

The Life and Times
of
WILLIAM GEORGE WALBY
of
Hatfield
Hertfordshire

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Frank J. Cox
23 Home Meadow
Welwyn Garden City
Herts
AL7 3BA

for

Hatfield Local History Society

WILLIAM GEORGE WALBY

I was born on the 22nd October 1909 in No. 4 Gun Cottages, Wellfield Road. They were so named because on the corner of Wellfield Road and St. Albans Road was the Gun Inn run by a family named Canham.

Mother always said that the cottage was so small that she could almost open the front door while sitting in the kitchen. Dad was a fireman on the old Great Northern Railway. He later became a driver and retired in 1945. Before joining the railway at 18 years old he worked as a coachman for Dr. Drage.

Wellfield Road we knew as Union Lane, or colloquially Workhouse Lane because a little way down on the opposite side of the road was the Workhouse or Union. Each night there would be tramps coming for bed and food.

Soon I was joined by my sister Phyllis then by my brother Maurice. There was another sister, Grace, but she had died before I was born. She died of pneumonia at one year old.

We moved to No. 2 Swiss Cottages in the Third Right of Way off St. Albans Road. My sister recalls this as a three bedroomed house with a living room downstairs complete with a big open range fire with an oven and a front room which opened directly onto the Right of Way. We also had a scullery with an old copper which had to be lit when mother did her washing and a square back yard with a disused well in the middle. The toilet was along a passage into next door's yard. Next to this yard, where mother used to hang her washing, was a stable belonging to Hulks the baker who had a shop at the bottom in St. Albans road.

There were five Rights of Way that went from St. Albans Road to the Common, a track which extended from Wellfield Road to St. Albans Road joining it near the site where later the cinema was built.

I had lots of playmates in Wellfield Road. One lived in the Prince of Wales public house opposite the workhouse. There was a small shop on the corner of the Common where as naughty boys we bought 5 Woodbine cigarettes for 2d. There were not many cars on the road so we could use that as a playground. For a football we rolled up newspaper and tied it with string. We played marbles with the glass balls we got from lemonade bottles which we had broken. We also played skipping and whipping tops.

When I was five I started school at Countess Anne's School at the top of Back Street near the church. It was a long walk each way. Going down French Horn Lane with fields on the left then houses. On the right were allotments with a path to Gracemead Cottages. There was a big house hidden behind trees and a footpath to the Tennis Club. Next came a space where the Council kept their lorries and engines, then more allotments. Going down the hill there were the Glebe houses where Dad's mother and father lived. Next came the gas works where we loved to put our hands on the wall to feel the heat. Under the railway bridge the road then divided with Batterdale to the left. Here was the fire station. Across the Great North Road we came to Back Street (later renamed Church Street) which joined the North Road. Some-times we went through Salisbury Square and up the steps called Jacob's ladder to Back Street. At the fork under the bridge French Horn Lane continued to the right past the Wesleyan Chapel on the right. On the other side of the road was a room over a garage where we had our scouts meeting hall, the road joining the Great North Road by the Girls' School.

For a change we sometimes liked to come home a different way, up Brewery Hill, where we could see the men stoking up the fires, then over the railway by the footbridge where we could watch the trains go by. One interest was to see the men put a wagon onto a train in the platform. For this they used a horse to pull the wagon along. We then went along Bury Road by some allotments to join French Horn Lane. Dad had one of these allotments.

Our family increased with Nancy and Elizabeth. The Great War started in 1914. Dad signed on for the forces with other men who were all given armlets to signify that they had volunteered. Dad was not called up as the railways needed their workers.

We had some excitement one day when a plane came down in a field behind the Wrestlers Pub. It was an open framed plane with two wings and the propeller behind the pilot's seat. The pilot was hurt and was taken to St. Albans hospital by Mr. Canham, landlord of the Gun Inn, in a horse and trap.

Mum's brother, Bill, who lived in Dalston used to come down with his family for a few days to get away from the London bombing. Mum found them somewhere to sleep. The railway used to send out a knocker-up during the night to call up the men for early duties and he used to stand outside the house knocking on the window with his cane and calling "George Walby" until he got an answer. There were several railway men living near us. When Mum asked Uncle Bill if he had had a good night, he said "Yes, but someone was up making a speech during the night!"

