered through a pair of Mum's stockings. The water was lovely and soft and there was plenty of lather after the second person had used the water.

Mother did all the cooking by fire and the washing was done by hand. We got all the wood we wanted from the countryside. Mother worked very hard. Eventually we had calor gas for cooking. The cylinders were kept under the stairs and lasted six or seven weeks.

We had a cupboard five and a half foot high and five foot wide and two foot deep. It was full of jams and puddings. Everything for a rainy day: blackberries, strawberries, marrow jam and salted runner beans in big jars. Hoarding was not allowed, really, but mother looked after us well.

Letters in a rabbit hole

It was quite a rough lane and could get into a terrible state, even in summer, where the trees hung over it. The only time it was level was during the war when the tanks came up to practise and made the lane nice and smooth for us for a few

months. The Home Guard did their training round there. The soldiers were very grateful for the water from our well.

The postman didn't like coming all the way up to the gatehouse. We used to find letters in a rabbit hole. Milk was delivered to the farm where it was put into a box. We'd collect it from there.

Teeth on the track

We were really close. The track was about ten feet away, and there weren't many trains, only about six a day, so it was usually very quiet. Once we had a visitor when suddenly there was a tremendous noise and the pictures on the walls began to rattle. He was most alarmed. "Whatever is happening?" he asked. "It's only the train going by," we reassured him.

My mum used to have false teeth. She used to take them out and put them in her handkerchief and place them under the tablecloth at mealtimes. There was always a big lump there while we had our meals. After the meal she would take the cloth and shake out the crumbs over the railway line. Once she shook out the crumbs and there were her teeth on the track too! She had to climb over and get them back.

The crossing was levelled off with wood. That's why it was called a level crossing, I suppose. It made a lovely flat area for Mum to clean the carpet. She'd lay it on the line and beat it and sweep it. This was too dusty a job to do in the house. One day she had a bit of a scare and heard the train driver blow his whistle when she was in the middle of doing this job. She had to remove the carpet pretty quickly. If she'd left it there it would have been cut into three pieces and she could have used it on the stairs!

Did you use the trains much yourself?

We couldn't afford to go by train very much. We had push-bikes. It was quite a quick journey to Welwyn Garden City – only about twenty minutes – and lovely cycling through the woods. When it snowed we walked to Welwyn Garden City via Ayot Green. In those days if you didn't work you didn't get paid.

WALLY OVERMAN (born 1910)

Wally started work at the Dump for Inns and Company in 1935. He was made foreman the following year and stayed 43 years until the Dump was closed in 1978. The following is from notes of a conversation in 1987 with Ruth Jeavons when the History Group ran a competition which Wally won.

I've been mixed up in rubbish all my life. One day I hope to write a book on refuse disposal from the days of stone jars to the plastic sacks of today. There were usually about thirty people employed at the gravel pit and on the Dump. They were paid by piece work, and each took a proportion of the profit. We were paid 7 shillings a truck and there were 22 trucks a day. So we earned 154 shillings a day, or £7 14 shillings between 14 people.

I had some wonderful people working for me over the years. One of the best was Jimmy Wright who had a heart attack on the Dump and died there. [Editor's note: Jimmy was aged 90.] One of the worst experiences of my life was when I had to go and tell his wife. Two I will name were Leslie Rolf and Clary Field. Les's father, Uncle Tom, whom they called "Moke", looked after the rural District Council's refuse which was brought in by what they called a mechanical horse, a three-wheeled vehicle. Also, Mr Stapleton [who kept the grocer's store on the site where Dillon's now is] had a horse and wagon to collect the local refuse.

Of course, the main job was emptying 22 railway trucks a day by hand. Eventually we used mechanical grabbers. Other names were the Latchford brothers, Tom and Will, also known as "Stomper", and "Tiddle" Monk from Nomansland. Denny Warren was what they called the tool nipper whose job it was to get the tools ready for Monday.

There were some heavy drinkers among those who dug up the gravel. The licensees of the Red Lion [now no longer in existence, but once on the site of the present post office in Station Road] used to keep a score for them. They would allow the bill to mount up to £5, which was something when beer was a penny a pint. You used to have to phone up the Railway Hotel or the Wicked Lady or the Red Lion to find out where the men were.

