

## St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016

**Building:** 17 High Street

**Researched by:** Maureen Jones

This research was undertaken by volunteers and is not an exhaustive history of the building but captures what intrigued them during the project.

If you have any memories you'd like to share, or any queries about the research, please do let us know: [museum@stalbans.gov.uk](mailto:museum@stalbans.gov.uk)

This beautiful building is situated in the High Street opposite the Clock Tower. It consists of three storeys and is distinguished by the pargetting on the first and second floors. Pargetting is a type of decorative plaster work, which in this case consists of rustic panels and at the top of the gable is a raised oval panel bearing the date 1665. The building is older than this and was probably built in the C15. The window on the first floor is a five light canted bay window (polygonal or square window) with casements and the window on the second floor is a three bay mullioned and transomed window (see picture). The curved glass windows in the shop frontage were put in sometime between 1880 and 1910.



When built there was no provision made for heating, so this and the two buildings adjoining it to the west were probably built as 'lock up' shops (i.e. solely used as a shop, with no living quarters). These had selling space on the ground floor and work space or storage space on the two floors above. The building became Grade 2 listed on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1950.

In 1834 William Fisk and his wife Louisa came from Suffolk to St Albans and opened a drapers shop on the High Street. William and Louisa had nine children. Three of their sons went on to become Baptist Ministers, but James, their second son left school at the age of fifteen to assist his father in the shop. The business was very successful and the 1881 census shows both William and James living above two adjoining shops with their families and staff.

James Fisk took over the running of the business in 1878 and his father William died in 1881. An 1883 advert from the St Albans Almanack and General Advertiser shows a department store spread over four buildings in the High Street selling general drapery, clothing and boots, furnishing and carpets.

The Fisks were now one of the leading families in the town and James became Mayor of St Albans in 1878, 1883 and 1892. James died in 1899 and his wife Anne and their son William carried on the business.

Fisks bought number 17 High Street (currently The Shaken Cow) in 1908 and it became their boot and shoe department. When in 1911 the building next door to the west, 'The Little Red Lion' public house lost its licence, William Fisk bought the building so that the department store could run over eight premises 17, 19, 21, 23, 27, 29 and 33 High Street. It was then proposed to demolish 17, 19 and 21 High Street, which were all ancient 'lock up' shops and replace them with a building more in keeping with the look of the rest of the store. In deference to the wishes of the people of the town William Fisk agreed to save Number 17, but the other two buildings were demolished.

In an article published in the Herts Advertiser in 1911 the reporter talks about the saving of Number 17 and says that in researching the history of the building it was discovered that it once belonged to Edward Strong. Strong was a master mason and worked with Christopher Wren on the rebuilding of St Pauls in London. Edward Strong died in 1723 and in his will bequeathed his estate to his only daughter Elizabeth New. There is a large memorial to him in St Peters church.

Like his father before him William Fisk became Mayor of St Albans in 1912 and his fifteen year old daughter Kathleen was his mayoress. William like the rest of his family was involved with the Baptist Church and was at one time their organist. He continued to run the shop until his death in 1936.

It would seem that Fisks was then run by a series of managers until 1961 when it became Blundell's department store. They were there until 1972. Since the 1970's number 17 has been many different kinds of shop including a double glazing store, a gift shop and since 2010 the Shaken Cow.

Number 17 is alleged to be haunted by a ghost known as 'the corset maker'. She is said to be the daughter of a manager of Fisks who kept her locked in her room when she fell in love with one of the storemen. In her distress she committed suicide. After her death a table of wedding veils in the shop was often found disturbed and some of the shop assistants saw her figure in the Abbey gardens. She is also said to haunt the basement and has been heard upstairs.

#### **Research sources**

- Census returns
- The Review Newspaper
- Historic England - Grade 2 listing
- Kelly's Directories (St Albans Central Library)
- Hertfordshire Genealogy -St Albans - Fisk and Son [www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/](http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/)
- St Albans Free Press
- St Albans in Old Photographs - Sam Mullins, Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994
- Picture Postcards of old St Albans - James Corbett, MMA, 1996
- St Albans Past and Present (Facebook group) - Maurice Ferrara
- Ancestry website [www.ancestry.co.uk/](http://www.ancestry.co.uk/)
- Fisk the Drapers, St Albans, 19th century – general internet website
- SAHAAS - [www.stalbanshistory.org/](http://www.stalbanshistory.org/)
- Fisk History - Internet