One job I did for Dad was to collect horse droppings for the allotment and once while doing this there was the first daylight air raid. I saw the planes and heard the gunfire so quickly ran home! Another time there was a bomb dropped at Hertford and Dad took us over to see the damage.

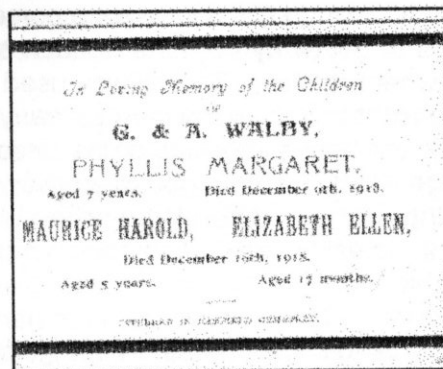
Another job was to help a baker deliver bread. I was paid the princely sum of a ha'penny. Our milkman asked Mum if I would collect acorns for his pigs. I managed to get half a pail full and he gave me a ha'penny. Mum was not pleased.

Between the first and second Rights of Way there was a mission hall which was used as a prisoner of war camp. After the war the Salvation Army took it over. Parties and concerts were often held there.

When the war was over we hoped for peace but disaster struck. We all went down with the 'flu. We lost Phyllis, Maurice and Elizabeth in one week just before Christmas. I remember looking out of our bedroom window to see them all being wheeled away on a bier. The doctor injected my sister and I. Possibly this saved us. How Mum managed with all this sorrow I shall never know.

Alan Cobham had some aeroplanes which, as his Air Circus, he took around the country. He also gave flights for five shillings each.

Dad took Nancy and I to the field up Briars Lane. Mum followed later. As there were only two seats Dad took Nancy up and I followed later with somebody else. It was grand, the wind from the propeller blowing through your hair and we were able to look over the side of the cockpit. When Mum got to the field she said "Where is Bill?" Dad pointed and said "Up there!" She nearly had a fit.



About this time a cousin on my mother's side from Tottenham used to come and stay with us. He writes:

"My father used to get one week's holiday a year. The factory where he worked closed down for a week in the summer with no pay, so there was little money to spare for a holiday as we know them today. Dad would usually spend the week painting the house.

"Fortunately for us we had Aunt Mary Anne and Uncle George living at Hatfield. Aunt Mary Anne was the eldest daughter of my mother's family, my mother being younger.

"We used to spend our Easter holiday at Hatfield. My mother and us boys would stay for two weeks, my father coming just at the weekends. We used to enjoy Hatfield which in the 1920s was quite a small village so everyone living there knew everyone else. The locals even knew us. The men working in the fields would know me as George Walby's nephew. Hatfield was a railway junction with railwaymen and farmers as inhabitants.

"I remember huge wheatfields and miles of open space. Such a contrast to our life in Tottenham.

"The farming machines and ploughs were worked by steam and horses, so there was plenty to interest small boys just up from 'Lunnon'

"As we arrived at Hatfield station, Aunt Mary Anne would meet us with an old pram borrowed from a friend. Cousin Nancy and a friend, sometimes Cousin Bill, would also be there. Such a lot of excitement, then we would all trail along the road in a great crowd.

"Uncle George was a driver on shift work. He would be woken up by a knocker-up when it was time to get up. The knocker-up used to have a long pole with which he could tap on Uncle's bedroom window. We used to wonder who woke up the knocker-up!

"Aunt Mary Anne had a firm belief that we never had any fresh air in Tottenham and spent our entire lives shut in dismal buildings, so when we eventually arrived at her house we were made to change out of our best clothes and go out into the fresh air.

"After a short while if we decided to creep indoors we would be met by a pointing finger and "OUT", so out we went all over Hatfield. We had some wonderful times, I had two friends at Hatfield and they would also be at the station to meet us.

"One of the events of our stay was to shop in St Albans. Aunt Mary Anne my mother, odd neighbours and my friends with several prams - quite an expedition. We would walk to St. Albans on market day. On the way home we would stop in a field, lay table cloths on the grass and eat sandwiches, home made cake and lemonade. We were always hungry.

"During one of our holidays at Hatfield, my father took us to see "the aeroplanes". This was at a flying club, the headquarters being a wooden hut on the edge of a field. Parked around the hut were the aeroplanes. We were allowed to touch them, bi-planes all canvas, wires and wooden struts. There was one mono-plane. The spectators were standing around very quiet just waiting for something to fly. Today on that same site stands the de Havilland factory.

