

St Albans Museums: ‘Talking Buildings’ project, 2016	
Building:	The Castle Inn
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<p>This research was undertaken by volunteers and is not an exhaustive history of the building but captures what intrigued them during the project.</p> <p>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</p>	

Several buildings in St Albans survive from the time of the First Battle of St Albans (22 May 1455) but none have the appeal that matches that of the Castle Inn. Myth, Medieval propaganda and dramatisation cloud historical fact surrounding the events that played out around this building. This research document will seek to establish what can be determined from surviving written sources, literature, oral history, topography, maps and built heritage. The controversy over the exact location of the inn (around the junction of Victoria Street and St Peter’s Street) will be addressed as well as a consideration of its post-Medieval history.

Wars of the Roses

The Castle Inn is primarily associated with events during the First Battle of St Albans. The Wars of the Roses significantly impacted the history of the town and the English Medieval world. The First Battle of St Albans, now considered by many historians to mark the beginning of the Wars of the Roses¹, put St Albans at the centre of political and military events of the fifteenth century. As dynastic rivalries intensified, the nobles of England polarised into two camps: those supporting the anointed monarch, Henry VI, and those loyal to the Duke of York. A key issue for York, namely the favoured position of the Duke of Somerset², could not be resolved politically and so this led to violent conflict.

The situation was forced to a head by the summoning of the great council at Leicester³. This was intended to provide for the safety of the king and his heir but it aroused York’s suspicions. York mustered men and moved to intercept the royal party before they reached Leicester as he feared the outcome of the council.⁴ Timing and geography put the two forces on a course to meet at St Albans.

The King and his men stationed themselves in the town while York’s forces converged on Keyfield to the east⁵. This put York’s men between Shropshire Lane (present day Victoria Street) and Sopwell Lane, making these two roads potential routes into the town for the attackers, and therefore placing the Castle Inn at a key position. The layout of the late medieval town is well understood⁶ and the

¹ Boardman, A. 2006. *The First Battle of St Albans 1455*, p7-8

² Goodman, A. 1981. *The Wars of the Roses*, p19

³ Cook, D.R. 2014. *Lancastrians and Yorkists: The Wars of the Roses*, p25

⁴ Goodman, 1981, op. cit., p22

⁵ Freeman, M. 2008. *St Albans: a history*, p120

⁶ Lane, H.M.M. 1931. ‘“The Male Journey” of St. Albans.’ *Transactions of the St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society* 1931, p112

Castle Inn is known to have stood on Shropshire Lane⁷. This road was one of the routes into the town across the defensive ditch known as the Tonman Ditch.

After negotiations failed and open hostilities began, the Lancastrians were at first successful in defending the town. A stalemate appeared likely until the Earl of Warwick and Sir Robert Ogle led their men across the ditch and rampart at a point between Sopwell Lane and Shropshire Lane and forced their way into the town through the houses, outbuildings and stables.⁸ This led to the concentration of fighting in the east of the town around the location of the Castle Inn. Indeed Boardman asserts that the “main action” took place near the building, even before the sequence of events that led to Somerset’s death at the Castle Inn.⁹ Boardman also affirms that a barricade erected in anticipation of the attack abutted the wall of the Castle Inn¹⁰, underlining the strategic position of the building.

A surprising amount of documentation exists from the period of the Wars of the Roses, including official documents and personal accounts, and while the movement of the opposing forces can be reconstructed with acceptable margins of error, certain points are obscured by propaganda and literature. Contemporary descriptions of the battle were published as newsletters and survive in archives to this day. The Abbott of St Albans Abbey also wrote an account of events in the monastery’s records. Any documents created in the highly politicised period immediately following the battle should be treated with caution, as the surviving key players often sought to justify their actions.

