

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016	
Building:	The Fleur de Lys, 1 French Row
Researched by:	Chris Brain
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	

In the fourteenth century John and Matilda Pikebon bequeathed their house on this site for the use of the Abbey after their deaths. The abbot, John Whetamstede, commissioned an inn and brewery here between 1420 and 1440. The name or its older variant, Flower de Luce or Luse, is often attributed to the apocryphal story concerning the imprisonment in the Pikebons' house of King John of France after the battle of Poitiers in 1356. However, this inn sign was commonplace in the period when the abbot's commission was carried out.

F G Kitton believed the building to date to the 14th century due to a fragment of window carving found during the demolition of The Great Red Lion pub next door in 1895. The present building was almost completely rebuilt in the early 16th century and enlarged again in the mid-17th century with haylofts and open gallery running around a courtyard.¹

Another famous name linked to this inn was Thomas Dimsdale, a surgeon from Hertford. He bought the inn in about 1745 and installed a bowling green behind the building running towards the present Verulam Road. Dimsdale was a pioneer of variolation, or inoculation, against smallpox and wrote several treatises on the subject. His fame spread and, in 1768, he was invited to Russia to inoculate the Empress Catherine the Great, her son the Grand Duke Paul and some 140 of her courtiers. He was paid £10,000, plus £2,000 in travelling expenses, given an annual pension of £500 and made a baron of the Russian Empire.

His son, Nathan, returned to Russia in 1784 to inoculate Catherine's other son, the Grand Duke Alexander. Dimsdale senior later went on to become Member of Parliament for Hertford in 1780 and 1784 and a successful private banker in Cornhill, London.

From 1681 until about 1850 a regular coach service ran to London and The Fleur de Lys was an inn of considerable importance. Its prominence faded with the ending of the coach service although it continued as a busy city pub.²

It is often mentioned in court reports and local newspaper articles, mostly about cases of drunken disorderliness, theft or accidents such as this one from The Herts Advertiser in August 1890: 'On Wednesday about noon, the man in charge of Messrs. Adey & White's mineral water van was about to mount the vehicle which stood outside The Fleur de Lis, when the horse backed, the van smashing the plate glass window of the unoccupied shop adjoining.'³

¹ The Old Inns of St Albans, F G Kitton

² Gentleman's Magazine

³ The Herts Advertiser