

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016

Building: The Civic Centre, St Peter's Street

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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 Civic Offices were housed in what is now the Alban Arena until 1988 when the new District Council offices were opened in response to the ever growing population of the City and the need to expand public services. The building was part funded by the sale of a number of other council owned properties.

Unlike Sir Frederick Gibberd's Modernist style Arena, the architecture is more reminiscent of a Romanesque style, more rounded and built in brick, rather than concrete. The architects were Town and City/Bovis, who were also involved in redevelopments in Victoria Street at the same time. The topping out ceremony was held on 28th August 1987.

A news release from the council's public relations office at the time tells us that 9000 cubic metres of sub-soil were excavated, 420 tonnes of reinforcing steel were used and 4,000 cubic metres of concrete poured.

Outside the building are hung the coats of arms of the city's seven twin towns:

 Fano, Italy	 Nyíregyháza, Hungary
 Nevers, France	 Odense, Denmark
 Worms, Germany	 Nieuwleusen, Netherlands
 Sylhet, Bangladesh	

The building is situated over 3 floors plus a basement. The council chamber is on the first floor. The chamber is dominated by the Coat of Arms of the City.

The blue shield with gold saltire is the city's arms. The crest shows a baron holding Magna Carta, referring to the first draft that was drawn up in the Abbey Chapter House in 1213. On the dexter side is an abbot and on the sinister side a figure representing John "the Schoolmaster" Printer (also known as "John Insomuch") and holding a print ball in his hand, the 3rd printing press in England was in the Abbey Gatehouse. The whole is on a ploughed field with cobbles.

A facsimile of the Magna Carta is hung on one wall. Outside the Chamber are the ship's bell from HMS Verulam 1943 and pictures of ships named St Albans. On this floor there is a link corridor connecting the building to the Alban Arena next door.

Offices fill the first and second floors. Recently some of the meeting rooms were named in honour of local "celebrities": Boudicca, Eleanor Ormerod (entomologist), Eric Morecombe, Sir Francis Bacon,



Sir John Lawes (founder of Rothamsted), John Blundell Maple (founder of Maples furniture store), Margaret Wix (first woman Mayor), Matthew Paris (C13th monk historian), Robert Runcie (Bishop of St Albans 1970 -80, Archbishop of Canterbury 1980 -91), Samuel Ryder (seed merchant and founder of the Ryder Cup), Stanley Kubrick (film director), Thomas Walsingham (Abbot).

On the ground floor, as well as a reception area and more offices, The Hub can now be found, including the police hub (the traditional blue lamp hangs outside) the Volunteer Centre, Citizen's Advice, Aldwyck Housing Association and Oaklands College information . You can also get a cup of coffee while you wait!

In the basement are 3 sets of extremely thick and heavy steel doors. These can be closed to form a secure nuclear bunker.

Bibliography

Freeman, M. (2008) *St Albans A History* Lancaster: Carnegie Publishing Ltd

St Albans District Council Press Release (1988)

20th Century St Albans, a project undertaken for the Institute of Tourist Guiding Green Badge qualification by Penny Thei (2013)