

The Mystery of Cop Alley

Beside number 120 Fishpool Street lies a narrow alley connecting Fishpool Street to Mount Pleasant via Offa Road. Today it is known as Cock Alley and many believe it was named after the old Cock and Flowerpot Inn at number 120.

However, older residents often referred to the alley as Cop Alley. Wilfred Grant, who lived at number 82 from 1934 until his death in 2004, insisted, in his Hertfordshire brogue, that it was ' Cop Alley '.



Gerald Sanctuary referred to the alley in his 1984 booklet entitled ' Fishpool Street-St Albans ' published in November 1984. Sanctuary states " No. 120, which has a Royal Insurance Company plate on the wall, was once the Cock and Flowerpot Inn, and beside it there is a very narrow alley, often overgrown with nettles in the summer, known as Cock Alley. In some old documents, however, it is referred to as Cop or Copt Alley. One might think that ' Cock Alley ' must be right, because of the name of the Inn, but it is just possible that the other name may be correct, for there is a very early record that there was a building above Fishpool Street in 1388, known as Cappyd Hall.

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It is referred to as ' lying North of Salipath ' and was owned by Nicholas Brembre, a man who was four times Mayor of London, but who was eventually hanged at Tyburn (close to where Marble Arch now stands, at the North-East corner of Hyde Park), for "misusing his position at court". Cappyd Hall later fell into ruins , there are now no traces of it, but it may perhaps have given the original name to " Cappyd Alley ", later corrupted to " Copt Alley ".

Local historian Geoff Dunk wrote an article in the St Albans Review in September 1976 which covered Cappyd Hall and Nicholas Brembre in some detail. Dunk's article carried the headline ' War Tax was the Last Straw for the Peasants '.

Dunk states that " Nicholas Brembre and Thomas Walsingham are names that come down to us from the reign of Richard II, which spanned the years 1377 to 1399 and was a time of great upheaval.

One of Brembre's properties was Cappydhall, immediately adjacent to Cock Alley, or Copt Alley, in Fishpool Street , St Albans, and he was four times Mayor of London. Walsingham was a monk and chief of a group of historians and copyists who worked at St Albans Abbey; he is our principal authority for the national events that took place in this period.

What Brembre did was reported by Walsingham. The historian came to St Albans from Norfolk as a young man and served in the Abbey until 1394, when he became Prior of Wymundam. In 1409 he returned to St Albans and died about 13 years later.

The output of Walsingham and his colleagues was so great that the Abbot, Thomas de la Mare, made plans to enlarge the Abbey library. After the Black Death of 1349 the economy of the Country was turned from agriculture to wool; much less labour was required for sheep shearing ".

Geoff Dunk goes on to say " About this time England established its export trade in the modern manner, and a number of towns were appointed as sole collecting centres in their area for wool. This wool, and other goods, were exported to the distribution centre of Calais by a monopoly of 26 merchants- the Company of Merchants of the Staple. Until 1558 Calais was English property.

Great wealth was gained by the merchants, and for the first time the profit went to the people who bought and sold rather than those who produced goods. Nicholas Brembre exported wool, imported spices and wines and became enormously wealthy. He owned properties in Kent and Middlesex, houses in St Albans and in 12 different London parishes. He lent large sums to Edward III and to Richard II.

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Richard was only ten years old when he came to the throne and the country was ruled by his uncle, John of Gaunt- Duke of Lancaster, and some of the wealthy merchants. Not only was the country governed by merchants, but there was rivalry between the trade guilds for control of the cities. When a draper or goldsmith was Mayor of London the price of food came down; when a grocery or fishmonger was Mayor it increased.

Nicholas Brembre was a grocer. On one occasion he was only elected Mayor of London by filling the Guildhall with armed men ".

Geoff Dunk states " The crunch came in 1381 when a poll tax was imposed to pay for the war in France. The people refused to pay and there were uprisings throughout the country. Preacher John Ball with his " When Adam delved and Eve span. Who then was the gentleman ", became one of the spokesmen for the multitude and Wat Tyler from Kent invaded London. The St Albans rising against the Abbot was led by William Gryndcobb.

The King was not blamed for the country's troubles and anyone who was " With King Richard and the true commons " went unharmed. Walsingham reports the events that followed.

The 14-year-old King made promises to Wat Tyler and the people should be freed from serfdom and be allowed to rent land. On his way to one these meetings Brembre, the late Mayor, who was accompanying the King, was stopped and shouted at by William Trueman. That same evening Trueman with a band of rebels came to Brembre's house and threatened him. Brembre bought his safety for £3.10s.

The next day, at a meeting with the King at Smithfield, the rebel leader Tyler was killed by Mayor Walworth. The Peasants' Revolt was over. John Ball was hanged at St Albans, as was the local leader Gryndcobb. Promises made under duress do not count and although gradual changes were made to the status of the peasants, it was around 80 years later that serfdom finally came to an end.

In 1388 Brembre was charged with using his position at Court to make his fortune and was hanged at Tyburn. It was reported in the 1556 Marian Survey that Copsydhall in Fishool Street was in ruins.

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Some of the facts in this article are collected together in ' England in the Age of Chaucer ' a very readable book by William Woods. Other facts are from various Transactions of the St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society ".