"One of our favourite pastimes was to stand on the iron bridge spanning the railway line at Hatfield station. We had a wonderful view of the track. Uncle George used to spend some time with us on the bridge telling stories of the railway. He knew the names of all the drivers and firemen on the line which was of course the main line between Kings Cross and Edinburgh.

"From London going north to Hatfield there is a rising gradient. The trains sometimes would run non-stop to Scotland and it was a drivers ambition to reach 100mph at Hatfield, but it never quite happened. Going south under our bridge the speed often exceeded the 100.

"Uncle would explain how the fireman would be working very hard to pull down the fire. We could see this as the train flashed underneath us with a shower of sparks from the fire box. Steam would be shut down at Hatfield and the train would then freewheel to London

"The drivers always used the whistle when they saw us on the bridge. All very exciting for small boys. We would go home all dirty with soot and smoke.

"We were allowed to stay indoors when the weather was rough, but we used to enjoy this as we were allowed to play with my cousin's Meccano. As the years went by this became my favourite hobby. Cousin Bill had a large wooden box full of Meccano parts. There was so much of it, it was possible to make almost anything. We were completely enthralled and to my joy it was decided that we could take it home with us. I suppose that Bill was now too old to be interested."

I remember Hatfield Newtown. Going west from Wellfield Road there was the Gun Inn, a house, another house where Mr. Higgs the tennis player lived. A memorial was fitted on the wall of his garden until it was transferred to a new site by the station. Then came Newtown House, the White Lion public house, some cottages one of which was the sub post office and then Tingey's grocer shop and W. Hulks the baker. Some more houses led up to the Boar and Castle pub next to which Tingey had their furniture store until they built the Corner House opposite the Gun. There was another house and then the Robin Hood pub. Some more houses then a shop



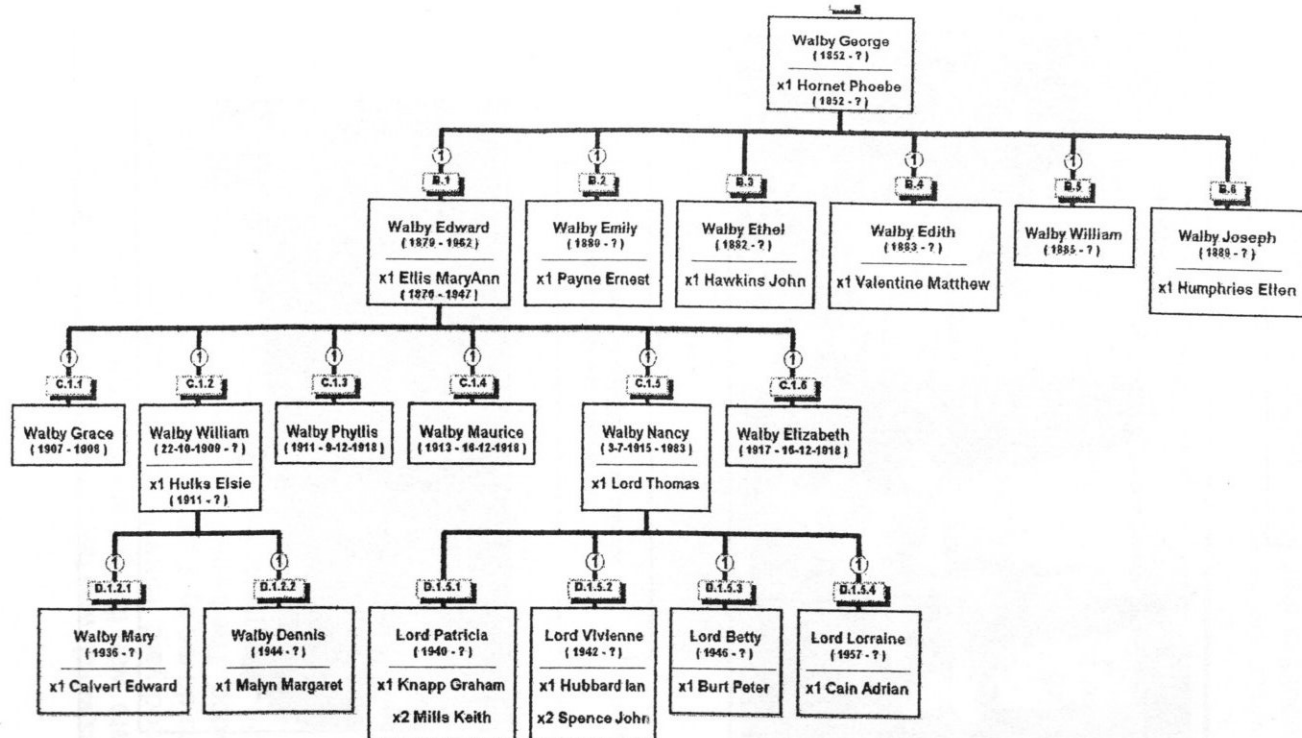
Dad with his potatoes...



