The Settlement Above the Marsh

The history of St Albans began before the Romans arrived.

Axes found locally dating from the Palaeolithic (110,000 BC) and Mesolithic (10,000 BC) periods show this area was populated by seasonal hunters, moving around in search of food.

In the Neolithic period around 4,000 BC, farming began. This produced a more reliable food supply and allowed people to settle in one place. In Hertfordshire, farmers used puddingstone, one of the rarest rocks in the world, to grind their wheat into flour.

Around 2,500 BC people learned how to mix copper with other metals to produce bronze, which they used to make blades and other tools. By 700 BC they were able to make even stronger iron tools.

During the Iron Age the local population grew and the first villages appeared.

A centre known as Verlamion, meaning, 'the settlement above the marsh', developed at a crossing point of the river Ver. The local Catuvellauni tribe worked the land while their leaders traded grain, cattle and slaves with other tribes in Britain and across the Roman Empire.

+ *You can visit a prehistoric ditch known as Devil's Dyke just to the east of Wheathampstead. This ditch formed part of an Iron Age settlement belonging to the Catuvellauni.*

A Growing Roman Town

The Romans arrived in Britain in AD 43.

While some tribes fought against Roman rule, the local Catuvellauni tribe seem to have welcomed the Romans. Verlamion, now the local capital, became known by its Roman name, Verulamium.

In AD 60 or 61, Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni tribe of East Anglia led a revolt, burning down Camulodonum (Colchester), Londinium and Verulamium before being defeated. Later, Verulamium was rebuilt on an even grander scale and by this time was granted the high status of *Municipium*.

Verulamium was a market town, with goods produced locally and traded from abroad through the port of Londinium. Metalworkers, potters and traders flourished along the Roman road into the town, known today as Watling Street.

After a second fire in AD 155, Verulamium was rebuilt again, this time with many impressive houses containing mosaic floors, painted walls and ceilings. Verulamium's political and economic importance saw it become the third largest town in Roman Britain.

While Roman rule officially ended by the early AD 400s, we know that the Roman way of life continued in Verulamium for some time.

+ *You can still visit the remains of Verulamium today. Explore the Roman walls in the park, see Roman central heating in the Hypocaust building and discover everything from fine mosaics and wall paintings to everyday objects in Verulamium Museum.*

The Rise of Religion

After the Roman period the settlement at Verulamium began to shrink in size and importance. While Saxon settlers spread across much of Britain, their presence was limited locally to a small community. Eventually the town passed into the ownership of the Saxon kings as a fortified settlement or burgh, referred to as Kingsbury.

As Christianity spread, the story of Alban, Britain's first Christian martyr, became increasingly important. Alban is believed to have been executed during the Roman period for his Christian beliefs and a shrine and monastery were built on the hill where he was thought to have died. In 1077 Abbot Paul de Caen

demolished the existing church and began building the Abbey church which still stands today.

As the monastery and its abbey church grew in size and importance, a new town grew around it. The Abbey bought the site of Kingsbury and diverted the Roman Watling Street from Verulamium into St Albans via Holywell Hill and Fishpool Street. The Abbey and town around it, now known as St Albans, soon became the economic centre of the region.

+ *St Albans Cathedral is still welcoming visitors today, more than 1700 years since Alban's death. Visit to discover more about the story of Alban, the importance of the monastery and its promotion to the status of Cathedral in 1877.*

Pilgrimage and Protest

During the medieval period, the shrine of St Alban became a popular place of pilgrimage.

Inns and taverns offered accommodation to visiting pilgrims and travellers. A range of trades including bakers, brewers, butchers, leather workers and weavers operated in the town. While the town and its people had some rights, ultimate control rested with the Abbey. The Abbot imposed taxes on produce passing through the market, controlled access to pasture land and forced the townspeople to grind their corn at the Abbey's mills.

In 1327 the townspeople protested outside the Abbey for

ten days before the county militia restored order. The King gave the townspeople more freedom except for the right to use their own handmills to grind their bread. The Abbey objected and a few years later these new rights were retracted.

The townspeople sought freedom again in 1381 when they joined the Peasants' Revolt. The rebellion was crushed and around 15 men were executed in St Albans, including one of the national leaders, John Ball, and the St Albans-born William Grindcobb.

+ *St Albans Clock Tower was built just outside the Abbey walls in the early 1400s. It was a symbol of independence as its market bell meant that the town no longer relied on the Abbey for time keeping.*

The Wars of the Roses

Two important battles during the Wars of the Roses took place in St Albans.

The House of Lancaster ruled through King Henry VI, but the House of York had a rival claimant to the throne - Richard, Duke of York. The opening battle took place in St Albans in 1455.

The Lancastrians, led by Edmund Duke of Somerset, and the Yorkists, led by Richard Duke of York, set up battle positions around the town. During the battle the Duke of Somerset was killed and Henry VI was captured by the Yorkists. Unlike most conflicts in the Wars of the Roses, this major battle took place in the

town centre, just outside this building.