' England in the Age of Chaucer ' was published by Woods in January 1976. It details the life of Nicholas Brembre at this very turbulent period of English History. It confirms that Brembre was a wool trade man and became very wealthy. Brembre thought he could put himself beyond the law by leading money to Edward III. John Philpot and Brembre were brothers-in-law having both married daughters of the rich John de Stodeye. In the last twenty years of his life Brembre amassed quite a remarkable amount of money. As well as six manors in Kent , three manors in Middlesex, and certain houses in St Albans , he owned property in twelve separate London Parishes (as stated earlier by Geoff Dunk). Woods also confirms that Brembre was not only a grocer, but a pepperer (spices imported in large quantities) and a dealer in iron, wines, woad (a blue dye for cloth)and wool.

Only John of Northampton stood up against the corruption of Brembre and Philpot. Brembre succeeded Northampton as Mayor in 1383-84; he not only had his predecessor's ordinances annulled (it was not until 1390 under another draper that a man was prosecuted for selling stinking fish) but began at once looking round for grounds on which he might have Northampton brought to trial on a charge of sedition.

Brembre was brought to trial in the February of 1388, accused among other things of having used his position at Court to make his own fortune by gifts of land and jewels and issues from the taxes , and of having procured land and jewels and offices for relatives and for those who would give him a commission on the grant.

The trial lasted four days. He was convicted and on Wednesday 20 February 1388, he was drawn in a cart to Tyburn and hanged.

The Marian Survey of St Albans

The so- called Marian Survey (in the reign of Queen Mary) was conducted in 1556 on behalf of the Court of Augmentations, which was set up to raise money from former property of the dissolved monasteries. The St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society published an article by William Page in the Society's Transactions of 1893-94. William Page covers Fishpool Street in some detail :

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" We now come to Fishpool Street, so called after the Fishpool to the south of it. Here are many interesting old house, several of which I have no doubt date back earlier than the time of the Survey. I have been unable to identify the position of any of the tenements mentioned in the Survey in this street; among them was one formerly called Maudlyn, then re-christened the Crane, and another called the Dolphin. The tenements on the south side all extended down to the meadow called Kitcheners Mead, which was between them and the river. Behind the tenements on the north side probably in Mud Lane, about opposite to the garden wall of the Manor House, stood the Black Cross.

The lower part of Fishpool Street was called Sallypath , possibly, as Mr Fowler suggests , from having been the sally from Kingsbury Castle which stood on the north side of it. Here was an ancient tenement called Coppinghall, in ruins at the time of the Survey, but I have found mention of it in an Inquisition Post Mortem on Nicholas Brembre taken in 1388 (an Inquisition Post Mortem is a historical record and valuation taken after a person's death to determine what was owed to the Crown).

Further details emerge about Coppinghall in more recent research. Chris Saunders was one of the St Albans Museum's archaeological team on the late 90s and a member of SAHAAS. He published a paper around 1995 entitled Medieval St Albans with references to Coppinghall, William Grindcobbe and Sir Nicholas Brembre (Brembre was knighted by Richard II in 1381).Saunders states the following: " Salipath: this was the lower end of Fishpool Street, although exactly how far it stretched is uncertain. This uncertainty is not new; in 1596 a building is described as being in ' Sallypath alias St Michells Strete alias Fishpoolstrete ". On the northern side the properties stretched back to Downfield hedge, the borough boundary which demarcated the Abbot's field known as Downfield and on the southern side down to the river.

In the C14 William Grindcobbe , one of the local leaders of the Great revolt of 1381 had a cottage known as Coppinghall (or Copped Hall) with two acres of land in Salipath and on the southern side of the street was later some property belonging to the Priory of St Bartholomew , West Smithfield London ".

Later in this very detailed research Chris Saunders also noted in 1381 that William Grindcobbe had a house on Holywell Hill and a house and a garden and dovecote in Elwood Lane. At this time Holywell Hill was known as Holywell Street and sometimes Haliwell Street. Grindcobbe was clearly a man of some social standing.

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Sir Nicholas Brembre and Geoffrey Chaucer were professional colleagues, political allies, and, to some extent, business associates within the royalist faction of Richard II's London. Chaucer was a courtier and poet who worked directly with Brembre in managing the City's customs.

Beginning around 1374, Chaucer served as Comptroller of Customs for the Port of London, which required him to audit the accounts of the Keepers of Customs, which included Brembre. They worked together in this capacity at the Wool Quay, with records indicating a close association.

Geoffrey Chaucer moved from London to Kent around 1385-86. He resigned his demanding Customs House position and gave up his London lease in 1386 to take on roles as a Justice of the Peace and Knight of the Shire (MP) for Kent. He likely settled in Greenwich. This gave Chaucer the time to write *Canterbury Tales*. While *The Merchant's Tale* is not exactly about Brembre, it is believed by some historians to be influenced by the types of merchants dealt with in his professional life. The character of the Merchant in the General Prologue is described as wealthy, well dressed, and a savvy businessman whose true financial status (specifically his debt) is hidden behind a facade.

The Merchant's Tale is generally viewed as a critique of the avarice, moral ambiguity and deceit often associated with the rising merchant class in 14th Century London.

This insignificant and often neglected alley way between Fishpool Street and Mount Pleasant has shown that it has a surprising and colourful history. Not only was Coppydhall once owned by two major figures in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 but also has interesting connections to Chaucer's '*The Canterbury Tales*'.

Acknowledgements

'England In The Age Of Chaucer' William Woods published January 1976.

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The St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society website.