A key document for the battle has become known as the Dijon Relation. This remarkable document of unknown authorship exists as a copy of the original. It is thought to date to 27 May 1455 and so was produced only five days after the events that it describes. Boardman notes that it provides an account of the events of the battle told from a Lancastrian point of view but describes it as “largely unbiased”¹¹. Useful information regarding Somerset’s fate can be found within it¹². The document notes that after the King was moved to the safety of the Abbey, York’s men continued to fight Somerset who was “within the inn.” After the doors were broken down, Somerset and his men elected to leave the building and were then surrounded by York’s men in the street. The author tells us that Somerset killed four men but was subsequently “felled to the ground with an axe”. This account paints a picture of a brave last stand which may be embellished (although earlier he is described as retreating to the inn to “save himself” and hide) but the practical details are likely to be reliable. Unfortunately the name of the inn is not given (as this information was probably considered irrelevant) and it should be noted that some translations from the original French use the term “house” instead of “inn”.¹³

Other important primary sources for the Battle of St Albans do not specify the location of Somerset’s death, while this may not be surprising, mention of the prophesy might have been expected if it was

⁷ Page, W. (ed.). 1908. 'The city of St Albans: Introduction'. In *A History of the County of Hertford: Volume 2*, pp. 469-477

⁸ Burley, P., M. Elliott, and H. Watson. 2007. *The Battles of St Albans*, pp.28-31

⁹ Boardman, 2008, op. cit., p123

¹⁰ Ibid, p121

¹¹ Ibid, p88 and p129

¹² For full translated text of the Dijon Relation see ibid, p162-5

¹³ Burley et al., 2007, op. cit., p36

widely known. The letter written by Bruges to the Archbishop of Ravenna simply says, "The Duke of Somerset was taken and forthwith beheaded."¹⁴ It also makes clear that once Somerset was dead the battle finished almost straight away.

The Shakespeare connection

The most famous reference to The Castle Inn can be found in the plays of William Shakespeare. The Henry VI trilogy recounts the politics and action of the Wars of the Roses and the First Battle of St Albans features in Part 2. Richard Plantagenet the Younger speaks the following lines in Act V Scene 2:

So, lie thou there;
For underneath an alehouse' paltry sign,
The Castle in Saint Albans, Somerset
Hath made the wizard famous in his death.¹⁵

This is the only building in St Albans that is specifically mentioned within the play, which gives the reference added significance.

Shakespeare wrote his play over a hundred years after events so investigating where he got this information is useful to understand the Castle Inn's history. The play was based on an earlier work called *The Contention betwixt the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster*, the authorship of which is disputed. It may have been written solely by Shakespeare, he may have had collaborators or it may have been the work of another playwright.¹⁶ The speech above has parallels with the corresponding speech in this play (see below) but appears as a shortened version.

So Lie thou there and breathe thy last.
What's here, the signe of the Castle?
Then the prophesie is come to passe,
For Somerset was forewarned of Castles
The which he alwaies did observe.
And now behold, under a paltry Ale-house signe
The Castle in Saint Albones,
Somerset has made the wissard famous by his death.¹⁷

Shakespeare is also known to have based his history plays on earlier literary works and historic chronicles. Scholars suggest he used chronicles by Holinshed, Hall, Grafton, Fabyan, Foxe and Hardyng for Henry VI Part 2¹⁸ and so all of these works may have influenced the final version.

The publication dates of these chronicles range across the sixteenth century and are likely to have influenced each other. Shakespeare drew heavily upon the works of Holinshed and so this may have

¹⁴ Hinds, A.B. (ed.). 1912. 'Milan: 1455', in *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts in the Archives and Collections of Milan 1385-1618*, pp16-17

¹⁵ Shakespeare, W. 1590. *History of Henry VI, Part II*

¹⁶ Dutton, R. 2016. *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist*, p200

¹⁷ Quoted in Lane, 1931, op. cit., p120

¹⁸ British Library. 2016. 'Shakespeare Quartos: Henry VI Part 2'

provided inspiration for Henry VI Part 2. Volume III of Holinshed covers the relevant period and gives an account of the Battle of St Albans, including the reference to castles, 'For there died vnder the signe of the castell, Edmund duke of Somerset, who (as hath béene reported) was warned long before to auoid all castels'¹⁹ (*sic*). There are obvious parallels between this text and the lines penned by Shakespeare and so this is possibly the primary source. This text was not published significantly earlier than Shakespeare's play and a considerable period had elapsed following the events he described.

A further work, Grafton's Chronicle, was published nearly 20 years earlier and contains similar wording. The text contains the lines, 'For there dyed vnder the signe of the Castel, Edmond Duke of Sommerset, who long before was warned to eschew all Castelles'²⁰.

