

A century on Fishpool Street

The life and times of Alice Gilchrist

by Stuart Macer

Alice Gilchrist was born in 1901 and lived at Hope Cottage, 170 Fishpool Street, for more than 100 years. In April 2000 Alice was interviewed by David Broom and Ruth Pickles for an oral history project, *My St Albans Memories*, for the Museum of St Albans.

David was Assistant Keeper of Social History at the Museum and Ruth a long-term resident at Bank House, 122 Fishpool Street, and a close friend of Alice.

The resulting tape and transcript give a remarkable insight into life in Fishpool Street and St Michael's village at the turn of the 20th century. Alice reflects on her early life, the games played in the street and lessons at school. She recalls the shops in the street, one of which was owned by her cousin Harry Hodsden, who lived next door at Church House, 172 Fishpool Street.

Alice remembers the street before the arrival of cars when the heaviest traffic was brewers' drays pulled by enormous shire horses and delivering beer to the pubs.



Fishpool Street, circa 1900

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Alice Gilchrist was born on 16 September 1901 and started life at 170 Fishpool Street (the house next to the white building in the above photograph). Her father Samuel Farmer bought the house in 1895 after Alice's elder brother was born. At this time Samuel was working as a coachman for the Reverend Robinson, the vicar of St Saviour's Church.

Her schooling was at St Michael's School, which she left at the tender age of 13 years. Alice sat an examination at the time known as the 'Labour Examination', which she passed, enabling her to leave school before she was 14.

Alice was not a strong child and her mother kept her at home for the first three months after leaving school. Thereafter she went to work for a Miss Butler in King's Road and was instructed in the skills of tailoring. Sadly, this only lasted two years, as Alice's mother had a stroke at the age of just 45. Initially, Alice's sister looked after her mother during WW1, but after her sister's marriage the house was too small to accommodate everyone. Alice became a full-time carer for her mother for the next 27 years.

Alice found moving her mother around physically very difficult. However, a lady church worker living next door told Alice to ask Canon Grimston for the loan of a bath chair. Grimston agreed to the loan of the chair for only two hours at any one time. However, Alice needed longer sessions to wheel her mother to her mother's sister in Etna Road. The resourceful Alice purchased her own chair from a newspaper ad and told Canon Grimston she no longer needed the church bath chair. The new wickerwork chair was bought for 10 shillings from a house in King's Road. It had a small front wheel and two larger rear wheels for steering. Alice pushed her mother up and down Holywell Hill and as far as St Stephen's Church. She was indeed a very resourceful 18-year-old.

Alice married an Irishman she met at St Michael's Church in 1930. William Gilchrist was a dispossessed farmer from Ireland and came to St Albans for work during the Depression. He worked in Gorhambury and had lodgings on Blue House Hill in a Lord Verulam property and attended church every Sunday at St Michael's Church where he met Alice.

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William worked at Prae Farm as a farm labourer. After marriage they lived at 170 Fishpool Street. The 1939 National Register shows Samuel Farmer born in 1865 and Eliza Farmer born in 1871 living with Alice Gilchrist, born in 1901, and with William Gilchrist born in 1889. Samuel was listed as a retired hotel porter and William as a general labourer. Both women are registered as “unpaid domestic duties” and Alice’s son William as “under school age” having been born in 1935. There were also two elder unnamed daughters living at number 170 at this time.

Alice’s father died in 1942 and her mother in 1946. William Gilchrist died on Whit Sunday 1971 after 41 years of marriage to Alice. The funeral for William was held in St Michael’s Church on the same date as their wedding 41 years earlier.

Alice was asked about the games played in Fishpool Street as a child before WW1 and the advent of the car. She joyfully recalled playing in the trees near St Michael’s Manor, games called ‘In-in’ and ‘Walnuts’.

The transcript reads: “Different seasons of the year we used to play marbles, fag cards, then we had hoops, boys used to have iron ones – skimmer — you used to run up and down the street... we used to have sticks for our wooden hoops, the girls had wooden hoops... Mondays was wash day, we used to sit on the bank here and blow bubbles in our clay pipes, used to buy them at the little shop down the road for a farthing each, and we used to sit and blow bubbles on the bank.”

Shops in Fishpool Street

Alice’s cousin was Harry Hodsdon, and he opened Harry’s Hardware Store in 1928 next to Alice at number 172. Alice recalls: “Shopping was no problem: my cousin Harry Hodsdon started a general store at No 142 – ‘If I haven't got what you want, tell me and I’ll get it’ – and when it got too crowded, he moved into the Old Church House at 172 and sold paraffin and hardware on the right and groceries on the left.”