Produce from the Dump

We collected some lovely flowers from the Dump. I used to win first and second prizes at the Flower Show with them. We got new potatoes earlier from the Dump than anywhere else. The peelings from the refuse would sprout as it was so hot. The tomatoes were good there too. During the second world war we grew a lot of mustard.

Sweet water from the well

They had to dig down 150 feet to get the water. When it was analysed by a sanitary inspector, he said it was perfect, though three degrees warmer than normal.

Birdwatching

We used to see some wonderful wildlife there: gold finches, linnets, and so on. Peter Scott's father used to come to watch the birds there. I think that was where Peter Scott got keen on

birds. They'd collect a hundred stale bread loaves from the local bakers on a Monday, scatter it about to attract the birds, then fire rockets with nets attached to trap the birds for ringing. Once they caught a seagull which had already been ringed. They could tell it had travelled 3,000 miles from Spitzbergen.

Bombs

The dump was used during the second world war as a site for detonating unexploded bombs. One afternoon a six to seven foot tall bomb was brought over from Bishop's Stortford and detonated. The blast shattered the windows in Reg Field's fish and chip shop in the High Street. Strangely, the windows of the workmen's huts on the Dump remained intact.

On another occasion we had the first intact land mine to be found locally. It had been dropped by the Germans on Luton Airport but got caught up on the roof of an aircraft hangar by its parachute. It contained 8 cwt of explosive. When that went off it made no more noise than a double-barrelled shot-gun, but it melted the stones.

JEANNE TEMPLETON

Jeanne and her sister, Peggy, sent in the two following accounts which we are printing in full.

Travelling from Wheathampstead to London in the 1950s

When my sister, Peggy Slater, and mother arrived in Wheathampstead from old Stevenage in 1954 the close proximity of an efficient public transport system had been a vital consideration in the great house hunt. There was no family car, but the bus stop was on our garden wall and

Wheathampstead station was a quick dash across the almost empty road. At that time I was living and working south of the Thames. To get back to work after a weekend at home I started my journey on Monday morning by catching the workmen's train for a very small amount of money and arriving in Kent in good time to start the day at 9.00 a.m. (Passengers travelling after 7.0. a.m. paid the full fare.)

The main function of our rail link, as well as passenger transport, was the transfer of crated automotive parts from Vauxhall's at Luton to the then thriving docks on Merseyside. The trains in 1954 were still steam. A plume of white smoke was far more picturesque and certainly less noxious than the acrid black fumes of the early diesel locos. Less romantic were the days when the whole garden and house were enveloped in smoke. We soon learnt to keep laundry indoors when there was a south wind blowing.

This was before the days of oil or gas-fired central heating so the coal yard opposite our house, in the space now occupied by the social club and its approaches, was always busy with supplies being brought in by train and transferred to stockpiles and thence to lorries for delivery to domestic and other customers.

In the night the routine muffled sounds of clanking railway stock were soon easy to accept and less startling than the sudden screech of brakes and tinkling glass at the roundabout, or the flashing of blue lights under one's window during a breathalyser check.

In 1958, after a change of job, I came to live at home and commute to London. The last train out of Kings Cross was at 6.30 p.m. This could not only seriously affect the possibility of working overtime, but would have seriously restricted one's social life. However, there was the great boon of a two-destination season ticket. This allowed you to travel from Kings Cross to Wheathampstead and also to use the "Bedpan" route to Harpenden, though by some strange rule

you were not supposed to alight at St Albans. Buses were reliable, though of course, not frequent. However, with careful planning it was rare to miss the last bus!

The stationmaster and porter were always helpful. From our house a good time check was the sound of the whistle blowing at the Folly Halt. On hearing this I would slam the front door loudly, then make plenty of noise pounding along to the station and up the wooden stairs, urged along by cries from the platform of "Hold it, Joe! There's another one coming!", and reassured by "Don't worry! Plenty of time, my dear!" and such like. Somehow the train was never late at the other end.

The journey to the Garden City was a delight – sometimes high on the embankment overlooking fields and meadows with strutting pheasants and early morning rabbits, sometimes along flat track between the conifers. A favourite journey for commuters and shoppers alike.

For some time the line was still complete, although only sleepers and clinker remained. My weirdest memory is of being woken one night by unfamiliar sounds. Opening the curtains I was dazzled by car headlights blazing down along the track from the Luton direction with rifle fire rending the air. The characters involved later claimed they were out shooting rabbits to feed their pet puma. Those were the days!