Hall's Chronicle dates to 1548 and so is much earlier and is considered by scholars to be a source for Shakespeare. It is written in prose format and laid out chronologically. Annotations to a copy of this book housed in the British Library have been identified as belonging to Shakespeare²¹ and so he was familiar with this work. The relevant excerpt from this chronicle reads, 'For there died under the signe of the Castle, Edmond duke of Somerset, who long before was warned to eschew all Castles'.²² This therefore continues to trace the reference to Somerset's death at the Castle Inn back to the middle of the sixteenth century and may be another source from which Shakespeare drew this information.

Other chronicles from this period discuss the battle but do not appear to have influenced this episode in Shakespeare's version. Robert Fabyan's *The New Chronicles of England and France in two parts* (original edition dating to 1516) covers the battle and mentions Somerset's death but does not go into any detail about the nature or location of this event.²³ The chronicles discussed above show the reuse of similar language to describe Somerset's death from the early sixteenth century until Shakespeare brought it to a popular audience at the end of that century.

The Prophecy

As mentioned above, Shakespeare weaves a prophecy into his play which foretells of Somerset's death in a castle. Whilst Shakespeare often used the concept as a dramatic device to forewarn audiences of impending doom and heighten anticipation, unusually the Somerset prophecy is only related once it is fulfilled. This therefore deserves further exploration and it appears that this prophecy may go beyond fiction and have roots in history.

¹⁹ Holinshed, R., J. Hooker, F. Thynne, A. Fleming, J. Stow and Sir H. Ellis. 1808. *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. Volume III (Edition of 1586)

²⁰ Grafton, R. 1809. *Grafton's chronicle: or, History of England. To which is added his table of the bailiffs, sheriffs, and mayors, of the city of London. From the year 1189 to 1558, inclusive*. [Original publication date: 1568], p653

²¹ Sams, E. 1997. *The Real Shakespeare: Retrieving the Early Years, 1564-1594*, p194

²² Hall, E. 1809. *Hall's Chronicle containing the History of England during the reign of Henry the Fourth, and the succeeding monarchs, to the end of the reign of Henry the Eighth, in which are particularly described the manner and customs of those periods*. [Edition dated 1548], p233

²³ Fabyan, R. 1811. *The New Chronicles of England and France in Two Parts*. [1516 edition with collations from editions of 1533, 1542 and 1559], p629

In Shakespeare's version the prophecy is related by a spirit to Roger Bolingbroke, the conjuror (Act I Scene IV), but this served the narrative of the play. The prophecy has been attributed to Margery Jourdemayne who was burned at the stake as a witch in 1441 for her part in an alleged plot against Henry VI.²⁴

Documentary mention can be found of the prophecy, although without reference to its ultimate source. The so-called Davies Chronicle (named for John Silvester Davies who first published this work in 1856) includes the following text:

Thys sayde Edmond duke of Somerset had herde a fantasyk
prophecy that he shuld dy vndre a castelle; wherefore in as meche
as in him was, he lete the kyng that he sholde nat come in the
castelle of Wyndsore, dredyng the seyde prophecy; but at Seynt
Albony's ther was an hostry hauyng the sygne of a castelle, and
before that hostry he was slayne.²⁵

This chronicle is thought to have been written during Henry VI's lifetime and so was written in close chronological proximity to the events which it relates. It also predates Shakespeare's version by over a century. While the veracity of this account cannot be confirmed, it is interesting to note that knowledge of this prophecy was in circulation amongst contemporaries. The author is unknown.

Contrary to this, Lane notes that no contemporary chronicle records the nature of Somerset's death²⁶. This may be due in part to the political bickering that continued after the battle. The Paston Letters record that Warwick and Cromwell argued fiercely in the presence of the King and the author of the letter, Henry Wyndesore, asks the addressee to destroy the letter as he was "loth to write any thing of any Lord."²⁷ This suggests there may have been an atmosphere of mistrust and fear and that the subject was purposely avoided. The gap between events and the first reference to the prophesy (which Lane puts at sixteen years²⁸) is long enough for myth and legend to grow up, even though it would still be within living memory. Furthermore it is difficult to believe that a man in Somerset's position in medieval society would be able to avoid setting foot in a castle for so long, particularly during his captaincy of Calais and the turbulent times experienced before the First Battle of St Albans.