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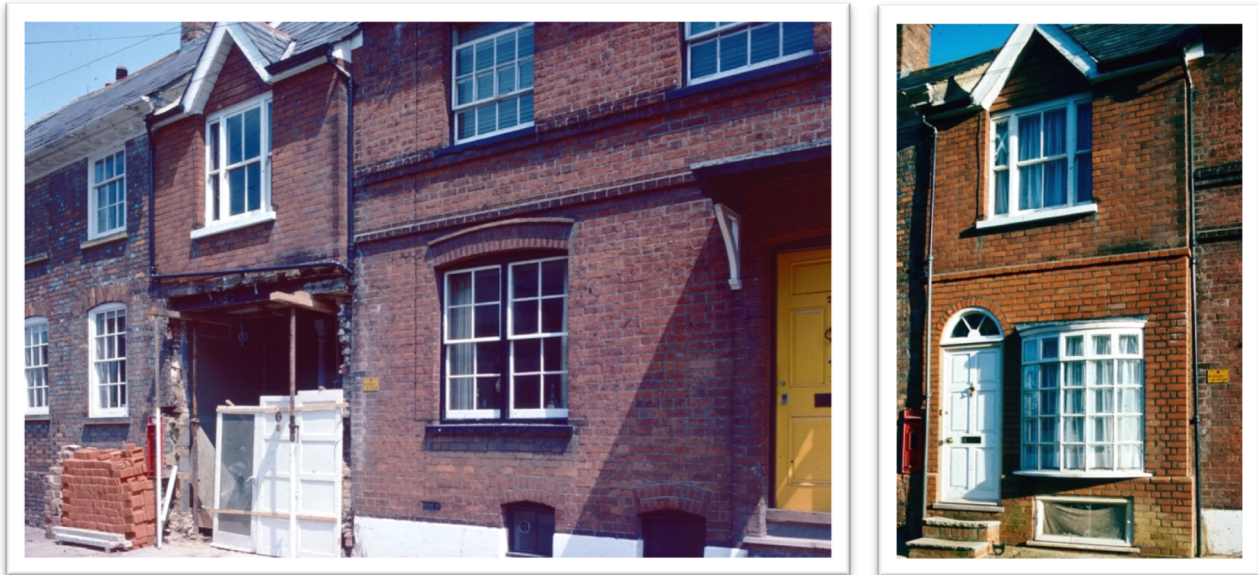
Kelly's Directory revealed the previous owner of number 172 as Frederick Phelps in 1927. Harry kept the store going until 1958. After Harry's retirement the house returned to residential use under the ownership of Denys Brown.

Further up Fishpool Street there was the Post Office at number 76. Alice remembers "there was another general store at No 76, which also housed the post office – the letter box is still there. There was a sweet shop on the other side of the road – one of the two cottages pulled down to make The *Blue Anchor* car park".

There is a long history of the Halsey Family owning and running the Post Office. Even before Kelly's Directory, *St Albans Almanack* lists a T. Halsey living at the property in the 1890s. The first year of numbering in the almanack is in 1897 when a Mrs Halsey is recorded as the shopkeeper. By 1901 Kelly's Directory has Annie Halsey as shopkeeper and in 1907 Annie Maud Halsey is recorded as "shopkeeper and post office".

Alice remembers "the two Miss Halseys" running the shop and post office at this time. Amazingly, Annie Halsey continued to run the post office and shop until the late 1940s. This is confirmed in the 1946 Kelly's Directory where Annie Halsey is listed as post office owner and grocer.

Business must have been good as Annie also owns number 78 Fishpool Street at this time. By 1958 the post office is taken over by A.H. Geary (general store and post office) and number 78 is now owned by Miss K. Halsey, who continued to live there until the late 1960s. In 1968 the post office and general store is run by F.L. Webb.



The above photographs of the Post Office were taken in the 1970s by Bernard Cox

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Wash Days on a Monday

Alice recalled that her mother always washed clothes on a Monday when Alice was a child. Clothes were heated in a copper by lighting a fire underneath the copper. After boiling the clothes were squeezed dry in a mangle. Clothes were then dried in the garden every Tuesday on a long washing line.

Alice's sister assisted in the washing process for the whole family and later with the ironing. With three double bedrooms but no bathroom, the heavy sheets were washed in a wash bath. Water from the copper had to be transferred to the wash bath for this process.

Alice's washing duties also extended to her brothers' collars. From the transcript: "The... little... boys had rubber collars, but when they went to work they had starched ones... yes. I've got two brothers and one sister and I looked after them all as well. I was the last one to get married. I never thought I was going to get married anyway, I never thought about it, not 'til I met Mr Gilchrist at St Michael's."

