

The Straw Hat Manufacturers of Fishpool Street



Whilst researching my lockdown article, 'The Lost Pubs of Fishpool Street', I became aware that many of the people who managed the pubs and their families in the 19th Century were equally involved in the manufacturing of straw hats.

William Marsh, who ran The Blockers Arms in 1871, was recorded as a hat blocker in the Census of that year. Later, the Javeleau Family ran the pub and two of the daughters of William Javeleau the publican were listed as Straw Hat Maker and Plait Miller respectively in the 1911 Census. Further up the street John E Darby, the son of the Licensed Victualler of The Queen Pub at 41/43 was also listed as a Straw Hat Blocker and John's sister Louisa, a Straw Hat Finisher in the 1901 Census.

I started researching the Straw Hat Industry in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire and immediately came across an English Heritage Publication, 'The Hat Industry of Luton and its Buildings' by Katie Carmichael, David McOmish, and David Grech, first published in 2013. It has an incredible aerial photograph of St Albans Abbey in 1920. The photograph has the following caption: "A view of St Albans Cathedral in 1920. In the foreground in close proximity to the Cathedral is a long, narrow building - one of the Town's many hat factories which have since disappeared". Here is the photograph:



I was obviously very familiar with hat making in Luton, but this image was a total surprise. This building was demolished in 1973 to make way for an extension to St Albans School and I will cover its long history in detail later.

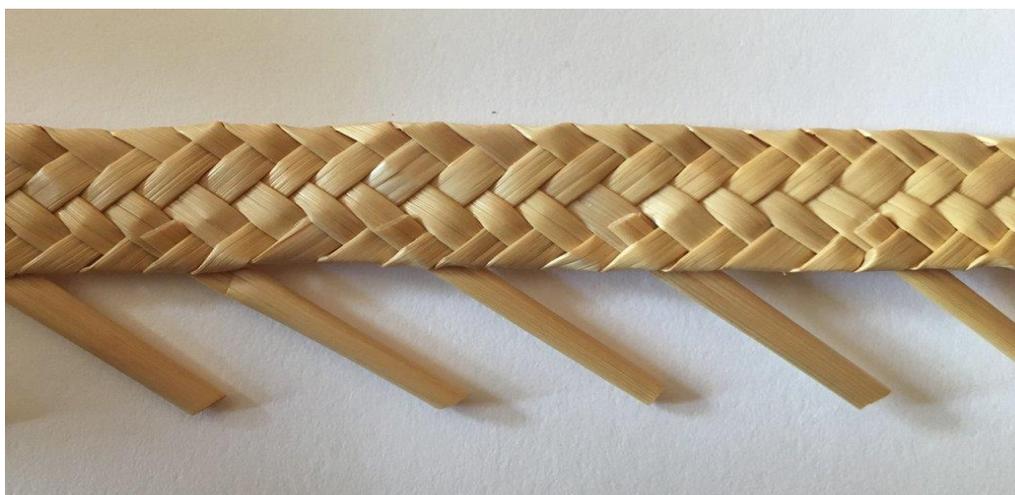
By the end of the 17th Century straw hat making had become well established in Hertfordshire and neighbouring Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. In the 18th Century the hats produced in these counties were of poor quality. Superior products were imported from Italy. The Napoleonic Wars of 1803-15 cut off these imports and at the same time the quality of home-produced straw hats improved.

The straw-plaiting and hat making industries were concentrated on the chalky soils in the West of Hertfordshire and on the northern chalk ridge. These soils produced straight but pliable straw which was especially suited for plaiting.

The straw was cleaned and cut into lengths, then plaited. Split straw created intricate patterns of fine quality. At its height in the mid to late 19th Century, plaiting employed nearly 13,000 people in the County of Hertfordshire, 94% of which were female.

From around 1800 onwards, straw preparation became more refined and was undertaken by dealers who bought the straw from farmers and sold bundles of prepared lengths to plaiters. Initially, both plaiting and hat making were cottage industries, but later Hitchin, Tring, Berkhamsted, Hemel Hempstead and St Albans held plait markets and became the main centres of hat production in Hertfordshire. By the early 19th Century, wages as high as five shillings a day were being paid to plaiters and hat makers in the St Albans area. At this time, the average wage for farm labourers was ten to twelve shillings a week.

