

From Alien Priory to Manor House – Uncovering 800 years of History

BY ELLEN LESLIE – BUILDINGS HISTORIAN

Above:
1761 Plan of
The Rectory

Top right:
The Manor
House 2011

Right:
1670 The Manor
House (The
Parsonage)
by permission
of The Master and
Fellows of Trinity
College Cambridge



My work as an architectural historian takes me all over the country, researching houses from medieval halls, Georgian townhouses, Edwardian mansion blocks and all building types and periods in between. I research houses for architects and property professionals as well as for private home owners and last year at the 2011 Listed Property Show I received several commissions, including a house in Ware, Hertfordshire that was once an “Alien Priory”, but is today called “The Manor House”.

The untold story of this Grade II* building was spread far and wide in

the form of maps, deeds, wills, letters, drawings and photographs. My research covered local archives, government records and libraries, as well as the Royal Institute of British Architects, the British Library, the National Archives and the National Monuments Record in Swindon. Researching this house also took me to the archive of Trinity College Cambridge. Using all these sources, combined with a personal inspection of the building, I was able to bring together the full story of The Manor House. This included who had lived there and how the building has evolved over the centuries.

It is believed that the house is

located on the site of an “Alien” Benedictine priory established in the 13th century. This doesn’t mean that little green monks lived there, but the religious order was under the direct control of a senior religious house overseas, in this case, France.

Although it is called The Manor House, for most of its long history it has been a substantial farm house that was once the hub of a large and dynamic farming estate.

Probably due to its religious origins, up until the early 19th century it was called “The Parsonage”. Then new tenants began to use the word “Rectory” or

