

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016

Building: The Gables, 13 – 15 Market Place

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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

Description

The date on the building is 1637 and sources suggest this is the likely date of its construction. It is likely that it was built to be used as a shop on the ground floor and living accommodation on the upper floors. Nikolaus Pevsner says little about the building - simply that it has overhanging gables and that in the seventeenth century buildings in the Market Place were taller and more ambitious than in less important streets.

It is Grade II listed 2. 'Early C17 timber framed building of 2 storeys and attic'.

From photographs it can be seen that it housed a variety of retail outlets over time – 1885 occupied by Roberts the chemist, 1890 – Freeman, Hardy and Willis, footwear retailer, one of city's earliest multiples, 1897 – Worsell the drapers.

Threat of demolition

In 1899 it was acquired by Boots the Chemist. It was their intention to demolish the building and in its place erect a modern building similar to all their other branches. This caused great controversy in the town. The campaign to save the building was spearheaded by F G Kitton who wrote an article in the Herts Advertiser in August 1899 entitled 'The Vanishing of old St Albans – a plea for the picturesque':

"the building now threatened is one which must be well known to every inhabitant of St Albans, standing as it does in what is perhaps the most prominent position in the town. The block of tenements, of which this particular house forms the northern extremity, is rightly considered as the most picturesque relic of medieval St. Albans, and the old plaster gable, with its overhanging upper storey fronting the Market Place and St. Peter's-street, imparts to this portion of the town a character at once so quaint and beautiful that its destruction would prove most lamentable from an artistic and archaeological standpoint."

However, not everyone in the town agreed. 'Pro Bono Publico' wrote in the edition of 01/09/1899 "Why is there all this hullabaloo about an old tumble-down wreck of a building in Market Place" – he suggested Boots knock down the building and replace it with something in the style of the Peahen. 'Vandal' wrote that archaeologists had no right to interfere with how businessmen would adapt their premises to suit their needs. He went on to suggest that the town should also knock down the 'Moote Hall' and Tudor Tavern. 'Up to date' described the building as 'Ramshackle antediluvian premises' and 'a drawback to a town of such go-ahead pretensions as St Albans'. Another suggested knocking down the entire row of buildings from the clock tower, leaving the clock tower standing and adding some fountains to the open triangular area – a bit like Trafalgar Square.

A petition was drawn up and signed by 300 people:

"This building is one of the best known and picturesque spots in the city and is visited by Artists and Archeologists as a valuable example of Ancient Domestic Architecture." It goes on to note that it is well known over England and America that Market Place is a place where picturesque buildings are found, proved by the number of strangers who visit.

This was presented to Boots who agreed to retain the building, making good and adapting internally to their needs.

Folklore

The Gables is said to be haunted. There have been reported sightings of two ghosts, one is an evil-looking old man who stands by a fireplace in the storeroom on the top floor and one is of an old woman who is doing embroidery. It has been said that people who have seen her experience an overwhelming desire to jump out of the window. Stock is moved around and allegedly shop assistants do not like to go up there on their own. Hauntings were reported even by members of the Free French army who were stationed there during the Second World War.

Sources

1. St Albans 1650 – 1700 A Thoroughfare Town and its people – SAHAAS
2. The Buildings of England, Hertfordshire – Nikolaus Pevsner – second edition
3. Historic England – Listed buildings <https://www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/>
4. British History on-line – Victoria county histories - <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/herts/vol2/pp469-477>
5. Hertfordshire Genealogy website - <http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/oldnews/ha-1899-08-26-st-albans-kitton-petition.htm>
6. St Albans in old photographs – Sam Mullins
7. Cuttings from Herts Ad 1899 – Public Library pamphlets file Y234.188
8. Haunted Hertfordshire – Ruth Stratton and Nicholas Connell