

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016

Building: 30–32 Market Place

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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

Aficionados of the café culture sipping their tall, skinny lattes in the urban chic of Caffè Nero might be surprised to know that 350 years ago they would have been sitting among “*stinkinge goare*” of a 17th century butchers shop and slaughter house.

The building now known as 30-32¹ Market Place was built in the 1660s² in what was then the butchers' shambles, the area of the town devoted to selling meat and slaughtering livestock. Originally consisting of market stalls, the buildings around the market place were gradually turned into shops that encroached upon the open market area during the 16th and 17th centuries.

It is rare to be able to identify the original purpose of a building from the architecture alone, but if we turn building detectives we will discover that Number 30-32 was purpose-built as a butcher's house and shop.

From the front, the building gives little clue to its origins with its modern shop frontage and a plastered first floor wall in which there are four windows with two attic windows above in a high pitched tiled roof³, but step into Sovereign Way (formerly Old Police Station Alley), which runs down the side of the building, and there are clues to its true origins. The rear wing has a “bold jetty”, a first floor which projects out over the ground floor. High up on the ground floor beneath the jetty are two mysterious windows “surrounded with moulded ornaments in low relief”⁴ – sometimes known as pargeting and which is more common to the Eastern counties. These north facing windows were designed to let in the light but to still keep the interior of the building cool. The room behind the windows has a sunken floor, making the room very lofty; it was in this room that the carcasses of the beasts were hung prior to being cut up.

Behind the present building would once have been a barn in which the animals were kept. A butcher's probate inventory of 1675 mentions “slaughter house and barns ... providing for the livestock awaiting dispatch for their killing”⁴. The Market Place was used for selling cattle and other livestock for many centuries before it moved to Drovers Way in 1926.

The 17th century the shop facing onto the Market Place would have sold meat and offal through a fold down flap in place of window and on market days there may also have been a stall outside, perhaps not so very different to St Albans market today.

Next to the shop on the ground floor would have been a hall, which would probably have been used as a place of business or office, whilst on the floor above the butcher and his family lived. A comfortable parlour occupied the jettied room⁵ over the butchery next to a dining room. From the

¹ Confusingly referred to as 33/34 Market Place in some sources, but clearly the same building

² St Albans 1650 – 1700, edited by J.T. Smith, M.A. North, Hertfordshire Publications 2003,

³ Domestic Architecture in Central St Albans c.1800 by John Bethell

⁴ A 17th Century Butcher's Shop – GP McSweeney & JT Smith, Hertfordshire Archaeology Vol. 16 (2009)

⁵ Jettying is a building technique used in medieval timber-frame buildings in which an upper floor projects beyond the dimensions of the floor below.

upstairs room there would originally have been a view up St Peter's Street to the church, which would have been considered quite prestigious. The butcher and his family would have been prosperous members of St Albans society.

Number 30-32 has had various retail uses over the centuries but it returned to its original purpose when Dewhurst the Butchers, occupied the site until 1994. Subsequently it became a clothes shop (Monsoon) and it now serves as a café where the sights and sounds – and perhaps the smells, are rather more acceptable to modern sensibilities than its original use.