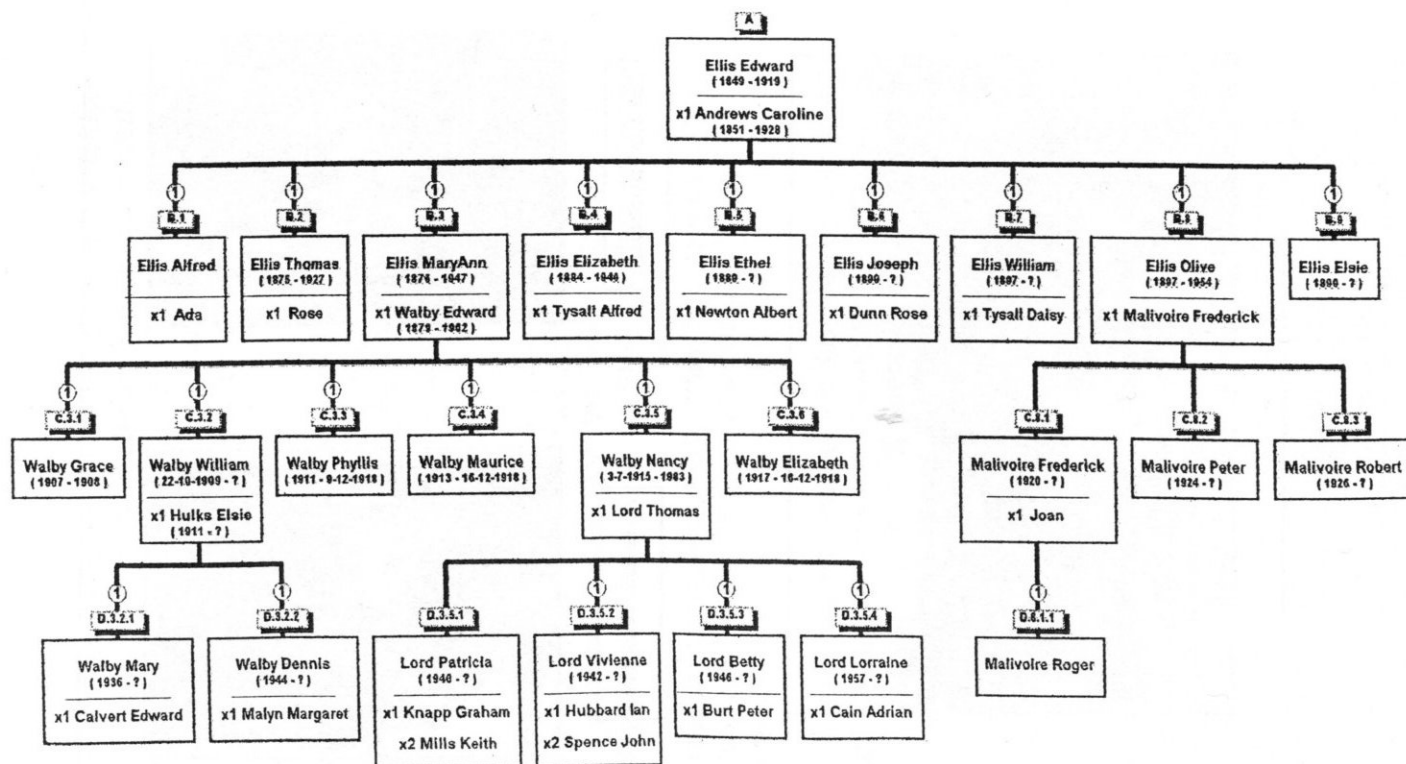
And Mum peeling them



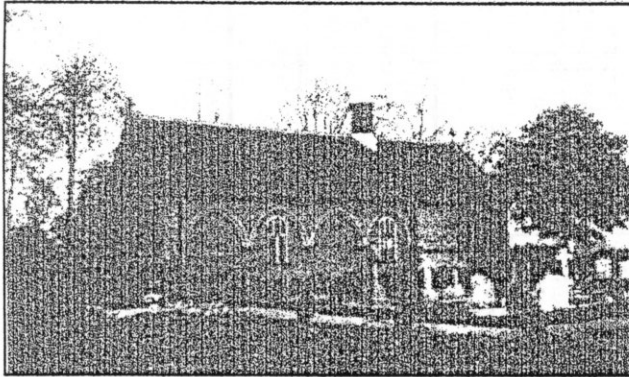
A Day at the Seaside
Dad - Mum - Bill
Nancy and cousin



Dad's Family Tree



Mum's Family Tree



St. Mary Magdalene Church, Hatfield Hyde
Where Bill and Elsie were married



May 1934

selling ladies clothes which was taken over by Marcus Walby as a butcher's. Then there was the entrance to the Common where Streaders had a wood yard. Here trees were cut into posts and planks. The saw was driven by a steam engine driven from a boiler fuelled with scrap wood. The trees were moved along to the saw by men turning a handle. Allotments were on the land leading up to Lemsford Road.

On the opposite side of the road from Lemsford Road was Briars Lane and returning to Newtown we had our recreation field. We used to play on the German field gun which was there. Gracemead Cottages came next then allotments all the way to French Horn Lane. The street lights were lit by gas and a man came round with a long pole each evening to light them and then later to put them out. They were not on all night.

As I grew up I went behind the police station sat an exam. at place at Hertford Some other school there, Dereckther had a mens' town and Sid Rum-the electrical firm. I Whilst there I joined Corps. Our uniforms with puttees. We paid and once, Prince Wales, came to Hertford hospital and we formed a



to the senior school behind School Lane. At 13 I Hertford and won a Grammar School. mates were also Chapman whose outfitting shop in the below who built up stayed until I was 16. the Officer Training were old fashioned raged each Armistice Edward, then Prince of to open part of Hertford Guard of Honour.

I was confirmed and attended services at St. Etheldreda's Church. I also joined the scouts. One of our scout masters took us for a breakfast at a hotel after 8 o'clock services but he decided to buy us a trek cart, which we needed, instead of paying for our breakfasts. It was about this time that the Wembley Exhibition was held with a World Jamboree. We went there and camped in a field nearby. We were given free tickets for the exhibition with half price rides. One day Prince Edward visited and we all went into the Sta-