Women and girls had to work long hours to earn these wages and often plaited whilst walking as well as sitting at home. Plait was made into 20-yard lengths called scores and the better workers produced four of these a day. The plaiters either sold direct to dealers who went from door to door or took their plait to the local markets. Fishpool Street was ideally placed for this trade. Plait Schools took children as young as three or four to learn the trade. The youngest children were employed to clip the straw ends of the plait. These straw ends were called 'speelers'. Quite a dangerous task for a three-year-old.



The children in the Plait Schools produced plait in very poor conditions. Open fires were too dangerous so in winter the only heating was from small braziers. Gerald Sanctuary mentions the Plait Schools in his 1984 book 'Fishpool Street-St Albans. I quote from his book: " During the winter, even though it was cold, fires were not allowed, because they tended to darken the straw, so the children had tins of charcoal burning under the stools. They used to arrange their frocks so that any smoke could not harm the straw. Compulsory school attendance did not apply until the 1870s, but children were taught to read and write at the better Plait Schools".



The Workshop Regulation Act of 1867 banned children under the age of eight, and required all children aged eight to thirteen to attend school for at least ten hours a week for numeracy and literacy lessons. At first, the Plait Schools claimed to offer this, but as many were run by women who were themselves illiterate, these schools were eventually forced to close.

From the 1870s onward, cheap plait from China and Japan competed with local plaiting leading to a substantial fall in earnings and by 1901 the number of plaiters in Hertfordshire had fallen to under seven hundred.

It was mainly women who sewed the plait into hats, while men were employed making wooden blocks around which hats were modelled. Men also finished the hats ready for shipping. All these jobs began as cottage-based trades until the work gradually concentrated into fewer larger factories. In 1914 more than 1,000 people were still employed in straw hat making in St Albans.



A collection of hat blocks.

There were several straw factories in Fishpool Street. Until this industry developed, straw hats were imported from Italy, but when the work began in Hertfordshire, several successful businesses were founded, providing jobs for many people. The Directory of 1839 says that "the manufacture of straw plait employs upwards of 800 people in St Albans and neighbourhood". When the first train arrived at the City Station in 1868, it was decorated with straw plait.



St Albans City Station opened on 1st October 1868

The opening of City Station led to the building of big hat factories from the centre of the City to the station between London Road and Victoria Street. I will cover these companies later. For now, we will concentrate solely on Fishpool Street:

I started by researching the Census details of 1851. Three hat manufacturers were listed in Fishpool Street: Joseph Morris originally from Nottinghamshire, Ruth Johnson from Redbourn and Samuel West from Surrey.

Nigel Goose has written a very detailed summary of this time in his publication 'Population, Economy and family structure in Hertfordshire in 1851'. In the book he states " Like Luton and Dunstable, St Albans appears to have been able to boast a number of substantial hat-making factories, sewing, blocking, stiffening, pressing, and trimming hats, operating alongside a large number of domestic outworkers, who were engaged in the early stages of manufacturing before passing them on to the factories or in finishing hats with trimmings of various descriptions. The men's boater was a particular St Albans specialism which was said to supply the world, whilst nearby Luton concentrated upon women's hats. The straw and straw hat industry permeated the whole town, and straw hat-makers, blockers, trimmers and straw plaiters could be found in numbers in each of the three parishes and in most streets but with a particular concentration in Fishpool Street which housed as many as 130 in 1851".

1890 Kelly's Directory listed the following Straw Hat Manufacturers and Straw Plait Dealers in Fishpool Street:

- Mary Dunham, Straw Hat Manufacturer
- Thomas Johnson Straw Hat Manufacturer
- Munt, Brown, and Co Straw Hat Manufacturer
- Henry Charles Webdale Straw Hat Manufacturer
- Joseph Wingrave Straw Plait Merchant.

Having got the names of the manufacturers my task was now to track down their locations. The obvious place to start was the large hat factory by the Abbey in the earlier aerial photograph. Jon Mein of the Arc & Arc was extremely helpful in providing the complete history of this building together with Ann Dean and Jill Singer.