The saddest day I've known in Wheathampstead (apart from the destruction of Town Farm) was the day when we all turned out to watch them dismantling the bridge.

PEGGY SLATER

A winter night stranded on the train

My mother and I moved into the village in 1954 when we bought Sunny Cottage, Lower Luton Road. We had no car and I was working in London, so the immediate access to the

station was a deciding reason for the purchase of the property.

Mr Munt and his porter were always most helpful, and the final part of the homeward journey from Welwyn Garden City was always so pleasant, particularly at bluebell time.

However, the most interesting and amusing incident – though it did not appear so at the time – was when, during one severe winter, the line from Welwyn Garden City was blocked by snowdrifts. The train arrived from London at Welwyn Garden City where the usual local train was waiting on the next platform. An announcement was made after some delay that the line was blocked and the train could not proceed. We were advised to ring for taxis or cars, or, for those living at Batford, Harpenden and beyond to take the next train back to London and then try the St Pancras line to Harpenden. Some of the Harpenden people did this, but by that time conditions had become so bad that no buses, cars or taxis were running. The remaining passengers in the waiting room held a conference and decided that the Station Master, who had completely disappeared, be sent for and asked what arrangement he intended to make for us.

In truly democratic fashion we elected a spokesman. The flustered stationmaster duly arrived and was informed that we were cold, hungry and tired and demanded action. In the end it was agreed that he send over to the pub for sandwiches, mugs of hot tea or beer, that the train in the station be kept with the engine running all night to provide heating, and that we could sleep on the train.

In the morning conditions had improved and the snowdrift had been cleared. Some passengers rang their homes and went straight back to London to work. Others, including myself, as I had an elderly mother, decided to go home and have a wash and tidy up before returning to work in London.

I must add that afterwards there were some whispers in the village. What happened in the train that night?

DICK RICHARDSON

Dick phoned to tell us of his recollections of travelling on the line as a commuter in the late nineteen-fifties. He travelled in both directions, first up to London, then from Hatfield to Luton, going to work for the Legal and General Insurance Company.

Steak and kidney pie, one shilling and ninepence

It was a very pleasant journey. The old first class rolling stock was very comfortable indeed with its red and blue velvet plush. It took half an hour from Hatfield to Bute Street, Luton. I remember that the station at Bute Street had an excellent refreshment bar run by a really buxom lady. You could enjoy a steak and kidney pie with sweet and coffee all for one shilling and ninepence.

Except at Harpenden East and the Ayot loop, the line was single track. The signalman had to pass a key to the driver to allow the train into the sections of double track to avoid collisions. This was a metal stick with a circle at the end kept in a small leather case. On one occasion, I remember, it was dark and had been snowing very heavily and we were waiting for the train from Welwyn Garden City to Wheathampstead. The signalman dropped the key in the snow. There were two drivers, two guards and the signalman all looking for this key in the snow. It took them some time to find it.

I was very sorry when Dr Beeching chopped the railway here.

ANN BURGESS (née Parsons)

The following reminiscences were sent to the History Group from Australia in the spring of 1994 at the start of our enquiries. They offer a graphic and lyrical account of the pleasures of travelling along the line at Wheathampstead and we print them in full.

I used the train to travel to and from Wheathampstead and Welwyn Garden City during the period from 1959-1965 when I worked at Smith Kline and French laboratories and then Markem (UK) Ltd. I can recall attending a meeting in Welwyn Garden City concerning the closure of the railway line. Everyone thought the closure was inevitable.

Train journeys through the seasons

The best way to remember travelling by steam train is to do it by seasons. The winter months of fluctuating punctuality of the train – points frozen again – in the early mornings, and the carriage windows opaque with ice. Having to breathe on the ice and wipe away a hole with gloved hands, just to get one's whereabouts. The intense cold and carriage bench seats full of heavily clad people taking up more room than usual. The leather window straps worn by many hands over the years being quite stiff with the coldness. The uncertainty as to how long the delay at Ayot Station would be for the oncoming train to pass. Would this make me late for work?

The evening ride home was more relaxed and it was a welcoming sight to see the Wheathampstead station porter standing in the gloom on the platform with his lantern.

