

The St Michael's Manor Tannery and Boot and Shoe Making in St Albans

Whilst researching the straw hat industry in St Albans I discovered another industry that employed two hundred locals in just two factories in 1914. The companies were John Freshwater & Co Ltd and Edwin Lee & Sons and the industry was boot and shoe manufacturing. I had anecdotal evidence of a tannery in the grounds of the St Michael's Manor Hotel in Fishpool Street dating back to Tudor Times. I knew that the lake in the grounds of the hotel completely dried out in the extremely hot summer of 1976 and that some archaeological work had been carried out at that time. I decided that this was a good place to start my research into tanning and boot and shoe making in St Albans.

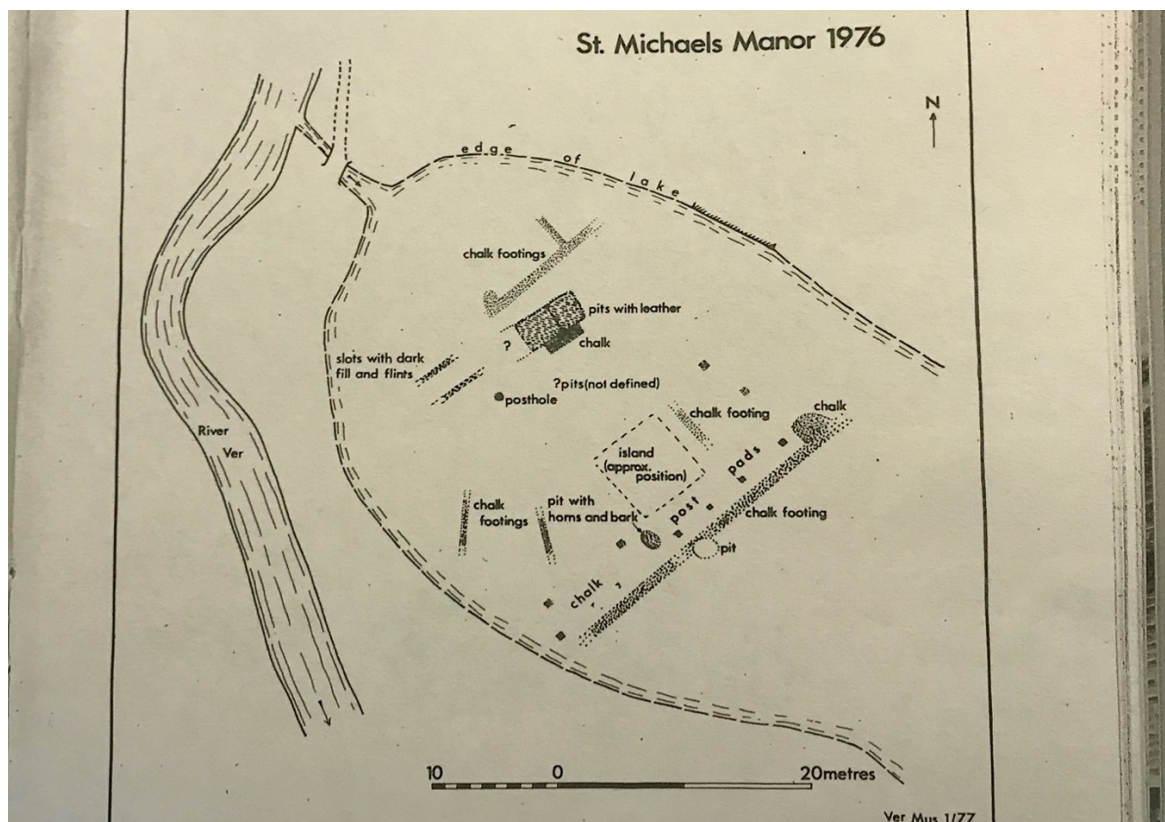


A publication in the Autumn of 1977 entitled 'Hertfordshire's Past Issue no 3' revealed an excellent article by Chris Saunders about the findings by the staff of the Verulamium Museum who had been invited by the hotel owner Mr Michael Newling Ward to witness clearance of silt from the lake in 1976. The silt was cleared using a mechanical drag-line.

