

## St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016

**Building:** The Corn Exchange, 18-22 Market Place

**Researched by:** Christine Bain & Lin Keen

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](mailto:museum@stalbans.gov.uk)

### Introduction

Opened in 1857 with a grand dinner, the Corn Exchange had a troubled start and ceased to be used as an exchange around the turn of the century. It was not just an exchange, however, but was a municipal building used for a wide range of purposes in the evenings and at other times when not needed for trading. Sublet in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the 1920s a lessee converted it into five shop units and it remains in use as retail premises today.

### The Building of the Corn Exchange

The predecessor of the Corn Exchange was an open-sided Market House. There had been a long history of complaints when, in the 1850s, the farmers and traders once again asked the Council for improvements. The Council set up a Market House Committee which presented a long report in February 1854. It was clear that repairs would not suffice - a new building was needed. Plans for a combined Corn Exchange and Market House had been commissioned and those from Coventry architect James Murray were recommended. The Council resolved to sell a piece of land in Fishpool Street and for the proceeds to be put towards the project. It referred the question of funding generally back to the Market House Committee.

In October 1855 the Council resolved to apply to the Treasury for permission to pull down the old Market House and sell the materials, and also for permission to take out a loan. By May 1856 the Market House Committee is reporting that the Treasury had consented to the sale of the Market House materials that the sale of the land in Fishpool Street had raised £65 and that public subscriptions amounted to £1,252. By this stage, it had become apparent that the cost of the larger site necessary for a combined building was too high. The Council decided to build a Corn Exchange only on the basis that a Market House would be erected elsewhere (although that never happened). Reduced plans by Murray at a cost of £1,470 were agreed and in July 1856 the Council agreed a contract with builder Joseph Briggs at a price of £1,380 13s.

The building was completed in September 1857. Its opening was marked by a dinner on 23<sup>rd</sup> September chaired by Mayor John Lewis and attended by more than 100 landowners, tenant farmers and townsfolk. The Herts Advertiser reported that the dinner was provided by Mrs Marks of the Peahen and Mr Barrance of the George Inn. The building was described as "chaste, elegant and useful" and the report apparently contained three columns of toasts and entertainment.

The Exchange opened for business in early October 1857 with 18 places let providing the Council with a likely income of about £110 per annum.

### Trouble and strife

The Council owned the land on which the Corn Exchange was built and, although the building costs were almost entirely paid for by public subscription, remained the landlord and retained control over its use. Less than two years after the building was opened, in February 1859, the Council sought to limit the opening hours of the exchange. At first the farmers and traders simply ignored

the new rules and continued as before but in December of that year the Council sought to enforce closure at 3 p.m. on market days (except for the collection of grain and samples).

The farmers and traders forcibly objected on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1859. They and their supporters broke into the building at 3.45 p.m. brushing two policemen aside. A cartoon by John Henry Buckingham depicts the disturbance. A court case followed in which three men were jointly charged with criminal damage to the building to the value of £1 2s 6d and were fined that amount plus costs or 21 days' imprisonment.

This was not the end of the matter. A public meeting agreed to boycott the building from 31<sup>st</sup> December. Trading was moved elsewhere and the Council was no longer receiving rent on the property. In March 1860, the Council conceded that the exchange could stay open for so long as the farmers and traders required but were kept waiting for a reply until December 1860 when the users demanded payment of £30 for expenses incurred in moving trading elsewhere. The Council agreed to pay and trading in the Corn Exchange resumed from February 1861.

### **A public establishment and a church**

In its day the Corn Exchange was abuzz with business and pleasure. As well as the corn market, the straw plait market was held there. It was a well-known local centre for concerts, meetings, exhibitions and other events although by 1861 a petition was raised against letting it for dancing which resulted in an order that no dancing should take place after midnight.