The Second Battle of St Albans started on 17 February 1461 when Queen Margaret and the Lancastrians confronted the Earl of Warwick. The Queen's forces made a successful attack which resulted in the defeat of Warwick and the Yorkists at Bernards Heath, just north of the town centre.

The balance of power continued to shift between the Lancastrian and Yorkist houses until the marriage of Henry VII Elizabeth of York in 1486 formed a new dynasty. Even after this, battles were fought and minor uprisings continued for a number of years.

+ *The site of the First Battle of St Albans is just outside this building, along French Row and Market Place. The Boot Inn has been named a "battlefield pub" as part of the building was already standing in 1455.*

A Royal Charter

When Henry VIII split from the Roman Catholic Church he ordered the closing of monasteries across the country including St Albans in 1539.

With the Abbey gone, St Albans needed new leadership and in 1553 Edward VI granted a Royal Charter which established a system of local government, including creating the position of mayor. The charter gave the town control of its market and set market days as every Wednesday and Saturday.

The majority of the Abbey's lands were bought by Richard Lee, a military engineer who had been an influential figure in Henry VIII's court. These lands included Sopwell Nunnery where he

demolished the existing buildings, reusing the materials to create Lee Hall on the same site.

Meanwhile, the Abbey itself was looted and fell into disrepair. As part of the 1553 charter, the Lady Chapel became a school, the gatehouse a jail and the rest of the main Abbey building the parish church.

+ *Visit the remains of Richard Lee's house, Lee Hall, still known locally as Sopwell Nunnery, just south of the city centre. The ruins, including the gatehouse and a kitchen, can be seen from Cottonmill Lane or the Ver Valley Walk.*

St Albans on the Map

St Albans is only a day's ride from London and travellers had been stopping here on their journeys north for hundreds of years. During the 1700s improvements in coach design and improvements made to the local roads led to an increase in the number of travellers.

In 1815 it was estimated that around a thousand people passed through St Albans every day. Inns and taverns appeared across St Albans to cater to them. Many inns had high, arched entrances to allow coaches to enter their stable yards and some of these are still visible on Holywell Hill and Chequer Street.

Improvements in transportation also led to St Albans becoming a very desirable place to live on the outskirts of London and several large houses were built in the area. One of the largest of these was Gorhambury; originally built by Sir Francis Bacon's father Nicholas, it was then rebuilt in an even grander style in 1777 and is now home to the Earl of Verulam.

Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough and one of Queen Anne's closest friends, was born in a house on Holywell Hill in St Albans.

+ *Gorhambury has been home to many important people including the philosopher and politician Sir Francis Bacon. The current house was built in 1777-84 but the ruins of the original Elizabethan house are still visible in the grounds today.*

A City in the Making

Until the end of the 1800s business in St Albans was largely restricted to workshop trades and cottage industries. Straw plaiting and hat making were features of this area for many years, providing employment for women and children.

The expansion of the railways signalled a dramatic change for St Albans. By 1868, Midland Railway's line from Bedford to London was completed with a new station built to the east of the town centre. By 1900, the direct service to London took just 35 minutes.

With this link established, some industries moved out of London seeking more spacious premises. The new industries replaced the

city's Victorian and Edwardian workshops with custom-built factories. Samuel Ryder made his fortune here with his mail order seed business before going on to establish the now world-famous golfing competition, the Ryder Cup.

In the 1930s, industrial manufacturing more than doubled due, in particular, to the development of electrical and aircraft industries. Planes made in and around St Albans made a significant contribution to the Second World War, including the Halifax and Mosquito bombers.

+ *There are many ways to explore St Albans' industrial heritage. Explore the Samuel Ryder Trail, visit the St Albans Signal Box or discover the story of the local aircraft industry at the de Havilland Aircraft Museum.*

A Thriving City

St Albans grew rapidly after the Second World War. Large housing estates were built at Cottonmill to the south of the city centre, Mile House to the south-east and New Greens to the north. The Marshalswick area to the north-east was also expanded, completing a programme of house building that had started before the war.

The district is now circled by the M1, M25 and A1M motorways. These transport links, alongside the direct rail line have attracted commuters to the city as larger businesses and heavy industry have moved further away from London.

As the city has grown, so have the leisure opportunities from cinemas and sports centres to a vibrant live music scene. Musicians as varied as Donovan, The Zombies and Enter Shikari spent their early careers in St Albans.

The first meeting of the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) was held in 1972 at the Farriers Arms pub. The organisation still has its head office in Hatfield Road and the local branch holds an annual beer festival here.

Today St Albans is a modern, thriving city however the signs of its history are still visible everywhere you look from Verulamium Park to the Charter Market just outside these doors.

+ *The story of St Albans City & District is continuing around you. Speak to staff at our welcome desk to find out about the many events taking place across the city and beyond.*