dium and sat on the grass. Now when I see pictures of Wembley Stadium I say "I sat there!"

The entertainment consisted of a film Hall near the station. projector so that at the lights went on the reel. In the time and the film they a song with a dot words. The music ano and we all joined also go to dances, in the same hall.



Officer Cadet W.G. Walby

we had at Hatfield show in the Public They had only one the end of each part while they changed between the news showed the words of bouncing along the was played on a pi-in and sang. We could whist drives or shows

I left school at 16 and got a job as a clerk at Welwyn Builders in Welwyn Garden City. For the next few years I had several jobs, moulder's mate, electrical apparatus assembly, printer's reader, cinema projectionist at the Regent cinema in St. Albans - until it burnt down - odd job man at St. Albans Theatre, postman at Hatfield and labourer at the tomato nursery at North Mymms. Then I started work at Murphy Radio first as a machinist then inspector. I progressed to estimator and time study man. I was also employed planning the layout of their factories when required.

By the time I was 18 the Council had taken over the old show ground on the St. Albans Road where the County Show used to be held, and built houses in a horse shoe that started from Ground Lane near the railway bridge and ended back in Ground Lane nearer the St. Albans Road. They became Stonecross Road and Clarkes Road. My parents were allocated one of these and it was great. We could have a bath in the bathroom and we had electric lights, a lovely garden with the sports field just over the fence where they played football, cricket and tennis. Dad's cousin Cis. who had married Sid. Payton from the butchers in Park Street, lived next door but one with her daughter Audrey.

It was on this sports field that my father played football for Hatfield and his team won a shield. I also played for Hatfield and later for Murphy Radio. I played cricket for Hatfield when our pitch was in

the park until the Stonecross Road field was available. After meeting my wife I played for Hatfield Hyde with her father and her two brothers.

