

# FREDERIC KITTON AND ST ALBANS

FROM PICKWICK TO PRESERVATION

## LARGE PRINT EXHIBITION TEXT



# **Outside West Gallery**

## **Punch Bowl, Redbourn Road**

pencil line drawing  
undated

The Punch bowl, now a private house was a pub on the road between Redbourn and St Albans.

## **Clocktower**

pen and ink drawing  
1900

In his 1901 paper on the Clocktower Kitton demonstrated that it was built between 1403-1412 (we now know it was completed in 1405). The tower had nearly been demolished twice in the nineteenth century before its restoration by architect Gilbert Scott, whose work Kitton approved of.

## **Inside gallery, right hand wall**

### **Frederic G Kitton**

Born in Norwich on May 5th, 1856, Frederic Kitton grew up with an ambition to become a writer and illustrator. At seventeen he quit his job as a clerk and started an apprenticeship at the Graphic newspaper, in London, as draughtsman and wood engraver.

After passing through St Albans on a walking holiday, Kitton was so impressed with the town that he decided to live there. He had become an expert on the life of Charles Dickens, writing a series of books on the author, although, having quit the Graphic in 1885, Kitton's earnings from his book sales proved somewhat irregular. Perhaps as a result, Kitton started providing drawings for a number of locally themed publications.

On the 29th of January 1890, Kitton married Emily Eliza Lawford and the couple moved to Prae Mill House on Verulam Road. He became increasingly focused on writing and became co-editor of the

Hertfordshire Illustrated Review in 1893. His increasing interest in the art and history of St Albans saw him help found the County Museum, becoming its first prints and drawings curator in 1898.

On the 25th of March 1904 Kitton underwent an operation to remove kidney stones. Unfortunately, this was not a success and after several months of decline, Kitton died on the 10th of September. His last book, The Dickens Country was published posthumously in 1904/5.

Image caption:

Entrance Hall: New Gorhambury House Line block print

Kitton was not enamoured with the new Gorhambury house constructed by his nemesis Lord Grimthorpe, noting in Picturesque Hertfordshire "Of old Gorhambury House nothing remains alas! But ruined walls partly covered with ivy"

## **Redbourne**

Watercolour with pencil  
1887

Kitton usually worked in pencil but occasionally produced watercolours such as this shot of Redbourn, exhibited at the Bath and West Southern Counties Society.

## **Untitled nude**

pencil line drawing  
1898

“As an artist he was too careful and conscientious... Had he devoted his whole time and energy to drawing there is no doubt that he would have reached the highest position, but he was more inclined to literature and made art subservient.”

## **Untitled**

**Group of children straw plaiting around gate**  
Pencil sketches c. 1900

These two pictures are unsigned but the style suggests strongly that they are by Kitton.

### **Old Cottages, Holywell Hill, St Albans**

pencil line drawing  
undated

In St Albans From An Artists Point Of View, Kitton noted that “the nearer one was my first home in St Albans.”

### **Harpenden Common**

Monochrome watercolour painting  
undated

A monochrome water colour painting by Kitton looking across Harpenden Common with the sun breaking through the clouds. Buildings can just be made out on the horizon.

# Inside the case

## Kitton & Dickens

Frederic Kitton grew up an enthusiastic fan of the works of Charles Dickens, developing such an extensive knowledge of the author's works, life and acquaintances, that the *The Dickensian* recorded that 'he was everywhere recognised as the first living authority on Dickens Lore'.

His first book to be published was Hablot Knight Brown, *A Memoir* in 1882, a biography of the illustrator of Dickens' early works, often referred to by Dickens as 'Phiz' and proved popular enough for a second edition to be printed in the same year. Kitton followed this with a similar work on another illustrator John Leech, the illustrator of *A Christmas Carol*.

Kitton's burgeoning career as a Dickens scholar saw further publications follow: *Dickensiana* a bibliography of the literature of Dickens limited to a run of 500 copies in 1886 and *The Novels of Charles Dickens* in 1887. Kitton also produced numerous articles for a range of magazines and periodicals including *Temple Bar*, *The Magazine of*

Art, The Library Review, The Athenaeum amongst others. Charles Dickens by Pen and Pencil was released throughout 1889 and 1890 in thirteen parts and with a five part supplement, and then in 1893 Kitton and William Hughes spent the last week of August visiting sites known to Dickens in Kent for the book A Weeks Tramp In Dickens Land.

