

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

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Tanners are often named in the mediaeval records of St Albans, as mentioned earlier, and at one time the craft was also strong at Bishop's Stortford, where many tanners lay in Water Lane. There was also an early trade at Ashwell, near Baldock.

The tanning process was considered a noxious or "odoriferous trade" and relegated to the outskirts of town. Occasionally, according to 17th Century Session Rolls, craftsmen were presented for placing raw hides in streams and thus polluting the water supply. At the beginning of the 19th Century a mill existed at Hertford for the grinding of oak bark, presumably used in tanning. Hides were combined with oak, beech or willow bark, which would provide tannic acid necessary in preserving and colouring the hide.

Shoe making, to meet local demand, was certainly carried on in St Albans and probably elsewhere in mediaeval Hertfordshire. In 1591-2 the County Justices fixed the wages of shoemakers in accordance with the Statute of 1562. "A shoemaker servant of the best sorte being unmarried to have by the yeare with meate and drinke and without leverye, 53s. 4d. Second and third-rate 'shoemaker servants' were to receive only 46s. 8d. and 41s. respectively". At the end of the 17th Century and beginning of the 18th Century frequent references in contemporary records are made to shoemakers in St Albans.

In the publication 'A History of the County of Hertford Volume 4 1914' there is the following statement: "at the present time (1914) there are a few firms of wholesale shoemakers in the County at St Albans and Hemel Hempstead, the factories of Messrs. John Freshwater & Co and Mr E. Lee furnishing great output of machine-made boots." It is interesting to note that amongst local artisans of this class at the present day, the terms 'cracker' and 'coons' are used to designate footwear - undoubtedly, corrupts of the mediaeval word 'craquoon' (a type of shoe).

The same publication documents the history of Edwin Lee & Sons. It states that "perturbed by the current unrest in the Shoe Industry in 1890, Mr Edwin moved his small shoe factory from Hackney to the more tranquil air of St Albans". As with all craft-based industries industrial relations were a problem from time to time.

Edwin Lee & Sons Ltd started in temporary accommodation in Cavendish Street St Albans on a garage site. A three-storey site was built in Grosvenor Road and was completed for production in 1893. The building was considerably extended up to 1920. Sons, Edwin S. Lee and Ernest Lee took over from Edwin. Edwin Lee went on to become the Mayor of St Albans.

In the early years of production, Lee's produced ladies and children's shoes. Trade was good until WW2. Throughout the War Years, 1939-1945, the Ministry of Food requisitioned most of the factory and departments. The staff of Lee's were hurriedly transferred to Lower Dagnall Street where they were granted a temporary home with H.E. Joyner & Co.

H. E. Joyner & Co was in fact the new name for the shoe factory of John Freshwater and will be covered in full detail later. However, True Form was the main customer of Freshwater in 1925 and the founder John Freshwater wanted to retire. Hence True Form bought the

business. The new name of the company is derived from the office manager at this time and Mr Joyner was given a ten year contract to run the company.

After WW2 Lee's workforce returned to Grosvenor Road in 1947 where about 100 workers were employed. In 1950 there was a minor trade recession and many workers were laid off. Historically Lee's used to export products to India, Australia and New Zealand, but gradually these countries produced their own products. Edwin Lee & Sons appears in Kelly's Directory in 1952 but has disappeared by the 1954 Directory. The exact date of closure was not known at the time of writing this article. The photograph below shows women assembly workers in the Grosvenor Road factory during the latter part of the 1920s.



Photo courtesy of Sarah Keeling, Curator of St Albans Museums

My research revealed an interesting document entitled ' Village Craft Becomes St Albans Industry' which tells the full story of John Freshwater Ltd as remembered by Eric Tansley who was born in College Street in 1921. Eric's grandfather, William Tansley was born in Welwyn around 1850 and worked with John Freshwater in Welwyn making shoes.

John Freshwater could see that the old craft method of carrying batches of work between various cottages in Welwyn for assembling parts of the footwear was a slow and time wasting process. Also, to make use of the new machines, power sources were required. He thought it would be a good idea to set up a workshop and get all his craftsmen under one roof.

In 1880 John Freshwater moved all his craftsmen and their families to St Albans to the site of an old iron works. The iron works were situated on the corner bounded by College Street

and Lower Dagnall Street. Arthur Tansley, Eric's father, became the foreman of the department producing the soles or "bottom stuff" for the footwear.

Gradually more machinery was introduced in the footwear production cycle and old hand craftsmen found themselves being replaced by machines operated by less skilled people. An industry-wide union had been developed and the union decided to call a National Strike in 1897 against the mechanisation of shoemaking. The strike lasted six months during which time more machines were installed. Most this new machinery was made in America. So a settlement was reached and both sides promised not to act without using arbitration first.

