

# Fishpool Street memories – Ruth Pickles

by Maggy Douglas, *nee Pickles* (first published in 2007)

Ruth Pickles of Bank House (No.122) died on 23 February, 2007. A memorial service was held on 9 March at St Michael's Church, at which she was a regular attender and for many years a member of the choir.

She had many interests, painting and gardening in particular, and fairly late in life took a Fine Arts degree at Leicester University. She was the mother of five children. Here she is pictured with one of them, Maggy Douglas, whose memories of Fishpool Street and Bank House are printed below.



*The late Alan Pickles*

My parents, Alan and Ruth Pickles lived in Fishpool Street for over 55 years and wouldn't have lived anywhere else. They arrived after a London flat, a year in America, somewhere in Leverstock Green, and a cold and draughty flat over the Kingsbury Lodge stables in Branch Road.

My father was a physicist at The Building Research Establishment at Garston and Mother had trained as an architect but now had two small children.

Their touchdown was at 120 Fishpool Street, a former pub, *The Cock and Flowerpot*. At that time it had a small steep garden, and a yard at the side. Mum was always very fond of that house and wished we could have stayed there.

Cine films of the 1950s show the street devoid of cars. Perhaps my father had the first one. Memories of the time include him saying that he came across a tramp, a little the worse for wear, lying asleep in the gutter. Dad offered him his arm and escorted him to *The Black Lion*, at that time a common lodging house.

At the ford in St Michael's Street steam engines took on water and there were horses and pigs behind the dairies in Branch Road. A rag and bone man used to bring his horse and cart down the road, shouting "Any old iron". In those days, people would leave their front doors unlocked and to protect the paintwork in summer, a curtain would be hung over it. There were still shops in the street but the people who had some money had gone to the better parts of St Albans and left their poor grannies behind.

With my arrival, the fifth child, 120 became too small. Next door, Bank House was in a ramshackle state. It had been tenanted or empty for years and electricity and plumbing were required, besides new roofs and ceilings. Dad bought it at auction and my sister remembers him carrying a fully-grown apple tree over his shoulder from the old to the new house.

My earliest memory is of walking along hand-in-hand with him to inspect the building work. After the years of neglect, the earth at the top of the garden had slipped to the bottom. Somehow it was all moved back and retaining walls, some 12ft high, were built to keep it there. And so we moved 'next door'.

As children, our favourite game was to get up through the attic to the roof and dangle an (old) penny on clear fishing line over the parapet. As somebody went by below, we would jangle the penny on the pavement so that they would think they had dropped it, turn to pick it up and see the coin fly upwards out of reach!



*An old photograph of Bank House*

The garden was also a paradise for children. Initially it was wild and the cow parsley grew so high that tunnels and hides could be built in it. Gradually it was tamed. There were tennis nets where hedgehogs got entangled and two dozen hens producing so many eggs we sold them to the neighbours. Later there were bees and vines. With such a large garden, areas had to have names. The strangest of these must be 'The Suez Canal', reflecting the political uncertainties at the time of purchase (and its shape and position). There was also the Ash Lawn and the Walnut Lawn; both trees long since blown down, and the kitchen garden, known as Muir's Way.

Mr Muir (who lived at No. 37) helped my father with the garden, Mrs Westell (No. 64) helped with the ironing, and our greatest love, Mrs Dupres (who lived in the right-hand half of No.150) helped with us.

It wasn't all one way. At a later stage, Mother became a social services home help and cleaned for an old lady at No.152. Mother was about to pour her bucket of dirty water from cleaning the floor down the kitchen sink, which at that time was probably the only sink in the very small, unrenovated cottage.

"Don't do that," cried out the old lady, "that's where I wash my face and hands."

More recently Dad was glad of help with lawn-mowing from Donato (No.154) and Mum was delighted that Vic (No. 98) would look after a plot and share a love of gardening.

Mum used to put spare fruit and vegetables on the doorstep for people to help themselves, and was so chuffed to see a thank-you note left in the tray one day, 'I have taken some apples to make a pie for my little girl'.

As I said, my parents loved living in Fishpool Street. They saw it change from near-slum, almost demolished by the Council, to being referred to by the local press as 'Little Chelsea'.

My father was a founder member of the Fishpool Street Action Group, and my mother frequently consulted a 1970s copy of Kelly's, a directory listing who lived in each house, or more recently referred to Madeleine (No.124) to identify neighbours whose name she could not remember. My parents liked having their neighbours on hand, not separated by long front gardens.

Although a move was sometimes mooted in later years, my mother declared she couldn't live anywhere else. And with the help of her neighbours, that is what she did.

**Maggie Douglas** (*nee Pickles*)

#### **Footnote:**

Maggie Douglas recalls how Fishpool Street began to be transformed (after the Second World War ended in 1945) from more or less a slum area into what estate agents began to call 'St Alban's Little Chelsea'.

Wendy Watson-Simpson (No.8), sister of Betty Davies (our President at No.59), has kindly let us see a newspaper cutting from 1969, which seems to give the first use of the description. It was attributed to Councillor Bertie Brett, a former Mayor of St Albans, who then lived at Bell Meadow (No.137).

With few exceptions the price of houses in the street was very low by today's standards. Even St Michael's Manor, so the paper reported, had been sold at auction in 1950 for as little as £4,000.

Many of the smaller houses were rented and some for very small amounts (8s 4d per week – about 40 pence in today's money) was quoted. However, when rent-control was abolished, prices began to take off.

But even in 1969, when the article was published, astonishment was being expressed that houses in the street were then fetching as much as £8,000 to £20,000. But, it said, 'because of the impossibility of mortgages on property of this vintage, the street is only attracting those with instant cash'.

But at least one estate agent got it right. Mr Eric Gillett, who had practised in the city since 1937, said that the process of upgrading the houses in the street would go on and it would become 'an extra rare and interesting place'.