Kitton concentrated on his work in Hertfordshire for the next few years, then in 1897 he published The Novels of Charles Dickens – a Biography and Sketch followed by Charles Dickens to be Read out at Dusk in 1898. Dickens & His Illustrators and The Minor Writings of Charles Dickens followed in 1899 and 1900.

On November 5th 1902 Kitton was made vice-president of the newly founded Dickens Fellowship. The following year he organised a Charles Dickens Exhibition held at Memorial Hall, London, and in the same year two more books - Charles Dickens (with G K Chesterton) and The Poems & Verses of Charles Dickens. A further work titled The Dickens Country was published posthumously.



The Hertfordshire advertiser's obituary of Frederic Kitton noted: 'there were few men better qualified to write upon matters connected with Dickens than Mr Kitton, whose name amongst lovers of Dickens is a household word'

***Charles Dickens by Pen and Pencil and a Supplement to Charles Dickens by Pen and Pencil, 1890***

Ironically, Kitton did not produce the collection of Dickens portraits and illustrations in these volumes, instead in his role as a Dickens expert, he provided the text.

Courtesy of the Charles Dickens Museum London.

***A Week's Tramp in Dickens Land by William Hughes & Frederic Kitton. 2nd edition, 1893***

Kitton and Hughes spent the last week of August 1888 visiting sites in Kent that Dickens knew and featured in his weeks. They took with them copies of Pickwick, Great Expectations, Edwin Drood, The Uncommercial traveller, Bevans Tourist Guide to Kent, one of Bacon's Cycling Maps, A map of the geology of Kent and a pocket barometer.

Courtesy of the Charles Dickens Museum London.

## **The Graphic**

Newspaper

Saturday, March 19, 1887

From childhood, Kitton wished to be a journalist and illustrator. At seventeen he was taken on as an apprentice at the Graphic as draughtsman and wood engraver and eventually worked for the London newspaper as a journalist until 1885.

## **White Hart Yard**

Pencil drawing

1896

Kitton the Dickens scholar noted “at the White Hart a serious accident happened for, as one of the coaches was passing through a low gateway into the yard, the head of a lady passenger came into contact with the top of the gateway and her neck was broken it will be remembered that in ‘Pickwick’ a similar incident is described.”

## **Charles Dickens Scrapbook Volume 1**

One of four 'Dickensiana' scrapbooks compiled by Kitton that covered details of Dicken's life and works and were used as the basis for much of Kitton's works on Dickens.

Courtesy of the Charles Dickens Museum London.

## **Bleak House and St Albans**

Charles Dickens published 'Bleak House' in 1852. An indictment of the Court of Chancery, which was meant to deal rapidly with ownership disputes over land and property. It had become quite the reverse, with cases often taking many years to resolve, by which time much of the value of the estate had been spent on lawyers' fees.

Bleak House, lived in by one of the main characters, John Jarndyce, and his wards, is part of one such disputed estate. Dickens wrote that it was reached 'from London by the Barnet road en route to St Albans' and from its windows lay 'a cheerful landscape, prominent in which the old Abbey Church with its massive tower, threw a softer train of shadow on the view than seemed compatible with its rugged character'.

In an attempt to identify the house described in Dicken's novel, Kitton wrote to the Herts Advertiser in 1890. Kitton considered what he called 'the Folly' to be the most likely candidate. This building had been owned in the early eighteenth century by the magistrate Mr Dalton and is shown on the 1810 map as Dalton's Folly,

hence Kitton's use of the name. The house, which still stands on the border of Normandy Road, Catherine Street and Dalton Street was later bought by a Dickens fan who renamed the building Bleak House in 1893.

Although he felt "the identity of 'Bleak House' is still a matter for conjecture" in 1902, Kitton reaffirmed his belief that the newly renamed Bleak House in St Albans was the most likely as 'the position of the house in its relation to the abbey church, and the characteristics of the locality are in harmony with the details particularised in the details of the story' adding in his final posthumous book that Dickens had stayed at the Queens Hotel in St Albans in 1852, the year 'Bleak House' began to be serialised and that "it was rumoured in the town that the object of Dickens's visit was to obtain 'local colour'".

## **Bleak House by Charles Dickens**

### **The Novels of Charles Dickens, a Bibliography and Sketch, 1897**

Courtesy of the Charles Dickens Museum London.

### **Signed copy of Charles Dickens by Frederic Kitton**

### **Letter to Kitton by Godfrey Turner**

Like Kitton, Godfrey Wordsworth Turner was an artist turned journalist who as a schoolboy knew Dickens. In this letter, Turner relates to Kitton his recollections of Dickens as a man, no doubt as material for one of his books.

