

WHEATHAMPSTEAD

The people of Wheathampstead station



Pre 1916

Wheathampstead station opened on September 1st 1860. It was a grand occasion with a fete in Rectory Meadow, music from the Hertfordshire Yeomanry and refreshments provided by the innkeeper of *The Swan*.

It is hard to imagine the impact the new railway had on a small rural community where the only form of transport had been the horse and cart. Ordinary people rarely

travelled more than a few miles from home, and fresh food was limited to what could be grown locally.

With the railway came business as well as the freedom to travel further than people had ever imagined. Everyone could now have easy access to coal for their fires, fresh fish was available from Yarmouth, industries could transport raw materials and finished goods. Older residents of the village, whose reminiscences were recorded in the 1960s, had vivid memories of Sunday school outings from the station. There were day excursions to Hunstanton, Skegness, Yarmouth, Lowestoft, Clacton and London.



Late 1940s

The train service was popular with anglers and with golfers on their way to play at Gustard Wood. In 1901, the GNR sold special golfers' tickets from London to Wheathampstead and return for one and a quarter times the full cost, on production of a voucher at the booking office. The St Helen's school logbook records several instances of children being punished for playing truant to "play golf".



1965

In later years commuters went to work in offices in London or the factories in Luton.

Some famous passengers

Perhaps the best-known passenger was the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856 – 1950) who lived at Ayot St Lawrence and walked or cycled to the station. The story goes that he was often late for the London train and that his chauffeur would drive ahead to warn the stationmaster, who would hold the train until Mr Shaw arrived.



1955

The photograph shows a "Special" train calling at Wheathampstead that took visitors on a day excursion from London to Ayot St Lawrence on October 2nd, 1955.

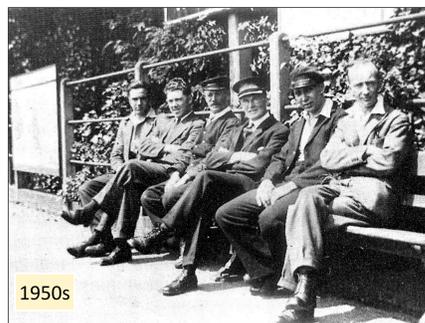
Apsley Cherry Garrard (1886 – 1959), polar explorer and author of "The Worst Journey in the World", lived at Lamer, a mile from the station, and was also well-known for arriving at the station at the last minute, throwing his fare onto the counter at the booking office, rushing up the steps and jumping into a carriage whose door was being held open by a porter.

For many more stories and anecdotes about the railway, see "Wheathampstead Railway Recollections", published by Wheathampstead Local History Group in 1995. There is a copy in the village library.



Station staff

The station offered a variety of jobs, including stationmaster, porter, booking clerk, signalman, and goods yard worker, as well of course as engine driver, fireman and guard. The first stationmaster was 30-year-old Harry Honeyball who came from Somerset. He lived in the stationmaster's house with his wife Ann and children Henrietta, Jane, James and Emma.



1950s

Mr Lee is seated third from the right in the photograph (above) faithfully reconstructed by members of the project team for the re-opening of the platform in 2010.



1956

This photograph (right), taken in the early 1950s, shows (left to right) John 'Dickie' Dawes, an engine driver, with fellow-workers Joe Payne, Jack Richardson and A.J. Wilson. Dickie Dawes' family still live in the village and Dickie's wife Brenda officially opened the restored platform in 2010.



William Bolding and family (left) ran the Railway Hotel from 1912 to 1919. They are seated in the courtyard of the hotel and the station platform is behind them up on the bank.



A 1950s fancy dress parade is shown on the right starting at the station entrance.

This site is as important to our village's history as the Grade I Listed St Helen's Church and the Corn Mill listed in the Domesday Book. It is a significant stop on the Wheathampstead Heritage Trail and part of a longer walk along the Ayot Greenway — the course of the railway towards Hatfield.

The volunteers

The restoration was completed by volunteers with support from the Parish Council and local businesses. For a fuller list, see the next panel. More than 50 villagers have given time to the project since 2009.



Restoring the platform

The line closed in 1965 and the station remained forgotten for more than 40 years until, in the autumn of 2009, a group of volunteers decided to investigate.



The site was overgrown with ivy and saplings which had damaged both the platform structure and also the magnificent trees surrounding the site. With the support of the Parish Council, volunteers set about restoring the platform and site so it could be used as a public amenity.



The photograph above shows members of the crew of HMS St Albans helping to clear the site in 2009.



What you see today is the result of hard work by a dedicated group of villagers. Access to the site is difficult so all materials have to be manhandled by the team. Each of the large slabs forming the platform edge weighs half a ton. Half of these had to be lifted from the track bed, repositioned, or reconstructed from fragments.

Fourteen new slabs were cast in position; all the raw materials were carried up to the site and mixed by hand. The tracks, sleepers and wagon were lifted onto the site by crane and 6 tons of ballast for the line was carried up by the bucketfull.

Every care has been taken to ensure historical accuracy. To give the right "look and feel" to the platform, the colour scheme in use from the 1920s to the 1960s has been followed.

The addition of the section of track, the goods wagon and the shelter adds to the impression of how the station would have looked. For more information on the wagon and Permanent Way, see the other panels.



2011