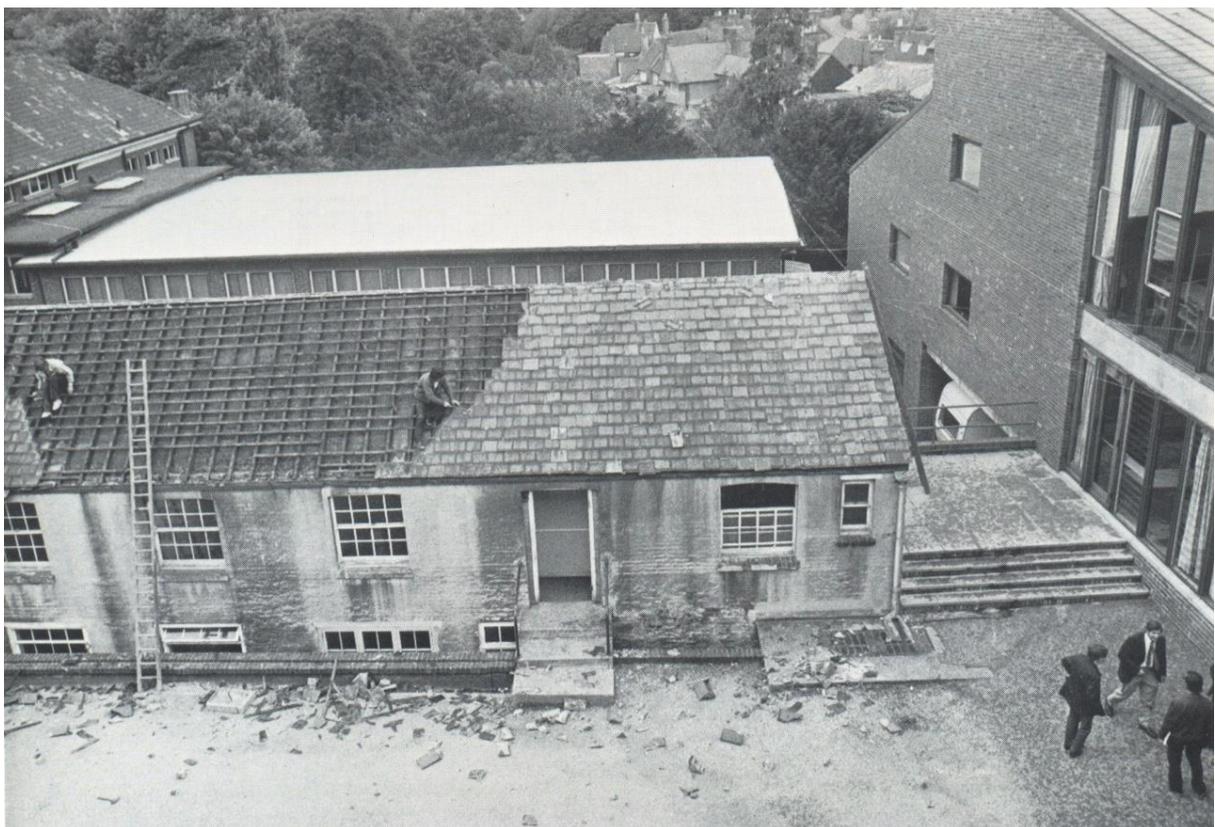
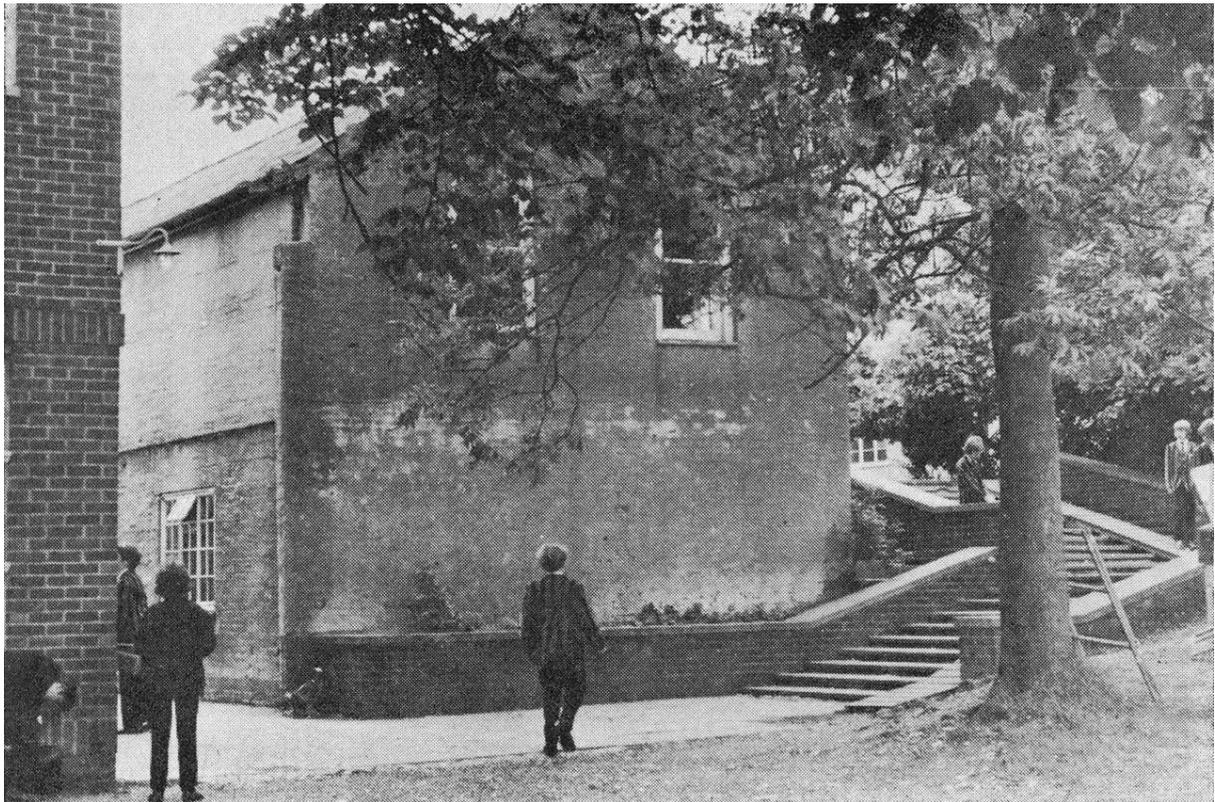
The Hat Factory traded under the name of Messrs Dunham and Martin. They took over from Munt and Brown & Company c1907. and M+B had taken on the premises c1860. Previous to this a Mr Shallis ran a straw hat-related business here in the 1850s.