Before the work was carried out it had been suggested that the lake was a surviving mediaeval fishpond associated with St Albans Abbey, despite the fact that it does not appear on maps until 1822. It is generally believed that the lake was constructed between 1810-1822. Removal of the silt revealed a scatter of building materials of the late 18th and early 19th Century in accordance with map evidence. Considerable modifications were made to the Manor House at this time and the construction of the lake as an ornamental garden feature would fit well in this context.

Once the silt had been removed from the lake bed various archaeological features were apparent, mostly notably a strip of chalk running across the cleared portion. These features had been cut into the underlying alluvial and peat deposits forming the flood plain of the River Ver. It was impossible in the time available to clean and record in detail the whole of the cleared area, but all obvious features were identified as far as possible, and recorded.

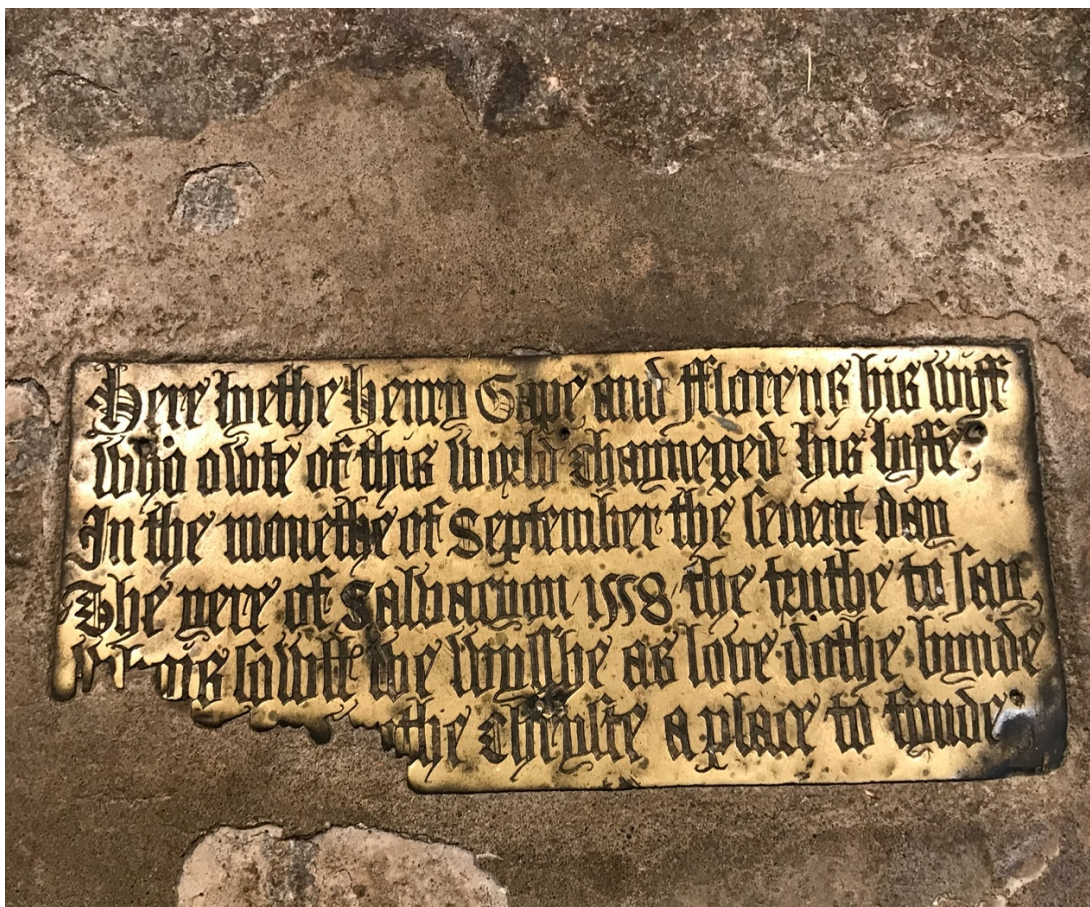
Some of the features clearly represented the footings for timber buildings, although no complete building plan was recovered. Of some interest were two large rectangular, conjoined pits, from the cleaning of which came a sherd of 16th Century pottery, parts of several leather shoes and a leather belt. A smaller oval pit contained in its fill oak bark and the horn cores of cattle. Here is a line drawing courtesy of Verulamium Museum:



St Michael's Manor was formerly in the possession of the Gape Family; how the property was originally acquired is unknown, but Henry Gape leased various properties in Fishpool Street and Sallypath (the lower part of Fishpool Street) from St Albans Abbey in 1538 and it is possible that one of the properties in Sallypath could be the site of the present St Michael's Manor. Henry Gape was a tanner, and clearly a prosperous one, and was the son of John Gape who in 1495 left a tenement in Sopwell Lane to his son Henry.

The Gape Family prospered in the years following the dissolution of the Abbey; Henry Gape's will of 1558 records a long list of properties including tenements in Market Place, Romeland, Holywell Hill and Fishpool Street. To his eldest son John he left his freehold property in St Michael's and " all his other leather and hides in his yard and vats and bark". It was probably John Gape who built the older parts of St Michael's Manor, for the initials I.G. and the date 1586 are inscribed on one of the ceilings. Henry Gape was Mayor of St Albans in 1554 and John in 1564,1572 and 1579, and the Gape Family was to play a leading role in St Albans affairs in the 17th and 18th Century.

Photo below of the brass in the nave floor of St Michael's Church to Henry Gape (d 1558) and his wife Florence.



Thomas Gainsborough's 1762 portrait of Joseph Gape Mayor of St Albans in 1746, 1761 and 1797:



It is clear that the family's original prosperity was founded on tanning and the remains found in the grounds of St Michael's Manor can be interpreted as the site of the Gape Tannery. The presence of large timber buildings apparently set around a courtyard, large pits and oak bark, in a situation well placed for constant supplies of water are all consistent with this view.

Tanning no doubt played an important part in the economy of St Albans. There were at least four tanners in St Albans in the 1360s, namely Richard Tavener, Richard de Norton's, Richard Lowyre and John Radelso and one John Wells held land in Fishpool Street before 1523. The 'leather market' is recorded in 1558 in St Albans and the 17th Century constitutions of St Albans provided for 'Leather Sealers' whose job was to examine all leather, and if sufficiently tanned and prepared, to stamp it, and to seize all leather offered for sale not bearing such a stamp.

As late as 1744 a large tannery existed and is said to have been situated in St Michael's Street, although the description might better fit with the lower end of Fishpool Street. It is described as "a large Tan Yard adjoining with eighty large Vats, and a most convenient good shed with a fine running River at the bottom of the said Yard and Garden....." This information was gleaned by T. Wells in his 'A Tan-Yard at St Michael's' SAHAAS Transactions 1937.

The Gape Family sold St Michael's Manor by auction in 1953 in settlement of death duties raising £4,000. After an uncertain spell as a country club and war veterans home the house was bought by Michael Newling Ward in 1965.

Many Fishpool Street Residents will remember the Newling Ward Family as they entered into the spirit of the community. Michael had a love of the amateur stage and was a member of the Company of Ten theatre group. His wife Gladys, was a keen tennis player and played at Junior Wimbledon 1932-1933. They were concerned with the welfare of their employees and many gave long service to the hotel. My own son Ewan had job in the kitchens as a student in the early 1990s and received a Christmas present from the family as did all members of staff.

After the death of his parents, the Newling Ward's son David took over control of the hotel in 1995. Sadly, David died in September 2012 and his widow Sheila sold the hotel in May 2016 as the family were now spread across the globe. The guide price for the sale of the hotel was £7.95M. The current owner is Mr Raj Gunpath.

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