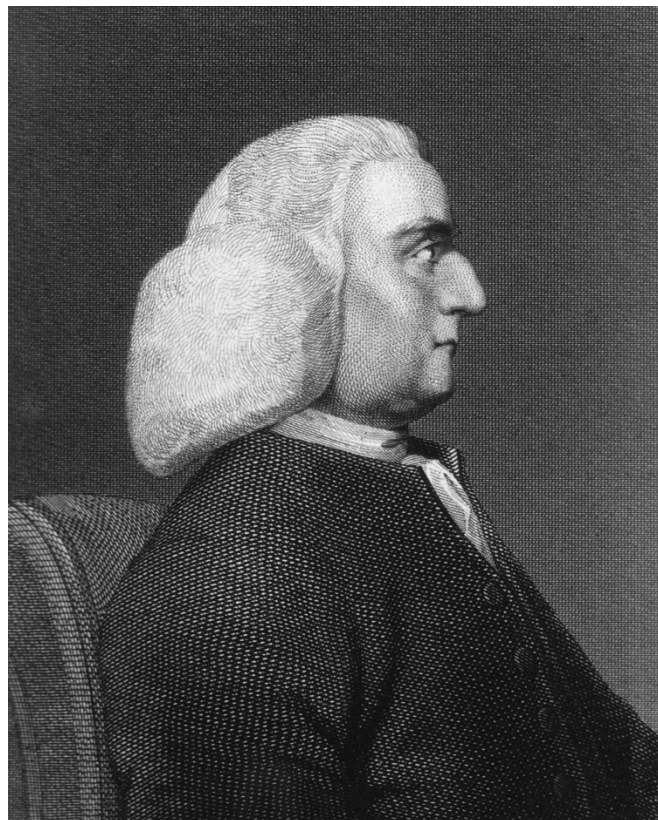
John Freshwater's factory grew considerably and he set up a warehouse in London to sell his shoes to other towns and traders. The factory produced large quantities of footwear and it was being sold to some large retail organisations, such as True Form of Northampton. About 1923 it was decided to make the group of buildings and sheds into a more unified factory. The mediaeval cottages were pulled down and Eric Tansley learnt from his father that on this same site had once stood a private asylum. This asylum was known as 'Collegium Insanorum' and was run by Dr Nathaniel Cotton and the poet and hymn writer William Cowper spent time here from December 1763 until June 1765. Cowper underwent an evangelical conversion and referred to St Albans as "my second nativity". Many houses were built in College Street in the 19th Century and the street name is derived from 'Collegium Insanorum'.

Photograph below of the corner of College Street and Lower Dagnall street taken around 1910 when 'Collegium Insanorum' is believed to have been demolished. The shadowy outline of the Abbey is just visible at the end of Spicer Street.





Engravings of William Cowper ( above) and Dr Nathaniel Cotton ( lower image).



The factory now became a mainly single- storey building some 40 metres square. In later years mains electricity replaced gas as source of power for production machinery. The old coal cellar was cleared and used as a store room. During WW2 the cellar became an air raid shelter.

In 1925 with the factory now a unitary building, True Form had become a major customer of Freshwater & Co. As mentioned earlier, John Freshwater sold his company to True Form and it was re-named H.E. Joyner & Co Ltd. In 1929 and 1930 when industry generally crashed, the firm was having great difficulty producing ladies shoes which were now the chief production, to the newly developing fashions. Eric Tansley's father William was given the responsibility of trying to make the factory viable after the departure of Mr Joyner in 1935. William found that True Form and Freeman, Hardy and Willis another subsidiary sold huge quantities of children's shoes all year round. William produced samples and soon H.E. Joyner & Co became mainly a children's shoe manufacturer. Production soared and reached a total of 6,000 pairs each week.

In 1953 True Form was the subject of a take-over by Charles Clore, the financier. Initially this did not affect the St Albans factory but in 1958 the workforce was dismissed and the premises sold off.



The site of John Freshwater Ltd today looking towards the Abbey.

The boot and Shoe industry has a similar profile to the straw hat industry in St Albans. What began as a village craft developed into a mechanised industry only to ultimately fail due to foreign competition and consolidation within the home market.

Acknowledgements:

St Albans Library with particular reference to Scott Chalmers.

Eric Tansley's Library Pamphlet ' Village Craft Becomes St Albans Industry'.

' St Michael's Manor 1586-1986' published in 1986 and compiled by Betty Ream with additional material by John Everett.

Hertfordshire's Past Issue no.3 Autumn 1977.

A History of the County of Hertford Volume 4 1914.

Sarah Keeling Curator of St Albans Museums.

Memories of St Albans published in 2000.

The St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society website.