Location of the Castle Inn

Uncertainty exists over the exact location of the Castle Inn. Some place it on the north corner of the current junction between Victoria Street and St. Peter's Street (where Skipton Building Society currently stands)²⁹, while others place it on the south corner (where Connells Estate Agents is currently situated). The street layout in this part of the city is almost certainly unchanged from the

²⁴ Ashdown-Hill, J. 2013. *Royal Marriage Secrets: Consorts & Concubines, Bigamists & Bastards*

²⁵ Anon (Ed. J. Davies). 1856. *An English Chronicle of the Reigns of Richard II, Henry IV., Henry V., and Henry VI. written before the year 1471*. Folio 190

²⁶ Lane, 1931, op. cit., p119

²⁷ Gairdner, J. 2010. *The Paston Letters, A.D. 1422-1509*. Volume 3, p45

²⁸ Lane, 1931, op. cit., p119

²⁹ Saunders, C. 1995. 'A Guide to the Topography, Buildings and People of Medieval St. Albans', p25

late Middle Ages as it corresponds with the earliest maps of St Albans.³⁰ There are also several historic buildings located along Chequers Street and St. Peter's Street.

The Castle Inn is marked on the earliest known map of St Albans which was produced by Benjamin Hare in 1634³¹. The junction is clearly shown and the use of Shropshire Lane as the road name. Trees and open space are depicted on either side until the detail stops at the Tonman Ditch (town boundary and defensive structure). The name of the Castle Inn is inscribed along the street rather than across any of the houses and this may have been interpreted by some as indicating the building on the south corner. However it is not clear which building the cartographer is indicating and it could be either side of the junction. It is interesting to note that few other buildings are named in the plan, the others being churches, the Abbey and its property, so this raises questions about the reason that the building was singled out for special attention. The only extant version of this map is also a copy from the original and it is not possible to determine how faithful to the original it is.

Peter Burley from The Battlefields Trust adds: *"When we wrote the book on the battles of St Albans we consulted SAHAAS on the location of the Castle Inn, and they came up with a very interesting observation. This is that on the older (coloured) version of the Hare map, the words "Castle Inn" seem clearly attached to what is now Connells Estate Agent [southern side], but in the woodcut copy of the map the names have become very slightly displaced to the left/upwards. This means that the words "Castle Inn" seem to be nearer to the Skipton Building Society [northern side] on the woodcut map. It was this map that whoever placed the plaque on wall used to locate the inn, but SAHAAS believes the coloured version is the more accurate and authentic. So far as I can make out, the Castle Inn is the only building whose location is made problematic by this slight displacement of text between the two versions of the map."*

Evidence for the northern position can be found in a piece of surviving documentation from the period. A lease in the documents of the Augmentation Office contains a reference to a tenement between the Castle on the south side and the house of George Vaughan on the north, with access to Shropshire Lane. The Victoria County History concludes that this places the inn on the north side of the junction.³² Furthermore, the Marian Survey of St Albans (observations for the report were completed on 13 August 1556) recorded a sizeable tenement called the Castle at the north corner of the junction which stretched to Monk ditch³³. This survey was handed to the Court of Augmentations of the Revenues of the Crown by an appointed commissioner. The purpose of this report was to record the property of the Crown within St Albans, the names of respective tenants and the rent that they paid and so is an important source in this debate.

Uncertainty over the location has existed at least since Kitton wrote an article on the "Old Inns of St Albans" at the end of the nineteenth century, in which he favoured the north side of the junction. Kitton also commented that Mr. Kingham (whose business stood on this spot at the time he

³⁰ Wilton, C. 2013. 'A Plan of the Town of St Alban, made by Benjamin Hare in 1634.' *Transactions of the St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society* 1900 (updated in 2013), pp. 3-4

³¹ For reproduction of map see: Freeman, 2008, op. cit., pp. 148-9

³² Page, 1908, op. cit., pp. 469-477

³³ Page, W. 1893. 'The Marian Survey of St Albans'. *Transactions of the St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society* 1893-94, p14

researched his article) had told him that he received many American visitors who believed it to be associated with the Castle Inn as mentioned in Shakespeare³⁴.

Despite this evidence some believe that the true location of the Castle Inn was on the opposite side of the street where Connells Estate Agents currently stands.³⁵

It is interesting to note that present day Victoria Street was not built along until the eighteenth century³⁶ and so the Castle Inn would have been one of the first buildings encountered when approaching St Albans along Shropshire Lane.

Shropshire Lane was narrow (see Hare map, reference 31) and so the road must have been widened at some point. It would be speculation to say that this may have been when the Castle Inn disappeared, however it also strongly suggests that nothing of the original building survives.