Examples of the use of the Corn Exchange for matters affecting the lives of people in St Albans include:

- In May 1858, the coming of the railway was celebrated with a ball until 3 a.m.
- In 1863 examinations were held by the St Albans British School with the Mayor presiding with subjects including not just reading, writing and arithmetic but also mental calculations and singing
- In March 1873 a meeting of agricultural workers took place there and passed a resolution to ask the House of Commons to extend the borough franchise to the counties of England
- In July 1884 a public meeting about the fencing off of common land along Sandpit Lane passed a resolution expressing "indignant protest against the wanton and illegal enclosure" (the perpetrators were eventually forced to remove their fencing)
- In March 1906 it hosted yet another public meeting - chaired by the Mayor, Samuel Ryder - to protest at the erection of telegraph poles and wires in St Peters Street (which remains without them to this day),.

There are records of many temperance<sup>1</sup> meetings being held in the Corn Exchange in the years up to 1900. There was even a Corn Exchange Baptist Church, a forerunner of today's Marshalswick Baptist Free Church. Following a split in the membership of the Dagnall Street Baptist Church, the breakaway group held their services in the Corn Exchange. The first such service, held on Sunday July 4<sup>th</sup> 1880, was arranged by Lord Grimthorpe (as he became), William Hurlock (alderman and one-time mayor of St Albans, a London businessman), Robert Pratt (printer of Market Place), Charles Gentle (iron founder and metal worker of French Row) and William Wilshire (carpenter).

That first service was well attended and services were held on each following Sunday in the Corn Exchange, the first communion being held on August 1<sup>st</sup>. The congregation decided to declare itself a Church of God and on the first Sunday in September 1880 in the afternoon the Corn Exchange Baptist Church was formed. The right hand of fellowship was extended to 35 people and the church was declared duly constituted. The Rev Henry W Taylor (who had preached at the first service) was invited to be its minister.

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<sup>1</sup> social movement against the consumption of alcoholic beverages

Services were held in the Corn Exchange until the opening of The Tabernacle in Victoria Street in 1882.

### **The twentieth century**

Once trading ceased, the building had a succession of tenants including Home & Colonial stores. In July 1914, the Council turned down a proposal to lease it out for 21 years (which had been opposed on the basis that it was the only place in town where people could hold any meetings they required). This meant that the building was available to play its part in the war effort during the Great War.

The British Women's Temperance Association used it as a rest room on Sundays for wives visiting soldiers billeted in the City (the influx of visitors at the weekends had created a problem for women in particular as there were insufficient places for them to seek shelter apart from the pubs). The Belgian Refugees Committee was given free use of the building as a meeting room during the week. In October 1915 the army wanted to use it to feed soldiers which was agreed if suitable arrangements could be made for the Belgian refugees to vacate it.

From 1918 the Corn Exchange was the home of the national kitchen. Its central position and size made it an ideal location for this. The Council provided it rent free and gave £500 to set it up. National kitchens were locally administered but part of a major nationwide government-funded programme to alleviate food poverty and its effects. They grew out of voluntary projects within working class communities to combat wartime supply disruption and price inflation. The movement was, however, short-lived; the national kitchens division of the Ministry of Food was finally disbanded in 1919 and the movement disappeared. By 1922 the Corn Exchange was the home of the United Services Club.

In 1924 the building was let to Mr. Israel Fraser for retail use. It was converted into five shop units and the stone and brickwork was cut away around the facade to a height of some 13 feet. The impact has been described as 'appalling' as the new subdivisions bore no relation to the original symmetry. A Design and Industries Association booklet in 1929 said that "helpless chaos" was an apt description and over subsequent years the Corn Exchange's appearance worsened, with the introduction of lower quality modern shop fronts and modern materials.

The number of separate lessees meant that restoration of the building overall was difficult. It was not until the 1990s that it was possible to prepare a scheme aimed at restoring the building as closely as possible to its original appearance. Work began in 1992. It involved the removal of the shop fronts and fascia signs and re-instatement of the main stone pilasters, stone arches and plinths using Bath stone and Portland Stone to match the surviving stonework. Reclaimed bricks were found to match the existing white bricks which formed the infill between the arches. Where there had originally been stone and brickwork mullions<sup>2</sup> painted cast aluminum fluted columns were introduced in front of the shop windows to give visual support to the stone arches.

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<sup>2</sup> Vertical bars between panes of glass in a window

## Sources

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<sup>3</sup> Must be incorrect as it was 130 years before