

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016

Building:	The Boot, 4 Market Place
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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 Boot or The Boot Inn is a picture-postcard building and it oozes with history. It became a licensed inn only in 1719, which is a comparative youngster for drinking establishments in St Albans. Incidentally, whilst contested, St Albans is thought to have the oldest pub in the land - Ye Olde Fighting Cocks which is believed to have existed since 793.

The Medieval Market Place had been home to temporary market stalls and it wasn't until the early 15th century that physical buildings were constructed. Originally, The Boot was two separate timber buildings built on a vacant plot in Market Place - one containing 1 shop and the other, 2 shops. The Building is now a grade II listed building.

Like many buildings in Market Place and the French Row, The Boot has undergone considerable physical changes and extensions over the centuries but it still has impressive beams, standing timbers and open fire places.

It is believed by the seventeenth century, both buildings came under common ownership and a shared chimney stack was added. These buildings had chambers over the ground floor. The storey is jettied (i.e. the upper floor projects beyond the dimensions of the floor below). Around 1719, it could provide living quarters for 4 soldiers but no stabling.

By the eighteenth century three attic rooms were built over the original chambers. We can see two windows overlooking Market Place for the attic rooms. From the 1860's it is believed the pub shared the building with a barbers and a tobacconist. Astonishingly it wasn't until the 1960's that The Boot occupied the whole of the premises.¹

The exact reason for naming the pub 'The Boot' is not known, but there are many theories. Before painted inn signs became commonplace, publicans would identify their establishment by hanging or standing a distinctive object outside the pub e.g. a boot or a copper kettle. It could be named after the Duke of Wellington who had designed a special long boot to be used in battle. It could be named after a 13th century priest John Schome, who trapped and sealed the devil in a boot. It could be named The Boot as a result of the tannery or leather market that existed nearby. It is believed strips of leather offcuts were found under the floorboards, possibly used in the construction of a boot?²

On 16th of July 2013, The Battlefields Trust recognised The Boot as a 'Battlefields Pub', an historic public house that is on or near the site of a British Battlefield.³ The First Battle of St Albans was fought on the 22nd May 1455 and was the opening battle in the Wars of the Roses between the Houses of York and Lancaster. Parts of the Boot date back to the time of that initial battle, which resulted in a victory for the Yorkists. Harvey Watson, the Chairman of the London & South-East Region of the Battlefields Trust, presented pub landlord Will Hughes with an Information panel commemorating the Inn's location during the First Battle of St Albans.

¹ http://www.salbani.co.uk/Pubs/bootweb/the_boot.htm

² <http://ghostpubs.com/haunted-pub/the-boot-st-albans>

³ http://www.battlefieldstrust.com/cms/upload/docs/256/lse_newsletter_summer_2013.pdf

Today, the walls are decorated with images of St Albans past and present including a painting depicting the First Battle of St Albans. It's quite amazing to think that all those years ago soldiers fighting Wars of the Roses in the streets of St Albans may have stopped to have a pint!

Like many old buildings in St Albans, The Boot is associated with a number of unverifiable ghost stories or paranormal activities. One story relates to some dried flowers discovered behind a wall when some building work was taking place at the pub⁴. Since the disturbance of the dried flowers the pub has been plagued with strange electrical problems, like the juke box and fruit machines switching on and off by themselves....⁵⁶

Another story, which is particularly gory, is the story of a visiting soldier that reportedly took a prostitute upstairs for the night, only to come down in the morning covered in blood. He was sent off to a penal colony on Van Diemen's Land, (Tasmania) whilst the ghost of the prostitute haunts the pub....⁷

Over the centuries The Boot has had many many owners⁸. One of note is William Draper. He owned the pub between 1743-1762 and he also appears to have leased for some years the Clock Tower and The Fleur de Lys as well. Soon after 1848, The Boot was acquired by Edmund Fearnley Whittingshall, brewer of Abbots Langley. Early in the 20th Century the Boot had a poor reputation with licensing magistrates, with the licensees appearing before them on a number of occasions. Along with a long list of St Albans Pubs and Inns, the Boot is mentioned in William Austen's poem, penned in the 1880's. Austen lived in St Peter's road, Almshouses.⁹

In 2015 The Boot won Best Pub in St Albans at the St Albans Food and Drinks awards and has for several years been awarded a place in the CAMRA (Campaign for Real Ale) Good Beer Guide.¹⁰

Incidentally, it is not only The Boot that is a listed building. The iconic red telephone kiosk we see outside The Boot is also listed!¹¹

Other sources:

Chris Saunders' (former Archaeologist at St Albans Museums) website:
http://www.salbani.co.uk/Pubs/bootweb/the_boot.htm

If you want to find out more about the work of The Battlefields Trust, promoting our battlefield heritage, you can visit their website: www.battlefieldstrust.com

⁴ <http://eerieplace.com/read-about-the-hauntings-at-st-albans-boot-inn/>

⁵ From 'Haunted St Albans' by Paul Adams. The History Press, The Mill, Brimscombe Port, Stroud, Glos. 2013. Page 37 and 38

⁶ Haunted St Albans, Paul Adams, the History Press, 2013, p.37.

⁷ http://www.hertsad.co.uk/herts-life/discovering_the_ghosts_of_st_albans_1_1674041

⁸ <http://pubshistory.com/HertsPubs/StAlbans/Boot.shtml>

⁹ Hertfordshire Inns and Public Houses: a Historical gazetteer, Graham Jolliffe & Arthur Jones, 1995. Hertfordshire Publications. (p.119-123)

¹⁰ www.thebootstalbans.com/

¹¹ <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/en-163518-k6-telephone-kiosk-outside-the-boot-publ#.VwIHEMcfXFc>