Spring was wonderful. Looking down from the train onto and across the hedged fields turning grass green after a long winter. Seeing the first daffodils and bluebells show their colours. The once bare trees beginning to come into leaf. Watching the rabbits enjoy the sunshine. It was a more relaxed and peaceful journey in the spring time. However, we were sometimes delayed because a cow was on the line.

Summer months. "Can we have the window down at last to let in some air?" A fresh morning followed by a warm dusky evening. People wearing summer clothes with much more room on the bench seats. Everyone more carefree and

thinking of holidays. Regular passengers disappearing for two or three weeks then reappearing with tales of foreign climes.

Autumn and the trees along the line are changing colour – oh! so soon. The first chilly morning and someone's tardy footsteps pounding up the wooden steps to the platform echoing. Then a mist, then a fog and Autumn has arrived.

Wheathampstead station was operated as a tight ship. The platform had character and I always thought how sterile the Welwyn Garden City station looked in comparison. The platform was always neat and tidy and looked attractive with shrubs and plants.

I can remember the ticket-cum-porter-cum everything. His name was Mr Monk, I think. Was it Ted? When he retired from duty we all made a collection for him and presented him with a watch. He always had a warm stove going in the waiting room which was welcome on cold days, and if the train was going to be really late he always made me a cup of tea!

Living at Station House

My mother (Mrs Lily Parsons) took up a position as Mr Lee's housekeeper for a couple of years from about 1946. She and I lived at Station House during that time. The house seemed large to me and the garden immense with wonderful banks of lilac trees next to the platform which had a profusion of blooms in the spring.

My bedroom had two windows, one which looked along the Harpenden (now Lower Luton) Road and the other which looked across the Codicote Road to the horse chestnut trees which also arched across the road to Gustard Wood. These trees were always a delight to me as they changed from sticky bud to flowering candle and finally conker.

The house had no bathroom and the outside toilet was

always cold and unwelcoming. There was electricity downstairs but upstairs in the bedrooms there were "fishtail" gas lights on the walls. As a child I used to love watching the different shapes these strange lights made on the walls.

The door at the bottom of the staircase led from our living room and I can vividly recall Mr Lee carrying a candle as he climbed the stairs to retire for the night. Since he had to be on duty early in the morning, this routine never occurred after 9.00 p.m.

Mr Lee

Mr Lee was a very quiet and private man with an air of aloofness about him, and folk found him difficult to get to know. However, I, as a child, did not discern this and always chatted away fearlessly to him. He used to paint posters for football matches and other special occasions, and he taught me to paint. He also encouraged me to write stories. I used to get some of them published in the children's Corner section of the Herts Advertiser.

Mr Lee played the organ at St Helen's for the Sunday services, arriving at church on his trusted bicycle. During these absences my mother and I would go into his study, which was strictly out of bounds, and she played the organ, while I played the piano. We were never detected!

KAY SHARPE

Kay worked as a booking clerk at Wheathampstead station in 1941, travelling from Horn Hill, Whitwell, where she and her husband then lived, to arrive at Wheathampstead for the start of her duties at 9.00 every morning. She would have to walk from Whitwell to Kimpton, then catch the bus to Wheathampstead.

Kay remembers the station as rather a primitive wholly wooden structure lit by old fashioned tilley lamps at a time when electricity was available. (Kay campaigned briefly and unsuccessfully for electricity.) It was one of her jobs to keep these lamps topped up with paraffin. The ticket office was up the stairs on the lamp-lit platform, and it was common for little splashes of lighted meths to fall on the work of the ticket and goods clerks. It was also common for passengers arriving at the station after dark to kick down the steps the lantern that stood by the ticket collector. Considering the risks, we were lucky that Wheathampstead station did not catch fire and burn down like the station at Ayot.

The service was friendly and unhurried. Train drivers would call out to passengers scurrying over the bridge telling them to hurry up as the train was waiting for them. Goods sent by rail specially for Wheathampstead included fish for Mr Field's fish shop in the High Street – where Village Videos now is. Otherwise Vauxhall Motors were the major users of the railway link, transporting spare parts and cars to London. Once a week a train known as the Dustcart Special would trundle down from London bringing rubbish to the tip at Blackbridge.

The fare to Welwyn Garden City in those days was fourpence halfpenny, and the rush hour fare to London for those travelling before 8.00 a.m. was cheaper than if you travelled later. (The opposite of the logic of the present British Rail pricing system for commuters whereby one pays more for the privilege of standing on a crowded train in the rush hour.) There was a special train to Leighton Buzzard on Saturdays which fishermen would take so that they could try their luck in the canal. One of Kay's own favourite journeys with her husband, Valentine, was to Hertford. They would take their bicycles in the guard's van and cycle on from Hertford to Broxbourne.