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Alice's brothers both obtained employment at a very young age. Her elder brother worked at Clarks and Clarks solicitors' office in Victoria Street. He started work at just 12 when he left school having passed the labour exam. He stayed at the same company until retirement. Her other brother became chief rating officer for St Albans and lived in Fishpool Street opposite the post office. Apparently, he lived next door to Mrs Harper, the wife of the vicar of St Michael's Church. Many residents will remember Nan Harper, who lived at Ver Cottage, 75 Fishpool Street, well into the 1990s.

Life at St Michael's School

Alice had a very happy and successful education at St Michael's School under the headmaster, Mr Sait. The head was a popular figure at the time and his wife was a school governess.

Alice recalled that Mr Sait started at St Michael's around 1888 and that he formed the church choir and became the church organist in addition to his role as a Sunday school teacher.

From the transcript: "The first hour in school was scripture lessons. We used to do reading, writing, arithmetic, needlework, woodwork, cookery. We used to have to go down to Victoria Street, that used to be at the Art School, for cookery lessons, we used to have to walk...".

Cookery lessons involved making a complete meal and then a written description of the process, complete with costings. "Some things cost a farthing, some things cost a ha'penny, course we didn't used to do big quantities, it gave us an insight how to do it."

Other activities included map drawing and spelling. A spelling test concluded each school day. Alice said: "Quicker we learnt to spell the quicker we got home."

Alice was asked about the changes in St Michael's village that she recalled before Prae Close came into being. Prae Close was merely a field owned by a Mr Aldridge, where an annual fair was held and "they used to have those roundabouts with horses... used to go up and down".

Family Life in Fishpool Street

Alice remembers large families in Fishpool Street with lots of children playing in the street. A highlight every Friday afternoon was a visit from the organ grinder, complete with monkey sitting on top of the barrel organ.

“Oh yes, Friday afternoons he used to come up here regularly, and (the) organ grinder used to turn the handle with a monkey sitting on the top. Oh, I’ve turned the handle many a time of the old barrel organ, used to play all the old tunes.” *Goodbye Dolly, I Must Leave You* was a favourite tune dating back to the Crimean War. Actually, this old song was popularised as a Boer War anthem.

Hiding grandfather in a cupboard

With the return to peace at the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 military expenditure was heavily reduced. As a result, the regular army was gradually slimmed down from 230,000 men to 91,000 by 1838.

In these conditions recruitment was hardly a problem. By the 1850s, however, Britain’s involvement in the Crimean War against Russia had revealed weaknesses in the size of the army. According to Alice, the army recruitment team came knocking at doors in St Albans.

“I remember my grandfather said they used to come round the houses calling up all the... older boys to go and fight in the war, and he said his mother hid him in the cupboard so that they couldn't find him.”

During Alice’s childhood life centred around St Michael’s village with very little contact beyond the parish boundaries. She maintained that she probably knew everyone in the parish. “Oh yes, this (was) a little country town, there weren’t the people living in it then, like there is now.”

Transport in St Albans

Alice was 10 years old when the first cars and buses arrived in St Albans. There were no cars in Fishpool Street and children could play freely without fear of accidents. Asked about car ownership in the street she replied: “No, we used to have pony traps, carriages – dog carts they used to call them... there used to be room for two on top.”

St Michael’s Church

Alice was very much involved with St Michael’s Church all her life, as indeed were all the family. Her two brothers sang in the choir and her elder brother was a bell ringer and a fireman.

Pubs in Fishpool Street

Alice had vivid memories of the pubs in Fishpool Street: “Oh, there was plenty of pubs: *The Black Lion*, *Blue Anchor*, *Unicorn*, next to *The Black Lion* there used to be. Then there was *The Blockers Arms*... then there was one at the bottom of Cock Alley called *The Cock and Flower Pot*, but they shut that one down first I think...”

The Blockers Arms is clearly visible in the HALS black and white 1900 photograph shown at the start of this article.

Alice concludes the interview with memories of her grandmother walking from Sandridge to St Albans for her shopping – complete with baby. Horse and carts were regular visitors to Fishpool Street laden with vegetables, fish and bread.

Alice Gilchrist was 103 years old when she died in September 2004. Her whole life was lived at 170 Fishpool Street. Her funeral was appropriately held in St Michael’s Church on the 30 September 2004 and the officiating minister was the Reverend Terry Beaumont. Her ashes were buried in St Michael’s churchyard on 17 October 2004.



St Michael's ford around 1900

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