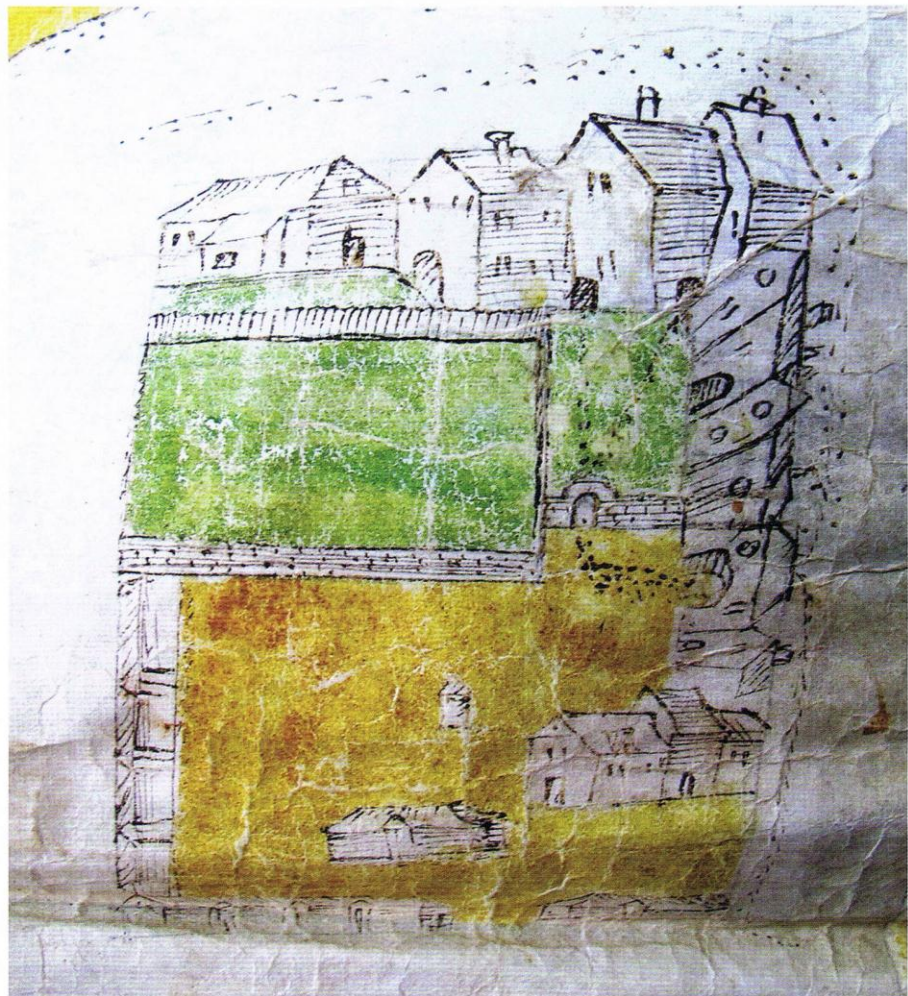


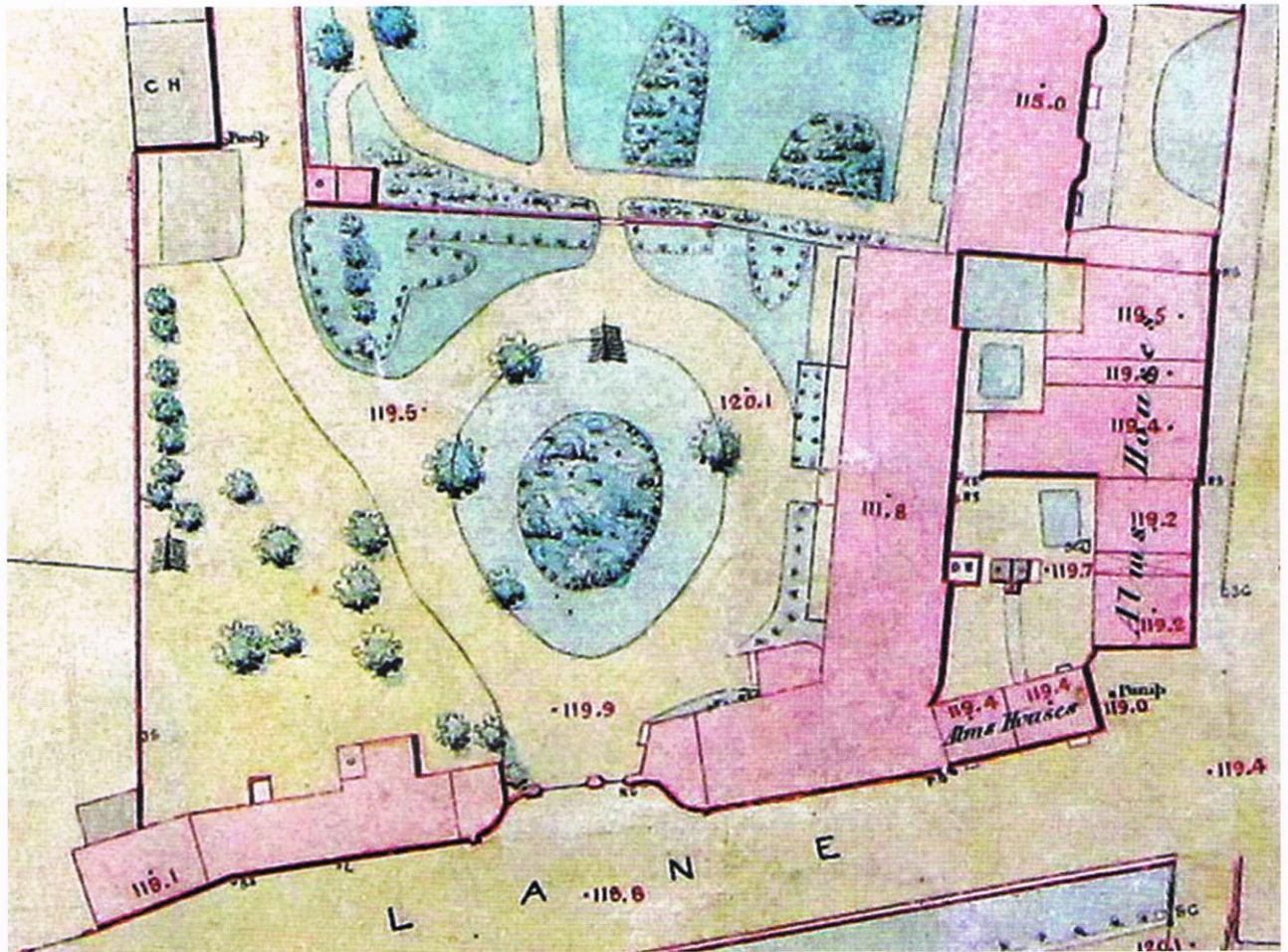
"Rectory House" and by the late 19th century the house was known as the "Manor Rectory" and or simply "The Manor House".

The house was taken out of religious hands in 1546, under Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries and given to Trinity College Cambridge.

My research found an unbroken line of occupants from the 1530s and it is interesting to see that with a change of hands, so the building was altered or improved. It was also encouraging to see that features about the house observed in my site inspection were borne out in documentary evidence such as inventories of works and correspondence between tenant and landlord.

Architecturally, The Manor House has seen change in every century of its long life. It is difficult to discern its medieval structure these days, but its footprint is still there with additions in each century from 17th to 20th. My documentary research also found evidence that





1851 Ordnance Survey Map

this “L-shaped” building was once two structures; one the main house, running north to south; and the other the office or “counting house,” west to east. My research showed the two buildings were joined in about 1800.

When investigating a house, I don’t just research the bricks and mortar, or wattle and daub, of a building; I uncover the human narrative as well. Within the walls of The Manor House are stories of long family lines, investing their lives and reputations in this house and estate over generations; stories of lives cut short; tails of fortune, ruin and civil war. One story which stands out is that of the young gentleman farmer Lewis Buckeridge who died aged about 35 years, in the early 1760s. He left one illegitimate infant son, whom he insisted in his will, would inherit the Parsonage’s lucrative lease. He also made clear that the mistress and mother could continue living at the house while

she remained single. But should she marry, not only would she lose her home, but also her son!

In the early 19th century there was a family of five brothers and sisters who shared the lease on the house and farm. They then sublet the property to a local businessman, William Cater, who ended up in Hertford Gaol for debt and other financial irregularities in the 1850s. He managed to ruffle many feathers in the town, none more so than the vicar. According to correspondence found, after the prison sentence Cater returned to live at the house, with his wife and children. But the vicar was very upset that this man, who still owed money to so many local people, should continue to enjoy the tenancy right to sit in the manorial pew in the church. This was eventually resolved when the Caters moved out of the property, albeit leaving it in a dilapidated state. Trinity College saw to it that all necessary repairs were carried out

and there followed nearly 150 years of peaceful enjoyment of the house by more well-behaved tenants and owners.

And today? Since 1993, the Manor House has been owned by Douglas and Gail Stewart who, with their loving care of this historic building, are writing the latest chapter in the story of this fascinating house.

Ellen Leslie BA (Hons) Dip. Cons (AA) is a buildings historian who researches the history buildings for the conservation industry and private home owners. She studied at the Architectural Association’s School of Architecture where she attained the Postgraduate Diploma in the Conservation of Historic Buildings.

*For more information:
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