



News and events

- Our next meeting will be on **Wednesday 16 October** when Heather Falvey will talk about **Reconstructing the medieval church of St Mary's, Rickmansworth, from wills.**
- **SAHAAS** (St Albans History Society) has an extensive **programme of talks** between now and Christmas. Tuesday evenings at 7.45, most at the Dagnall Street Baptist Church, some on Zoom, and some on both. <https://www.stalbanshistory.org/category/events>

An Unusual Burial

In about 1845, a farmer named Dolphin Smith and his wife, Maria Atherton, moved from Wiltshire to Water End Farm, at that time in the parish of Sandridge. Around the same time, William Alsup Grigg and his wife, Ellen Atherton, Maria's sister, also moved from Wiltshire to become the tenants of Castle Farm on the banks of the River Lea. Little is known about William Grigg other than the information given on their marriage certificate of 1844. Born in Newbury, Berkshire, in about 1815, the son of John Grigg, a 'gentleman', he was described as 'a medical man' and in later years on his probate document as a 'Surgeon'. Why he abandoned medicine to take up farming after his marriage is unknown but he and his wife settled at Castle Farm and remained there for 15 years. The 1851 census return shows William Grigg as a tenant of Charles Drake Garrard, farming 150 acres and employing seven labourers. He and his wife lived at the farm with two servants and do not seem to have had any children.

In the late 1850s, amid mounting excitement and some trepidation in the village, railway tracks were cut through open fields to the south of the river visible from Castle Farm. The new station at Wheathampstead was due to open on 1 September 1860. Sadly, earlier that year on 9th February, William Grigg, pre-occupied with other concerns, committed suicide at the age of 45. An inquest was held at the farm before the coroner, R. G. Lowe Esq, and a report was published in *The Hertford Mercury*:

It appeared from the evidence that William Grigg indulged too freely in drink and on Thursday last, paid unusually frequent visits to his cellar for home-made wine, which was kept there. After his last visit to the cellar, he smoked a pipe in the parlour, then went upstairs into the bedroom of an elderly female relative, where he endeavoured to light a fire. After that he had supper, and went to bed at 7 o'clock, not an unusual hour for him.

Almost immediately afterwards Mrs Grigg heard a noise and on going upstairs found her husband had shot himself. He had discharged a pistol, which he kept loaded on the mantel-shelf, into his mouth. It was stated he had often expressed a fear that he should be turned out of the farm, but that there was not the slightest reason for this impression. The Jury found that the deceased 'Shot himself with a pistol while in an unsound state of mind'.

For centuries suicides were buried at crossroads, sometimes with a stake through their body. In 1823, Parliament condemned this barbaric practice and passed an Act allowing private burial in a churchyard, but only at night and without a Christian service. The law was later reviewed and a new Act in 1882 allowed burial in daylight hours. William Grigg was buried in February 1860, presumably at night, in the churchyard at St Helen's and a discreet gravestone now marks the spot.



He bequeathed 'under £800' to his widow (current value about £47,000) so Ellen left Castle Farm with independent means. After her tragic experience, she never re-married but two generations of her family provided her with support. She died at Portsea Island in Hampshire in 1895 at the age of 77.

Suicide was not decriminalised until 1961 and a ban on full Christian funerals for those who commit suicide was only lifted by the Church of England in 2017.

Dianne Payne