Apparently, Munt and Brown went bankrupt in 1907 and Thomas Martin, who had worked for M+B for 30 years, bought the company and set up Dunham and Martin with Francis William Dunham. Census details show the Dunham family were very active in straw hat making in Fishpool Street and New England Street.

The factory, which stretched back some 270 feet from the road, had separate departments for bleaching plait, machine sowing, hat stiffening (achieved by dipping into vats of gelatine), blocking (using hand irons as well as eight steam hydraulic presses), trimming (where leather lining bands and ribbons were fitted to the hats) and checking for size. Dunham and Martin made hats for Eton, Harrow and Rugby Schools as well as well-known girls' schools and department stores. A familiar sight in Fishpool Street used to be large horse-drawn drays loaded with cases of hats labelled and bound for worldwide destinations like New York, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and Rio de Janeiro. St Albans City Station paid a key part in the transportation of the hats.

In 1937 Thomas Martin retired and the factory closed as cheaper imported hats were now available and straw hats were becoming unfashionable. The factory premises were demolished in 1973, and

their place was taken by the new buildings which are part of St Albans School. The School digital archive has these photographs from the Sixties and early Seventies.





I next looked for the location of the Straw Hat Manufacturers Webdales. Henry Charles Webdale was listed as a Straw Hat Maker in the 1890 Kelly's Directory. Gerald Sanctuary mentions Webdales as Straw Hat Manufacturers at 57 Fishpool in the 19th Century. He also states that the factory included numbers 59 and 61.



57 and 59 Fishpool Street part of Webdales Straw Hat Manufacturers in the 19th Century.

In 1901 Webdales moved from Fishpool Street to Oswald Road near the City Station. Webdales made straw hats in Oswald Road in the first quarter of the 20th Century.

The Johnson Family were very active in the straw hat industry in St Albans. The 1890 Kelly's Directory lists two people of the name:

Thomas Johnson of Fishpool Street listed as a Straw Hat Maker.

