

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016	
Building:	The Clock Tower
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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	

St Albans Clock Tower is the only medieval town belfry in England. Morpeth in Northumberland also has a Clock Tower but being built at the beginning of the 17th Century it is a couple of hundred years younger than St Albans and so not Medieval. It is also 20 feet shorter!²

The tower was built in 1405 according to dendrochronological testing (using ring patterns in wood) carried out on the floor joists in 2009.⁶ The samples revealed the timbers to have been felled in the period 1401-4, suggesting the Tower was erected quickly and completed by 1405.⁶

Documentary evidence confirms that the plot of land that the Clock Tower was built on was still vacant in 1403.^{1,14} A second deed of 1412 mentions the existence of the "Clokhows"¹⁴ and so Kitton¹ concluded, "that the Tower was built between the 29th of June 1403 and Easter 1412".

As to why the Clock Tower was built, is a more of a mystery. The Clock Tower was built only 25 years after the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and a very short distance away, and defiantly facing, the pilgrims' entrance to the Abbey at Waxhouse Gate. This could suggest that it was built as a symbol of the growing independence by the townspeople from the power of the Abbey. With their own clock and bell they could now regulate their day without relying on the Abbey.

To hang the bell 'Gabriel', named after the Archangel, which weighs one ton and is 46 inches in diameter¹³, it would have been brought in through the large arch windows on the ground floor and then hoisted up through the centre of the Clock Tower. It was rung at 4am to wake the apprentices for work and at 8pm in the winter and 9pm in the summer for Curfew, when all the fires were to be extinguished and all lights put out. The bell was also rung for the start of the First Battle of St Albans in 1455. The last time the clock was swung to sound the bell was in 1901 for the funeral of Queen Victoria.¹³ The frame is now so weak that it is rung by being "clocked" on the side.

Despite the Tower being referred to as a Clockhouse from 1412 it would not originally have had a clock face or any system that connected the bell ringing with the clock. There is definite evidence of the existence of a clock in 1485, when the Clock House was leased to Robert Grane, a smith.¹ The current clock mechanism was made in 1866 by John Moore & Sons and was put in place when the tower underwent major renovations. The clock face that you see now was put up in 1958 and made of copper.³

From very early on the ownership of the Clock Tower was in the hands of 80 townspeople, until 1553⁵ when the lease was made over to the Mayor for public use. Today the Clock Tower is still owned and maintained by the council.

The council did little to maintain the structure in the early years and by 1700 had voted in favour of pulling the Clock Tower down by 8 to 5 votes.⁴ Luckily this was later rescinded and repairs made but the tower was left for decades to decay and deteriorate. It was finally restored in 1866 following the plans and designs of the architect, George Gilbert Scott. The Clock Tower's restoration included – all eight windows replaced, the facing flint repointed, all the corner quoin edging renewed with Bath

stone, a parapet built on the top along with a turret surmounted by a weathervane and a replacement clock installed and new railing placed around the base.¹

Over its 611 history, the Clock Tower along with the various structures that have been built against it, has been used for a variety of businesses – shoe maker, pawnbroker, butcher, ale house, draper, post office¹, saddler & harness maker, stationers and as a telegraphic station.^{7,8,9,10} In 1855 Richard Gibbs & Son were running their printers from the small shop attached to the east side of the Clock Tower. This is where the first edition of the “The St Albans Times and Herts Advertiser” was published on the 7th of July 1855.¹¹

In the 1870’s James Walklate¹⁰ took on the lease to run his harness making and saddlers business. If you were to stand in front of the Clock Tower in the early 1890’s you would see a large wooden shop sign attached to the lower story, which read “Walklate – saddler and harness maker. Hanging on the outside of the windows are a selection of harnesses for sale and if you were to “peep through the low-arched doorway”, as Ashdown¹² suggests, it would “reveal an interior which is strikingly picturesque, for here may be seen the men busily occupied at benches bestrewn with appliances necessary for their trade.”

If you were to then to climb up the narrow, stone steps you would pass through the Walklate’s store room on the first floor, and then up, passing the door to the Clock, on past the doors to the Dial room and that of the bell, Gabriel and up, after 93 steps to the top. On reaching the roof top you can rest against the southern parapet, where James Walklate’s son Edward carved his name, which can still be seen, and look out over St Albans.

Ashdown’s¹² description of the Clock Tower as, “one of the most conspicuous and interesting features in St Albans” is as true today as it was a hundred years ago and still “exhibits a marked individuality essentially its own”. Anyone can [visit](#) the Clock Tower today between Easter and September and climb the 93 steps to the top and hopefully agree with Ashdown when he wrote, “what a magnificent view of town and country lies before”.

References

- 1 F.G. Kitton lecture notes dated 15 March 1901 (printed in SAHAAS transactions)
- 2 “Morpeth Clock Tower and Bells”, by Richard Major (2006)
- 3 “Round St Albans with Geoff Dunk” published by the Arc & Arc (1985)
- 4 “The Corporation Records of St Albans” by A. E. Gibbs (1890)
- 5 “St Albans 1650-1700” by J T Smith & M A North published by University Hertfordshire Press (2003)
- 6 Unpublished document – Bridge M C 2009. The tree-ring dating of timbers from the Clock Tower, St Albans, Herts. (http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=MHT14548&resourceID=1008)
- 7 Kelly’s Directory of St Albans (St Albans Central Library)
- 8 Steven’s Almanach & Directory of St Albans (St Albans Central Library)
- 9 Post Office/Kelly’s Directory Hertfordshire (Ancestry.com)
- 10 Kelly’s/Pigot Directory of Hertfordshire (St Albans Central Library)
- 11 “Herts Advertiser” newspaper (STA microfiche/cuttings files)
- 12 St. Albans Historical & Picturesque by Ashdown & Kitten (1893)
- 13 Information Boards in the Clock Tower compiled by the Museum Service, researched by Chris Green (2007)
- 14 “The Herts Genealogist and Antiquary”, Vol. 1, edited by William Brigs (1895)