Courtesy of the Charles Dickens Museum London.

### **The Dickens Country by Frederic Kitton, 1905**

Published posthumously, the introduction to The Dickens Country includes an obituary for Kitton.

## **Wall to left of cases**

### **A Corner on Verulam Road**

Pencil line drawing  
undated

The Great Red Lion was one of the oldest inns in St Albans, developing from a pilgrim house serving visitors to the Abbey but the old building was demolished in 1896. The replacement Red Brick building that stands today was called a “terrible infliction” by Kitton. This drawing from around 1890 shows the back of the original building with its stabling.

### **Holywell Hill looking North**

Pencil line drawing  
undated

Kitton felt that “the white hart and adjoining tenement constitute perhaps the most picturesque feature of Holywell Hill” and “has much the same appearance as it possessed when the coaches

rattled under the lofty archway into the yard beyond”.

## **French Row**

Pencil drawing  
1893

Kitton felt that the Christopher Inn’s “plaster gables, overhanging upper storey and red roof enable us to realise how the streets of St Albans must have looked in the middle ages” although “about a century ago the old Christopher began to decline in popularity as regards a superior class of clients ... it opened its portals to all kinds of vagabonds and disreputable persons and, eventually losing caste altogether, was compelled to suffer extinction”.

## **The Boot**

Pencil line drawing  
undated



Kitton felt that the market was “undoubtedly the most picturesque scene in all St Albans”. The Boot, on the left in this picture, dating in parts to the 16th century was a similarly striking accompaniment.

## **Holywell Hill**

Pencil line drawing  
undated

The Jolly Maltster, Post Boy and Trumpet alehouses on Holywell hill with the Trumpet in the foreground. The landlord of the trumpet in the 1740s was Music Master John Sherman.

## **Sopwell Lane**

Pencil line drawing  
undated

Kitton thought Sopwell lane was a “romantic thoroughfare” with “quaint old-world character – the varied and broken line of roofs, red tiled and dormered – the gables, the half-timbered or plaster

fronted cottages...here and there we may discover a carved door head of classical design”.

## **Corridor between galleries (l-r)**

### **The George Yard Entrance**

Pencil line drawing  
undated

The yard of The George Inn, looking through towards George Street, St Albans. The intricate moulding above the doorway was later removed.

### **The Grammar School in the Lady Chapel: St Albans Abbey**

Pen and ink drawing  
c.1870

Lord Grimthorpe's restoration of the Abbey in the 1880s was widely disapproved of. Kitton repeatedly lambasted Grimthorpe's plans and limited his illustrations largely to elements of the interior feeling that the exterior "imparted an effect of antiquity and pictorial charm, which, alas! Has gradually been wiped out by the restorer."

## **French Row, St Albans**

Pencil line drawing  
undated

“In this narrow thoroughfare there were once several inns and the remains of one of these ancient structures, viz the Christopher imparts quite a picturesque aspect to the row, the plaster fronted gables and overhanging upper storey enabling us to realise how the streets of St Albans must have looked in medieval times.”

## **Alleyway**

Pencil line drawing  
undated

Kitton believed “the ancient and historical city of St Albans possesses attractions both for the antiquary and the lover of the picturesque”; “in St Albans there still exist more half-timbered houses than the casual observer might suspect.”

## **Fishpool Street from St Michael's**

Pencil drawing  
undated

Kitton thought Fishpool street with its “quaint overhanging storeys with plaster fronts, classic doors enriched with carving, old fashioned shop windows” was a valuable surviving part of St Albans’ past.

## **The Cloisters, St Albans**

Pencil line drawing  
undated

In Bygone St Albans Kitton noted “one may honestly confess to a feeling of astonishment in discovering in the thoroughfares of our ancient abbey town, so many architectural relics of days long past.”

## **Fleur de Lys Yard**

Pencil line drawing  
undated

Although he felt the Fleur de Lys was “one of the most picturesque ‘bits’ of old St Albans”, Kitton noted that “at the reformation the Fleur de Lys underwent repairs and since then has almost been rebuilt.”

## **Chequer St West side**

Pencil line drawing  
1894

Of the town centre, Kitton felt that “there still exist 2 or 3 gabled fronts of considerable interest...all who cherish a taste for medieval design must regret that opportunities have been recently lost of erecting here such buildings as would have been in more harmony with the medieval period.”