I first met Elsie Hulks, my wife, while she was walking out with my friend Sid Mills. I was trying to make a go with the girls but no luck. One day I met Elsie and she said that she and Sid had parted so we decided to make a go of it.

She had been tage opposite St. church in Hatfield family were porters. Her father mother did all the ing, her sister was brother rang the organ. Her father man and gardener in Hyde House by the side of the church, for Mr. & Mrs. Kendall.



Church Cottage

born in Church Cot-Mary Magdalen Hyde. She and her staunch church sup-was verger, her cleaning and wash-in the choir and her bell and pumped the worked as coach-

We planned to get married so I went to the Council hoping for a house but with no success. Anyway we were married in May 1934 at Hatfield Hyde and were going to live with my parents. We told the Council of our intention and they said that they would fit me in and within six weeks we were given a house in Stockbreach Common. Then in 1936 we had Mary.

We heard that houses were to be built on the Birchwood Estate. Our neighbour was interested because her brother was intending to get married. We had the agent come to see us so that we could get all the information. We chose No. 13 (later to become 45) and moved in on Friday 13th November. Later Mum & Dad had one at the end of the road.

We had our church services in a wooden hut at the west end of Birchwood Avenue. Later the church bought a piece of ground at the corner of Birchwood Avenue and the road which led from Ground Lane (Homestead Road). Our parson, with help from all the folk around the estate built a little church. When mother died in 1947 we had the service in this church. Dad lived alone for some

while but later could not manage so was taken to an old peoples' home in St. Albans. When he died, aged 82, he was buried with Mum in the cemetery in St. Albans Road.

When the war started I signed up for the forces but as I was in a reserved occupation did not get called up for service. We had several people stay in our house as our part of the war effort. About 1942 I transferred to Cossor Radio in Finsbury Park where I worked long hours plus firewatching. I also did firewatching at home.

Our Dennis was born in 1944. In October a doodle bug dropped in the school playground and Elsie was so scared that I took her and the children down to Great Malvern to stay with her aunt. I used to go down to visit each weekend.

I was called up for the Home Guard but a month later the war was over so we were disbanded. With the end of the war victory celebrations were held in Birchwood and other places.

I came back to Murphy Radio for about two years and about this time Elsie and I were thinking of taking over a boarding house at the seaside. After looking for suitable premises we chose one at Walton on the Naze. Mary, our daughter, helped for a while. Later, with finances becoming a bit tight, I took a job at the railway station as a carriage cleaner porter, porter guard and then passenger guard.

One day I saw a notice that some bungalows were to be built so I went to see the builder and managed to get one. It was built on a slope from the road so we could clean the front windows standing but I had to have an extending ladder to reach the rear ones.

In 1968, when I was 59, we took over a hardware shop at Worthing which we enjoyed until, with me coming up to 65 years old, we decided to give it up. I had various little jobs to keep me occupied until I was 78.

We had several coach trips around Great Britain and lots of boat holidays on the Norfolk Broads. When my wife was taken ill I had to do what I could with home care help, but as we had moved to the south coast in an upstairs flat she was having trouble climbing the stairs. With the help of our church we obtained the tenancy of a

ground floor flat in some almshouses and were able to get out with a wheelchair.

When I was 80 our children gave us a party. Later I had to have a pacemaker fitted and a hip replacement so it became necessary to move into a nursing home where Elsie could be properly looked after and I was not overworked. We are now enjoying life in Worthing.



Bill and Elsie

HATFIELD LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Previously known as HATFIELD THIS CENTURY is an Association of people interested in the history of Hatfield.

The aims of the society are:-

To encourage and undertake research on Hatfield's history using a variety of sources including documentary evidence, oral history, standing buildings and other appropriate material that is available.

To produce publications and exhibitions from the research outlined above building on the work of the original Hatfield WEA.

To provide a forum for the exchange of information on the history of the Hatfield area.

To arrange meetings and lectures on subjects of general interest, to provide Newsletters and to make contributions to the press in furtherance of the Society's work.

To establish a data base of information for future generations.

New members are always welcome. Application forms are available from

Mill Green Museum and Mill
Hatfield, Herts. AL9 5PO

or

Hatfield Public Library
Queensway
Hatfield Town Centre

