

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016	
Building:	The Christopher Inn, 3 – 9 French Row
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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 Christopher Inn was one of the most popular, prosperous and grandest hostels in St Albans from the late 1500's for a couple of centuries. But its fine reputation waned and its grandeur faded in the 1800's and it became one of the most notorious Inns⁴, often featuring in court cases.

Visitors today wandering along French Row, past the bakers and the sweet shop and the Italian restaurant all of which used to be the Christopher Inn, are unlikely to realize that they are passing through what used to be the one of the shadier streets of St Albans. If you continue past the sweet shop and through the part-timber archway, below the former inn, you can still see a carved bracket representing a grotesque, half well-endowed woman and half cloven hooved beast dating from the time of the Inn. This "succubus" was said to be a sign of a brothel in medieval times, but these days it's referred to by some as "The Boobie Lady".²

Originally the buildings consisted of a group of two-storey medieval cottages about 20ft deep fronting French Row, with later extensions to the rear. The medieval roof of the cottages still remains with a complicated roof structure³ - its uneven slopes and dips indicating its age. The cantilevered front of the French Row building gives the street the charm and character of an old-world thoroughfare.

There are two cellars under the old Christopher Inn, the walls of which were built using flint, with courses of Roman tiles, "no doubt robbed from Verulamium" according to some. A cellar to the rear, in the shape of a tunnel, was assumed to be the beginning of one of the underground passages popularly believed to be running beneath the centre of medieval St Albans, but when tonnes of rubbish were cleared, this supposition was proved false.³

The restoration report of 1953³ stated that when work began, the building was found to be "so damaged and robbed of relics the impression was one of squalor rather than historical interest". But builders unveiled:

- four 16th century stone fireplaces, including one in what was probably the chief public room of the inn, covered with a variety of names and dates scratched on the stonework, the earliest of which is 'Roger Tirrill 1622'.
- oak panelling was discovered in the kitchen of the common lodging, behind 27 layers of wallpaper, hessian, sheets of newspaper covered with whitewash and other decorative finishes.
- on the first floor, fronting French Row, a window dating back to the early 1500s, containing early plain glass with original lead was uncovered.

The Christopher Inn had a fine reputation in the late 1600s. In the 1660s two large chambers in the south wing of the Christopher Inn were fitted out with panelling and carved fireplace lintels. The Christopher then had two of the best inn rooms in St Albans; one being especially desirable for its lofty position.⁶ In 1663 it was the second largest inn in St Albans having 14 chambers.⁶

In only a matter of a few decades the French Row area was to decline. In 1838 the council was asked to resolve the 'nuisance' arising from the overcrowded state of the Christopher, which then housed 10 families, mainly paupers, eight of whom were suffering typhus fever.⁸

The 1851 census⁵ details Neptune Smith, aged 33, as a victualler (person licensed to sell alcohol) at the St Christopher Inn. He featured in the trials of the St Albans Bribery Commission in the same year when a political scandal hit St Albans as it emerged that most of the votes in a by-election had been bought. The going rate was £5 a vote which was exactly the amount that Neptune Smith admitted in court to accepting for "his services" of "keeping the peace".⁷

In 1858, the license for "The St Christopher" came up for renewal. Evidence given by a woman living near the St Christopher –

"... stated that the house was conducted in a most disgraceful way, and she had seen girls exposed in a perfectly nude condition at the bedroom window. Respectable people were often afraid to come down the street."

"The chairman said the immorality in the town had become flagrant and abominable".⁷

The reputation of The Christopher didn't change though and it was reported in 1861 that Smith was being charged with keeping a brothel and in January of 1862, he pleaded guilty to "unlawfully keeping a disorderly house".⁷

The sudden death of Neptune Smith, aged 52, at a public house in Hertford was reported in 1867. He had drunk "a good deal" and complained of being unwell during the night so had "two glasses of brandy and water" in the morning. A couple of hours later he was found lying on the floor dead. He is buried in St Peter's Church along with his wife who died nine years later.⁷

By 1899, when Kitton was writing in "The Old Inns of St Albans",¹ The Christopher is no more and had been "divided into three tenements".

The building continued to deteriorate in the inter-war years and was sorely in need of the complete restoration that council undertook in the mid 1950's. It is now a delightful street to walk down without a hint of its notorious past, except perhaps for the rather grotesque "Boobie Lady".

References

- 1 "The Old Inns of St Albans" by F. G. Kitton, 1899
- 2 "Herts Advertiser", 31st January 2016
- 3 "The Renovation of the Christopher Inn, French Row, St Albans, 1950-54" by A S Moody, City Engineer and Surveyor, published by Academic Journal Offprint, from SAHAAS transactions, 1961.
- 4 "St Albans: Historical and Picturesque" by Charles Henry Ashdown and F G Kitton, 1893
- 5 Ancestry web site on line (www.ancestry.com)
- 6 "St Albans 1650-1700 A thoroughfare town and its people" (SAHAAS) by J T Smith and M A North, 2003, Herts Publications
- 7 Newspaper Archives web site on line (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)
- 8 "The Corporation Records of St Albans", 1890, Gibbs & Bamford