## **Kitton & St Albans**

In 1878, Kitton moved into a cottage at the bottom of Hollywell Hill. At the time he was still working for the Graphic newspaper and establishing his name as Dickens scholar but the artistic and historic potential of St Albans gradually drew his attention.

Some of Kitton's early work relating to the county was no doubt inspired by the need for some form of steady income, as earnings from his published books proved sporadic, with Kitton noting in a letter "my finances... being at a very low ebb just now, owing to publishing delays". In 1892-3 Kitton produced the drawings for Hertfordshire County Homes and Hertfordshire: Some Ancestral Estates and Interesting Careers two specialised volumes examining the history of local houses and their owners as well as over one hundred illustrations for St Albans Historical & Picturesque by Charles Ashdown. A more fulfilling role saw Kitton become co-editor of the Hertfordshire Illustrated Review, a paper examining the county's history for which Kitton was able to write as well as draw in addition to his editor's role.

In 1897 Kitton was elected a member of The St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological society (SAHAAS) and took on an active role in the foundation of the County Museum, organising the purchase of a collection of books and prints collected by the antiquarian Lewis Evans. When the Museum opened in 1898, Kitton was made honorary curator for prints and drawings and spent the next few years building up its collection of books and prints and instigating its art collection.

In the same year, he had the chance to work with his old friend, Holmes Winter, whose book, *The Last of Old St Albans*, saw the two artists producing illustrations of the old surviving buildings in the town which they both feared would be torn down for the sake of modernity. This led Kitton to move from simply recording old buildings to actively attempting to preserve them. He undertook surveys of buildings for SAHAAS, while his frequent articles on the historic joys of the town were published in the local newspaper alongside his letters calling for the protection and preservation of local buildings.



In *Old St Albans and How to Preserve it* Kitton wrote 'to deprive St Albans, or any other old town, of its ancient buildings, and to substitute them for modern structures, will result in destroying that valuable individuality which should distinguish one place from another'. Kitton's greatest success was the saving of the building in the market place known as The Gables from redevelopment, but a range of buildings in the town were made more secure by his efforts to publicise their importance.

## **East gallery, righthand wall**

### **Walls of Verulam St Germain's Block**

Pencil drawing  
undated

In 1898, Kitton examined St Germain's Block and recommended Lord Verulam protect the area with fencing.

### **High Street, St Albans**

Pencil line drawing  
1893

Although much of High Street was rebuilt or at least re-fronted by the late nineteenth century, Kitton considered two or three of the houses to be of an age and quality worth preserving. After his death, obituaries recorded his success in preserving several houses in St Albans including one on High Street.

## **Doorways, Fishpool Street, St Albans**

Pencil line drawing  
undated

In St Albans From An Artists Point Of View Kitton noted “here and there we may discover a carved door head of classical design”.

### **Abbey wall plaster**

Pencil drawing undated

### **Shrine of St. Amphibalus**

Pen and ink drawing undated

Kitton’s dislike of Lord Grimthorpe’s restoration work on St Albans Abbey meant that he avoided drawing its exterior in detail, sticking to older interior features untouched “by the unsympathetic, though generous, hand of Lord Grimthorpe”.

## **Market Place**

Pencil drawing  
undated

In Picturesque Hertfordshire Kitton wrote of the market “here indeed is material for pencil and camera! The wooden stalls laden with garden produce and other goods and screened by awnings from sun or rain the country folk buying and selling, the kaleidoscopic movement all present an ever-changing scene of which the observer never tires.”

## **Back of House in George Street**

Pencil drawing  
1892

Kitton recognised “many specimens of domestic architecture have been re-fronted at a later date ... so much so indeed that it becomes necessary in order to determine the approximate age of erection to examine the rear of such buildings where one may perchance find satisfactory evidence of it in the unaltered gables, dormers, etc, which have been permitted to remain intact.”

## **Inside cases (East Gallery)**

### **Queen Eleanor's Cross, Hardington, Northampton**

Pencil line drawing  
undated

St Albans once had an Eleanor Cross – a monument erected in memory of the wife of Edward I, built at each point her body rested on route to her burial at Westminster Abbey. Kitton's decision to draw one of the three surviving crosses at Northampton may be due to this.

## **The Vanishing of Old St Albans. A Plea for the Picturesque**

Newspaper article  
1899

In 1899 The Gables was sold to Boots who planned to demolish it. Kitton wrote an open letter "To Messrs Boots and Co" petitioning against this on the grounds "its destruction meant the loss of one of the most striking features of old St Albans." Kitton's appeal met with public support and Boots agreed to limit alterations to a few internal features. The building still survives today.

