

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016	
Building:	37 - 39 Holywell Hill
Researched by:	Richard Howard
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	

These two buildings stand on the east side of Holywell Hill at the junction with Sopwell Lane. They date from the 15th century and incorporate number 2 Sopwell Lane which dates from the first half of the 16th century. All three are nationally listed Grade II buildings {1,2,3} and are widely considered to be amongst the best preserved medieval buildings in St Albans. Number 37 was built as an inn known as The Crane, it later became The Chequers and in the early 19th century The Crown and Anchor {4}. Number 39 is also believed to have been an inn known as the Horsehead in the 16th and 17th century, there is no record of it being an inn from the 18th century. {5}

The three buildings are each of two storeys and are timber framed under a high-pitched tiled roof. The roofs of numbers 37 and 39 are continuous whereas that of number 2 Sopwell Lane is slightly lower than number 37.

The first floor overlooking Sopwell Lane is jettied¹ in similar fashion to a number of other buildings of this period in St Albans e.g. the Moot Hall (W H Smith), the Christopher Inn and other houses further along Sopwell Lane. This feature provided additional floor area on the upper floor. The refurbishment of number 37 following the lorry crash in 1958 (see below) resulted in the ground floor on the Holywell Hill side being extended outwards so that it is now flush with the first floor. Exposed beam ends with plaster filling between can be seen along the first floor overlooking Sopwell Lane and Holywell Hill. The eight first floor windows reflect a number of different styles indicating replacement of the original unglazed windows over the years. The ground floor along this section is brick faced and incorporates later sash windows, a 19th century shop front and two 19th century doors all in the Gothic style. The south side of the building overlooks a courtyard garden and features a Juliet balcony on the first floor.

Number 39 adjoins number 37 and also features exposed beams and is refaced with plaster. The three first floor windows are replacements as is the sash window on the ground floor. The door has five fielded panels beneath a radial fanlight and cornice hood on curved brackets. To the left of the door is a carriageway entrance leading to a rear yard.

The interior of numbers 37 and 2 have been extensively modernised, however, many of the original timbers and beams have been retained along with a large stone fireplace on the first floor.

The following photographs illustrate some the features described above.

¹ Jettying is a building technique used in medieval timber-frame buildings in which an upper floor projects beyond the dimensions of the floor below.



Numbers 37 & 39 from Holywell Hill



The north side of number 37 & 2 Sopwell Lane



Number 37 showing different window styles and filled in cellar entrance



Number 2 showing 1st floor window, beams and jettying



One of the Gothic style 19C doors



The 19C Gothic style carriageway entrance to number 37



The location of the 19C shop front



Refurnished ground floor of number 37, part of number 39 showing the carriage doors

Although these buildings are over 500 years old there is limited information available regarding their history and who lived there, this particularly applies to the 17th and 18th centuries. They have, however, occupied a prominent position on one of the main routes into and out of St Albans from their construction in the late 15th century through to the present day.

From medieval times until the coming of the railways in the 1850s St Albans was one of the main staging posts on the coaching route between London, the Midlands, and the North. Frederick Kitton noted that at the height of the coaching trade about seventy coaches passed through St. Albans every day bringing travellers, business people and visitors to the Abbey {6}. Given that the population of the St Albans district in early 19th century was around ten thousand the presence of up to one thousand visitors each day must have a significant effect on the local infrastructure, as well as providing commercial opportunities for local traders and hoteliers and employment for local people .

Prior to the construction of the new London Road in the late 18th century stagecoaches entered and left the town via Sopwell Lane and Holywell Hill. This route was lined with inns and hostelries and although not the largest or most famous of St Albans' inns, The Crane and The Horsehead were ideally placed to take advantage of this early tourist trade. Once the coaches could use an alternative route that avoided the steep incline of Holywell Hill it is highly likely that trade dropped for the inns serving the Sopwell Lane area. This was compounded by the arrival of the railways in 1858 and it therefore no surprise that The Crown and Anchor then became a local drinking establishment.

No 37 was built as an inn serving the monastery prior to the dissolution in 1539 and was known as the Crane until at least 1556. It later became the Chequers, or Lower Chequers to distinguish from the Chequers Inn in Chequer Street, and in the early part of the 19th century the premises became the Crown and Anchor. In 1891 it was owned by the Anchor Brewery of Hemel Hempstead and was offered for sale as a freehold beerhouse. Beerhouses were licensed under the Beer Act of 1830 and allowed any householder or ratepayer, on payment of two guineas to the Excise, to sell beer and cider from their property. This often resulted in licensees operating both as a shop and a small scale public house.

The property was described as 'occupies a prominent position at the corner of Holywell Hill and Sopwell Lane, having frontage of 20 feet to the former and of 91 feet to the latter'. This would suggest that it occupied most, if not all, of the Sopwell Lane building rather than just number 37.

The property was also described as 'comprising shop, two parlours, taproom, eight bedrooms and kitchen'. {7} This plus census records from the time that identify the licensees as a grocer/publican/beer retailer are consistent with the Crown and Anchor's description as a beerhouse {8}. Evidence of a 19th shop front would also tend to support this view.

Local trade directory entries for the first half of the 20th century continued to describe the proprietor as a beer retailer without making specific reference to the Crown and Anchor although it was most certainly trading under this name when a lorry crashed into the premises in 1958. The resulting damage can be seen below in a photo by local resident Alf Gentle:



This event signified the end of the building as an inn and public house after more than 450 years. Number 37 was however restored with a modern frontage and traded as an antiques shop until the mid 1980s, latterly known as Crispin Antiques it is now known as Crispin House. The premises then housed an estate agency and a children's clothes shop before becoming a private residence in 2004.

There is a strong possibility that number 39 was also an inn known as the Horsehead. In 1650 the Chequer and the Horsehead were owned by Arthur Bankes and in 1681 his widow sold both properties, the latter described as 'lying and being together with the Chequer'. No further references to the Horsehead have been found and it does not appear on M.H. Pope's map of 18th century St Albans {5}.

On-line sources

Footnote no	URL	Title	Page nos
1	https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1103095	Crown and Anchor	
2	https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1347166	2 Sopwell Lane	
3	https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1347143	39 Holywell Hill	
4	http://www.salbani.co.uk/Med%20Web/holywell_hill.htm	The Crane Inn	
5	http://www.stalbanshistory.org/documents/1899_1900_07_.pdf	Old Inns of St Albans - F Kitton	3/4
6	http://www.stalbanshistory.org/documents/1899_1900_07_.pdf	Old Inns of St Albans - F Kitton	1/2/3
7	http://www.stalbansmuseums.org.uk/get-involved/talking-buildings/	Crown and Anchor	64/65/66
8	http://pubshistory.com/HertsPubs/StAlbans/CrownAnchor.shtml	Crown and Anchor	