

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016	
Building:	The Abbey Gateway, Romeland
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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	

The Abbey Gateway, (also known as 'The Great Gateway' or 'The Abbey Gatehouse') is a *very* impressive sight.

Along with the Abbey, it is now the only other remaining structure of the famous old Benedictine Monastery that had dominated the history of St Albans since 793.

Whenever I set eyes on the three-storey Abbey Gateway, I am struck by the sheer size and the strength and power it projects. Why would a gate to a place of worship be so imposing and intimidating? Is it to keep people out or is it to keep people locked in? Well, its colourful history gives us the answer...

It is fitting that such a strong edifice was built at the request of a strong man. Thomas de la Mare, the 30th Abbot of the Monastery, was indeed a strong man. He took over as Abbot in 1349 after his predecessor was killed by the plague and he went on to be Abbot for nearly fifty years.

The plague, known as the Black Death had swept across Europe from 1348 to 1349 killing possibly half of the population of England. Forty seven of the sixty monks at the Monastery perished.¹ As a result of the carnage, the old strict hierarchical order between the everyday townsfolk and the Monastery had started to crumble...²

Thomas de la Mare had the walls to the Monastery rebuilt and fortified. In 1362, the predecessor to the current gateway was blown away in a gale. So de la Mare ordered a new, stronger replacement gateway to be built. It is the building we see before us today.

The Abbey Gateway was not just physically strong but it also presented a psychological barrier between the Town and the Monastery.³ Whenever there was unrest and disputes the townspeople would gather in front of the gateway. Also, by this point, the Abbey Gateway had become the town's prison.

In 1381 anger and insurrection reached boiling point not just in St Albans but across England - the Peasants Revolt had begun. Thousands marched and rioted across the land. Within the space of just a few days, rebels, angry for many reasons including high poll taxes, had extorted concessions from the then King of England, Richard II.

In St Albans the rioters broke through Abbey Gateway, freeing some of the prisoners and began attacking the Monastery buildings. Many monks fled for their lives but not the Abbot Thomas de la Mare. He remained in place and negotiated with the rebels in the hope of saving the Monastery⁴.

¹ St Albans - a History by Mark Freeman. 2008

² 'The monastery of St Albans' by Gerald Sanctuary

³ St Albans - a History by Mark Freeman. 2008

⁴ 'The monastery of St Albans' by Gerald Sanctuary

When news filtered back from London that the Revolt's leader Wat Tyler had been killed by the King's men the rebels began to lose hope. Over the coming weeks the King rescinded all concessions he had granted to the rebels and had begun to execute and punish them. Several ringleaders of the revolt were kept as prisoners in the Abbey Gateway and then hanged in St Albans in the presence of the King. The King also ordered the townspeople to pay the Abbot compensation for the damage caused by the riot.

The Monastery had survived, as did the Abbot Thomas de la Mare. However, the relationship between the Town and the Monastery always remained tense. The Abbey Gateway continued to symbolise conflict.

Following the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539 many structures of the Monastery were demolished. Only the Abbey itself and the Abbey Gateway survived intact. Ownership of the Gateway transferred from the Abbots to the Crown.

In 1479, The Abbey Gateway is also known to have housed the third ever printing press in England. The printing press is known to have printed a school textbook.

The Gateway remained a prison for a time before it became part of St Albans School in 1871⁵, which is what it is to this very day. One of the oldest schools not just in Hertfordshire, but one of the oldest schools in the world. It has many famous former students including Nicholas Breakspear, who went on to become Pope Adrian IV. John Ball, a leader of the Peasants Revolt who was hanged, drawn and quartered in St Albans and one of the most famous Physicists of our time, Professor Stephen Hawking.

Research sources

St Albans - a History by Mark Freeman. 2008

'The monastery of St Albans' by Gerald Sanctuary, 1986

British History website: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/herts/vol2/pp469-477>

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abbey_Gateway,_St._Albans

From the Tourist information sign in Romeland:

The Abbey Gate is the most important entrance into the monastery.

St Albans played a major part in the Peasants Revolt of 1381. Conflict had been growing with the Abbot over milling rights and it was the homeland that local people gathered before breaking into the Abbey Gatehouse, which at the time housed the Abbots prison. The present Great Gateway was built in the 1360s, replacing an earlier one that was severely damaged by a gale in 1362. This gate is a grade 1 listed feature.

The gateway (along with the clock tower built between 1403 and 1412) symbolises the conflict between the monastery and the town which was not resolved until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539.

Following the dissolution of the monastery the land was sold off and a number of the Abbey buildings were demolished.

⁵ <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/herts/vol2/pp469-477>