Letter from AE Gibbs to William Page confirming the Frederic Kitton had agreed to act as curator for the county museum.

Letters to Frederic Kitton in his role as curator of Prints and drawings relating to purchases for the museum.

## **Preserving the Picturesque**

After his work with Holmes Winter on The Last of Old St Albans, Kitton became much more active in attempting to preserve the buildings he had previously recorded. He was an early advocate of preserving heritage, calling for an end to developer led destruction and the development of laws that would lead to buildings being preserved for the enjoyment of future generations.

Kitton took particular umbrage to the rebuilding projects of the Cathedral's West front and St Michael's Church tower, both funded by Lord Grimthorpe, who agreed to pay for repairs providing he could choose the designs; many, Kitton included, thought these were out of character for the existing structures. Kitton regularly wrote to the Hertfordshire Advertiser complaining of what he saw as Grimthorpe's vandalism. He showed similar disdain for the Town Hall which he considered an 'architectural monstrosity ... of which I defy any artist to succeed in producing a picture'.

Kitton's preservation attempts were more succesful later that same year when a shop in the

market place known as the Gables was purchased by Boots with the aim of replacing it with a modern store. Kitton had already written that the view of this building with the cathedral behind was “undoubtedly the most picturesque scene in all St Alban’ and now wrote a polemical article, The vanishing Of St Albans – A Plea For The Picturesque, calling for a petition to protect it, noting the building “imparts to this portion of the town a character at once so quaint and beautiful that its destruction would prove most lamentable’. A public petition saw Boots agree to limit alterations to a few minor internal features. The building still stands today.

Kitton neatly summarised the issues facing preservation in towns such as St Albans, which remain true to this day: ‘St Albans is being rapidly modernised doubtless owing to its proximity to London and instead of the quaint half-timbered structure with its gables and dormers we have an obtrusive rectangular structure of glaring red brick, with windows of plate glass...economical utilitarianism is the order of the day’...[but] it must be remembered that ugliness is by no means essential to economy’



Picturesque Hertfordshire by Duncan Moul and  
Frederic Kitton

Kitton provided the text for this volume alongside  
Moul's drawings. Here he lambasts Lord  
Grimthorpe's heavy handed restoration of the  
Abbey.

High Street in snow by Kitton, from Picturesque  
Hertfordshire

Kitton provided a number of images for this book  
by Charles Ashdown.

St Albans Historical and Picturesque  
Signed by Charles Ashdown and Frederic Kitton.

## **St Albans Historical & Picturesque**

Pamphlet

1893

Subscription Pamphlet for Charles Ashdown and Frederick Kitton's St Albans Historical And Picturesque, published in 1893. The illustration by Kitton is entitled "Romeland".

### **Letters to Kitton in his role as curator of prints and drawings at the County Museum.**

In 1898 Kitton became the honorary curator for prints and drawings at the newly formed County Museum in Hatfield Road. He used his contacts to persuade many local artists to donate pictures to the museum.

### **Article reproduced from the Hertfordshire Illustrated Review by Frederic Kitton.**

Article and illustration on the civil war in Hertfordshire by Kitton, who also acted as editor for the lifetime of this local journal.

### **Letters to Kitton in his role as curator of prints and drawings at the County Museum.**

## **Wall to left of window**

### **Near Market Cross**

Pencil drawing  
undated

Kitton had a particular affinity for “the plaster fronted tenements, quaint gables and those red roofs” of St Albans.

### **Abbey Gatehouse**

Pen and ink drawing  
1890-95

Kitton opposed Lord Grimthorpe’s restoration work on the Abbey in the local press and many agreed with him that “persons who view the abbey for the first time experience a keen sense of disappointment in finding modernity instead of antiquity”. The Abbey Gatehouse, structurally sound was spared any such work and proved much more inviting a subject for his pencil.

## John Cox

This exhibition is based on the work of and dedicated to the late John G.E. Cox. John was a local historian of renown with interests which ranged wide but it was always to his study of Frederic George Kitton that he returned. John's curiosity had been triggered in the early 1970s by a display in St Albans of the artist's work. Over the following 50 or so years, Kitton's varied pursuits kept John's attention, so much so that by the time the Covid pandemic brought his research to a halt, he had collected over 700 examples of the artist's work from collections spread far and wide around the country.

John's dedication to the promotion of local history also kept him busy. He served for many years on the committee of the Hertfordshire Association for Local History. Moreover, in 2019, John was elected an Honorary Member of the St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society in recognition of his extensive contribution to its work.