Other documentary references to the Castle Inn

It is not clear when the Castle Inn was built or for how long it stood, but references to it can be found in sources from the fifteenth century until the seventeenth century. Documentary evidence is scarce, however references can be found in wills, parish records and post mortem inquisitions.

The will of John Wangford (dated 31 March 1473) bequeaths a tenement in St Peters Street next to 'Le Castell' to his daughter and her husband,³⁷ and so provides a reference to the building during the medieval period. It also locates it at the junction with St. Peter's Street.

The next known appearance in records comes over a hundred years later in the seventeenth century. Roger Pemberton is mentioned as the owner of the Castle Inn in St. Peter's Parish Books and Records of 1618 and so links a named individual with the property. The record shows that the churchwardens were ordered to remove people from certain seats so that they could be occupied by Pemberton and "in future to belong to their two houses, viz., 'The Castell' in St. Albans..."³⁸ This suggests that Pemberton was a man of standing in the community.

The Castle also appears in another document relating to this individual. The post mortem inquisition following the death of Roger Pemberton (dating to 1628) records that he held the "messuage called the Castle in St Albans in tenure". The term "messuage" implies that there were also outbuildings and land. The document records John Pemberton as his heir. The inquisition also notes that (along with the Leaden Porch) the Castle was worth 13s. 4d.³⁹

The Castle then appears briefly in the post mortem inquisition for Ralph Pemberton (dated 25 April 1645) who may have been another of Roger's sons.⁴⁰

³⁴ Kitton, F.G. 1901. 'The Old Inns of St Albans'. *Transactions of the St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society* 1899 and 1900, Volume 1 Part 3 New Series, p250

³⁵ Bard. R. 2014. *St Albans Through Time*

³⁶ Page, 1908, op. cit., pp. 469-477

³⁷ Flood, S. (ed.) 1993. *St Albans Wills 1471-1500*, p19

³⁸ Kitton, 1901, op. cit., p251

³⁹ Bragg, W. (ed.). 1899. *The Herts Genealogist and Antiquary*, pp.242-3

⁴⁰ Ibid, p243

The Castle Inn still existed in the 1660s, as reference is made to it in a will dated 1669. The will was made by Adam Potter who was living in the Castle Inn at the time that the will was drawn up. Potter is described as a mealman, and so he was a middleman who bought corn directly from farmers and then either sold it on or arranged for it to be ground into flour. Some rare details about the form of the building are also obtained from this document as it records that the property was rated at 5 hearths in 1663 and had two acres of land behind it.⁴¹

Present day

The current tenants of both properties were approached on 30 April 2016 and enquiries made about the history of the respective buildings. The staff of Connells were not able to give any information except to confirm the existence of a cellar. This is possibly earlier than the current structure which is 1950s/60s in appearance. There were no features on the ground floor interior to suggest that the extant above ground structure is any older.

The staff in Skipton Building Society could not provide any information on the medieval history of the site but supplied interesting information on more recent history. They commented that there are vault doors in the basement which may relate to the property's earlier function as a bank. Tunnels run underneath the building and are accessed from the basement, although they appear to be blocked off. The staff speculated that the tunnel heads towards the courthouse in one direction and the old police station in the other although there is no evidence for this. They also commented on ghost stories told about the building, although they had not experienced any unusual activity themselves.

A quick visual inspection of the interior of the Skipton site did not suggest that any older building fabric remains. The walls are not particularly thick and so are unlikely to support a later façade.

The staff thought that Skipton Building Society had been there for between fifteen and nineteen years. Before this the unit was occupied by the National Provincial Bank which merged with Westminster Bank in 1968⁴². Before that it had either housed Yorkshire or Leeds Building Society. A firm of solicitors currently occupies the offices upstairs.

The view that no original fabric survives from the Castle Inn is shared by other researchers, including Ashdown-Hill.⁴³

A plaque commemorating the death of Somerset can be seen on the wall of the Skipton Building Society (see Figure 1, Appendix).

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

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⁴¹ Smith, J.T. and M.A. North. 2003. *St Albans 1650-1700: A Thoroughfare Town and Its People*, p167

⁴² Royal Bank of Scotland. 2015. 'National Provincial Bank Ltd'

⁴³ Ashdown-Hill, J. 2015. *The Wars of the Roses*

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Appendix



Figure 1: Plaque on the wall of Skipton Building Society
(Taken by the author on 30 April 2016)