

# THE MAKING OF A MARKET TOWN

A collection of textile artworks by ERTF

Markets have played an important part in the rich history of St Albans and in the East of England region over the centuries. Bustling with activity, trade, local characters and enterprise – everyone loves market day!

This exhibition of textile art takes the theme of the market town as a place for trading and gathering. Social history, trade routes and products provide inspiration for the artworks and reflect the value of the local market to the community, past and present.

The *Eastern Region Textile Forum* (ERTF) was launched in April 2008 at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford. Members are from Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk and North London.

Members were invited to the St Albans Museum and/or Braintree Museum to look at a selection of items from the stores and learn more about the fascinating stories connected to markets. Other members researched markets in their own market towns.

This exhibition showcases their artistic responses to aspects that inspired them. They are divided into two themes; inspiration from history and inspiration from local produce.

ERTF is a thriving group of like-minded individuals who love to create, employing a wide range of techniques. It offers regular opportunities to exhibit, two conferences a year, and an opportunity to meet other textile artists. [www.ertf.org.uk](http://www.ertf.org.uk)

## **The Making of a Market Town - The Joy of Market Day**

The market has been a twice-weekly event in St Albans' calendar for many centuries, as in many other market towns across the region.

Throughout its history, the market has been a meeting place, a focus for seasonal fairs, and even a forum for social and political action. For example, the suffragettes held their meetings in St Albans market place.

Today the market still bustles with crowds of shoppers, the sound of trader's cries, colourful stalls and local characters, all adding to the enjoyment of shopping and meeting friends on market day. The stalls and their wares are a visual feast.

Individual pieces in this exhibition express feelings about going to market and the stories attached to the experience. The artists in this exhibition invite you to engage with this experience through the pieces exhibited here.

## **The Making of a Market Town - Inspiration from history**

From the Iron Age settlement of Verlamio, the tribal capital of the Catuvellauni, to the Roman forum at Verulamium, there have been markets and trading in this area for as long as there has been a settlement here.

The construction of the Abbey Church attracted huge numbers of pilgrims to visit the shrine of St Alban. A market is believed to have been established outside the Abbey in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, controlled by the Abbot. The proceeds of trade were paid directly to the monastery.

The Peasants' Revolt in the 14<sup>th</sup> century marked a shift in power from the church to the townspeople. The construction of St Albans Clock Tower was a symbol of this power shift. Its bell tolled to mark the beginning and end of market trading and it became a focal point for the area we now define as the market. Streets and alleys in this area give clues to the produce sold. Over time, temporary stalls became permanent shops.

A Royal Charter issued by Edward VI in 1553 formalised the status of St Albans Market. It specified the market days as Wednesday and Saturday. St Albans remains a charter market to this day.

Similar histories unfolded in other market towns in the region. Several are represented in this exhibition – Cambridge, Kings Lynn, Norwich and Bedford. They show the way that produce from local farmers and craftspeople was brought and sold through the market place, and how the wealth generated contributed to the prosperity of these towns.

## **The Making of a Market Town - Inspiration from local produce**

The sale of food has always been the primary focus of the market. Local farmers and small holders brought their goods to sell at market, with a large trade in grain for milling into flour. The standardisation of weights and measures helped to make sure that customers got a fair deal. Livestock was also bought and sold, as well as meat and leather to make boots and shoes. Flowers, fruit and vegetables in their season added variety and colour.

Alongside this, local areas produced specialist crafts for utilitarian purposes. Many places made pottery, wool cloth and yarns, straw plaiting for hats and baskets, lace and shawls. All were for sale in local markets. These skills were passed on from one generation to the next and are now celebrated and preserved as historic crafts.