Thomas Henry Johnson of 10 Holywell Hill listed as Straw Hat Manufacturer.

In addition, I also came across Ruth Johnson in the 1851 Census operating in Fishpool Street and listed as a Hat Manufacturer.

Thomas Johnson of Fishpool Street operated in a building where number 10 Fishpool Street stands today. This building was demolished in 1906. TH Johnson & Sons was founded in 1834 and traded from at least four locations from the 1850s. The factory operating at 10 Holywell Hill moved to Lower Dagnall Street in 1891 following a bad fire.

I photographed this group of buildings having first seen reference to them in the English Heritage publication 'The Hat Industry of Luton and its Buildings' by Kate Carmichael, David McOmish and David Grech. Jon Mein is of the opinion that THJ occupied all three white buildings in my photograph below, and possibly extended into the brick building to the left.

It was Jon who confirmed the relocation of THJ to Lower Dagnall Street after the fire in the Holywell Hill premises in 1891. Michael Fookes also confirmed that they traded from numbers 2, 2a and 2b Lower Dagnall Street. On close inspection I was able to see two metal plaques bearing the names

Dagnall House and Ashbrittle House. THJ continued trading here until the late 1920s.



I found reference to one other Straw Hat Manufacturer in Lower Dagnall Street in Kelly's Directory of 1890. His name was Philip Gentle but could not find a location.

I concluded my research for Fishpool Street hat manufacturers in search of Mary Dunham listed in the 1881 Census as being aged 58 and a Straw Hat Manufacturer residing in Fishpool Street. Jon Mein was able to confirm that Mary Dunham was the widow of John Blows Dunham and that they lived at 46 Fishpool Street. Mary traded at this address until she sold the business in 1892. It would seem that Mary was the aunt of Francis William Dunham who was in partnership with Thomas Arthur Martin and they traded as Dunham and Martin until 1937. It was the aerial photograph of their premises in the grounds of St Albans School that sparked my imagination for this project, and it is rather fitting that I concluded my research with this company.



46 Fishpool Street.

The English Heritage Publication 'The Hat History of Luton and its Buildings' has reference to the Straw House in Spicer Street states " Although smaller in scale than many of the central Luton hat factories and warehouses, this Italianate plait warehouse nonetheless demonstrates many of the same features in terms of plan, design and decoration- including a raised ground-floor showroom with basement below". This is now The Straw House Hotel at 1A Spicer Street and the owners, Mr and Mrs Oakes, are former Fishpool Street residents.



Jon Mein informed me that these buildings, together with the house at 1 Romeland Hill, were occupied by the Slade family an important family in the history of the Town/City in the late 19th Century. Various members had an interest in the hat trade at the time.

The opening of St Albans City Station in 1868 paved the way for much bigger hat factories to be built from the City Centre to the Station between London Road and Victoria Street. This is a whole new history for another time but to conclude this article I offer the following images of one of the remaining buildings and two photographs from the Imperial War Museum.





This converted Hat Factory is in Inkerman Road and was part of Macqueen's Hat Manufacturers in Lattimore Road.

E Day & Company had a large factory in Marlborough Road which opened in 1913. With the outbreak of WW1 Day's set up a production line employing mainly women and girls to turn out military sun helmets. Here is a photograph of the female workers outside the factory in 1914.



Wyse, Sons & Company opened a large factory in Ridgmont Road late in 1909. The Imperial War Museum houses this touching War Memorial Plaque to the fallen employees.



I would like to thank the following people, publications and organisations that helped in the compilation of this article: The St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society; I received enormous help from Jon Mein and Anne Wares as well as help and inspiration from Jill Singer and Ann Dean. English Heritage: 'The Hat Industry of Luton and Its Buildings' written by Kate Carmichael, David McOmish and David Grech. Kate Carmichael granted me an interview by phone.

Michael Fookes' publication: 'Made in St Albans-Ten Town Trails Exploring St Albans Industrial Past' and personal help from Michael. The publication 'Around St Albans with Geoff Dunk'. 'Population, Economy and Family Structure in Hertfordshire in 1851 Volume 2' by Nigel Goose. St Albans Library with particular reference to Scott Chalmers. St Albans School Digital Archive with help from Chris Harbour.