

# St Michael's Manor

## 1586-2026



St Michael's Manor stands on land originally belonging to St Albans Abbey, which, in 1538, was leased for 81 years to Henry Gape, a member of a family with a long tradition of service to St Albans.

Shortly afterwards the lease was converted to a sale, which explains why it did not fall into the hands of the King's Commissioners at the the time of the Dissolution. Indeed, tradition has it that it was a Ralph Gape, said to have been the Abbey's last steward, who helped the Abbot pre-empt the King's designs and provide for the monks by selling some monastic property once the royal plans became apparent. In the event, he would clearly have been in a good position to negotiate for land which would be of use to the family, already operating a well established tanning business which seems to have been acquired from one Richard Done as early as 1436.

The lease defined the building as bounded by " The tenements of Fishpool Street, whereof in one of them Robert Longe, wheeler, and in the other Peter the Looder, the first abutting upon the King's Highway on the South part and upon Downfield on the North part..... and the second abutting upon the King's Highway on the North part and prior's pond on the South part, towards Kitchener's Mead and adjoining to the tenement of John Berge, carter, on the East part and the tenement of Robert Clement carpenter on the West part.....Timber needed for repairs to be taken at the assignment of the cellarer of the monastery out of the woods called Prayewood and Batchwood ".

It is not clear when a house was first built on the site. The reference to the timber " for repairs " suggests that a building stood on the site before 1530, and this may well be incorporated in the present building which dates back to Tudor times; the cellar contains some evidence of an earlier mediaeval building for it can boast a number of Roman bricks, frequently taken from the ruins of Verulamium for use in new projects in mediaeval times, and the remains of an old flint wall. It is likely that the family began to build a new home for themselves shortly after the land passed into their possession and added new features as time went by.

The Oak Lounge, part of the original Tudor structure, has a fine Elizabethan plastered ceiling with decorations that include fleur de lys and stylised floral bosses; it also incorporates the initials of John Gape and the date 1586.

In 1684 the Mayor of St Albans leased to John Gape the younger " a piece of ground lying in the street of St Albans, joining the North side of his mansion house, about ten feet in breadth along the side of the house, with liberty to enclose the same with posts and rails, yet so all people may pass and repass without hindrance ". The lease was for a hundred years at 1d ( one penny ) a year. This would most likely have been to provide a space for horses which would be tied to the rail- a remote anticipation of our present car parking problems.

The second part of the house was added in the time of William and Mary ( 1689 to 1694 ) and a third , smaller extension, which included a new dining room , kitchens and bedrooms was carried out in 1970. The various architectural styles have been designed, in the words of owner Michael Newling Ward at this time, " to make a very satisfying and harmonious whole while other details- a magnificent hand plastered rococo ceiling on the first landing, Georgian panelling in the Oak Lounge, and elegant Edwardian staircase and the like - contribute to the beauty and graciousness of the building ".

" 1985 saw the completion of the 1970 extension, adding six new rooms to the second floor, the whole attractively tiled and provided with curved dormer windows to match those of a hundred years or so ago ".

The Gape family, builders and owners of St Michael's Manor for so long, played a prominent part in the history of St Albans. The third mayor after the granting of the first charter in 1553 was a Henry Gape and in all a Gape held the office of mayor on some sixteen occasions over a period of three hundred years. They also provided a vicar and several churchwardens of St Michael's Church.

The house was sold by the family in settlement of death duties in 1953 and after some years as a country club it was bought by Mr and Mrs Michael Newling Ward in 1965.

There has been much confusion about the history of the Manor lake. The lake does not appear on any map until 1822 and its appearance ties up with the probable date of a major landscaping of the gardens over two hundred years ago. Its relatively short existence became even more apparent in 1976 when Michael Newling Ward took advantage of the unusually severe drought to dredge 1300 tonnes of silt from the lake and invited staff of the Verulamium Museum to observe the process. The clearance revealed a variety of late eighteenth / early nineteenth century building materials and some chalk footings for timber buildings cut into the alluvial peat deposits which formed the plain of the River Ver. In addition, two or possibly three, large rectangular conjoined pits came to light in which were found a sherd of sixteenth century pottery, part of some leather shoes and a leather belt. A smaller oval pit was found on land previously belonging to the Manor and now part of number 133 Fishpool Street.

Henry Gape, the lessee of the monastic lands in 1538, was already well established as a tanner and on his death he left to his son John his freehold property in St Michael's and " all his other leather and hides in his yards and vats and bark ". It seems logical therefore to assume that the family business was moved near to the family home, where there was also a convenient regular supply of water from the River Ver, and that it was the remains of this that was uncovered. There is also documentary evidence as late as 1744 of a large tannery in this area.

The Herts Advertiser ran an article on 12th May 2016 about the sale of St Michael's Manor. The headline ran as ' Family sells St Michael's Manor in St Albans after 50 years in charge '.

It went on to say " The Newling Ward family said members were " very pleased " to announce that after 50 years of running St Michael's Manor Hotel in Fishpool Street , St Albans, it has been sold to another family ".

Sheila Newling Ward explained " My parents-in- law, late husband David, son Richard and daughter Philippa and I have all been involved in improving the buildings, grounds and business over the years ".

" With no clear succession within the family and most of my children and grandchildren in Australia, and after much soul searching, I decided it was time to retire and spend more time with the family ".

Its new owner, Mauritian born Raj Gunpath , said it would be business as usual, adding " I am very conscious of the long history of independence that St Michael's Manor has enjoyed under the Newling Ward family and wish to retain this as we bring the hotel into my family ".

Raj said no immediate changes were being proposed, as the previous owners had built up a thriving and respected business during their tenure; " Our goal is to build on that solid foundation and further cement the reputation of the hotel into St Albans and Herts by continuing to pursue even higher standards of service and quality ".

This year marks 10 years of St Michael's Manor Hotel under the stewardship of the Gunpath family.



*St Michael's Manor under snow December 2017*