As to particular memories of passengers, Kay well remem-

bers Bernard Shaw and the economy of his Christmas tip for all station staff. Thirty shillings. Between four or five staff, this did not go far. In fact Kay could not recollect ever having her share!

A wartime memory was of the gas masks which were "everlastingly being left on the train by the two children from the Swan". Kay would have to tell their father to come and collect them. "There wasn't a war in this village", Kay says.

They should never have closed the railway, in Kay's opinion. She was sorry to see the station closed. She and her husband campaigned against the bypass, thinking it a waste of time spending money on roads. Ironically, Mr Lee was knocked down by a car while crossing the road opposite Kay's present house in the Marford Road.

ANTHONY AND MARGARET GOBBY

Neil wrote us a letter following the appearance of our article and questionnaire in the Parish Pump in the Spring of 1994.

The railway was a critical factor in our moving here as Margaret needed it for work. In the beginning she travelled to Dunstable where she worked at Vauxhall Motor's Accessories Department. Later, when she worked at Finefare, she travelled daily to Welwyn Garden City. She did this until they closed the line. Travelling by steam train was comfortable and perfectly natural. We took it for granted. Had we known what was to come in the future we would have treasured every mile!

The views across the countryside are our happiest memory – the wildlife at the side of the track, completely unconcerned.

Wartime memories of "Wheezy Anna"

I lived in Luton during the war, in Mill Street, about a quarter of a mile from Bute Street station. The line was at the bottom of our back yard. The traffic seemed to be mostly goods, and a lot of shunting went on. In those days we had British summertime and I was put to bed around 7 p.m., but it was broad daylight 'til ten p.m. It was not easy to get to sleep while the shunting was going on 70 feet from my window! There was one engine which we named Wheezy Anna on account of its noise.

Often trains stopped opposite us for ages, and on one occasion our cat returned from the hunt with a packet of sandwiches which she had taken from the guard's van. We often pictured his face when he wanted his lunch and couldn't find it.

From 1945 I went to Dunstable Grammar School. There were often bus strikes or the weather was too bad for the bus to run and then I went to Dunstable North from Bute Street. One treasured memory was when I was coming home one day. I slammed the door shut by pulling on the window strap but had to lean out to do so and too late found my thumb was in the door hinge. That was the day I taught myself to swear!

I can honestly say that over all these years I have never stopped missing the train.

**WELCOME ABOARD FOR A BRIEF EXCURSION INTO THE SMOKY
PAST OF WHEATHAMPSTEAD'S RAILWAY DAYS!**

**“The engines were painted in apple green and inscribed G.N.R. ...
Passenger carriages were stained a rich mahogany colour and brightly
varnished.”**

**“When a driver went through a long tunnel ... he couldn't tell whether
he was on or off the track, so thick was the smoke and so dark the
tunnel.”**

**“The journey to the Garden City was a delight – with strutting
pheasants and early morning rabbits.”**

From September 1860 until April 1965, Wheathampstead enjoyed the use of its own railway station on a branch line with a direct route to London. Everything from cattle to water cress, and straw hats to fish, not to mention people, was transported to and from the village by rail.

Here is an anthology of voices, some from far back in time, others more recent, recalling those days and the pleasures and benefits of having our own railway system. Nurse Hawkins, the village midwife over fifty years ago, speaks of travelling up to London in her youth for midwifery training in the East End. More recently there are accounts of living in a crossing keeper's cottage within ten feet of the track; of being stranded, unable to reach home because of snow drifts on the line; of the station with its old-fashioned tilley lamps and well-kept shrubbery and its station master of twenty-two years, Mr Gerald Lee, “a railwayman of the old school, always punctual, reliable and courteous”.

The local history group presents this collection in the hope that readers will enjoy the authenticity and directness of the contributions, also that they will be inspired by hearing such reminiscences as are here recorded to tell us more about Wheathampstead's past for future generations to savour.

Cover illustrations: Wheathampstead station, c. 1905, the official G.N.R. postcard, and, below, the Bolding family in the garden at the back of the Railway Hotel, c. 1908.