

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016

Building: 'The Grange', 16 St Peters 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

Introduction

Built in 1764 for three times Mayor John Osborn, the Grade II* listed Grange has been described as a country house rather than a town house and with justification because, as will be seen, its grounds were once extensive. It has also been reported as having a rather eerie resident.

History

Grange Farm once occupied the land to the east of St Peters Street and north of Shropshire Lane (now Victoria Street). The Grange was built in big grounds associated with this farm; the Civic Centre with the Alban Arena, the Magistrates Court and Water End Barn, now fill what were once the grounds of the house.

It remained in use as a house into the 1900s but by the 1940s was being used as offices for St Albans Council. In the 1980s the Grange was substantially renovated, a Victorian extension being replaced. It is now occupied by the Nationwide Building Society.

House and grounds

On 26th October 1809, a property thought to be the Grange was advertised to let in the London Courier and Evening Gazette. The advertisement described the house as being "*situate in the most pleasant and healthy part*" of St Albans and consisting of "*a spacious entrance hall, library, well furnished with useful books, parlour, drawing room, four best bedrooms, servants rooms, kitchen, pantries*" plus a "*brewhouse with a well of excellent water in it*".

It is, however, the description of the outbuildings and extensive grounds that is most intriguing given the situation of the Grange today. They are described as consisting of a "*three stalled stable with coach house, and many other buildings for pigs, fowls, dogs, wood etc., pleasure ground enclosed on three sides, with brick wall planted with fruit trees and shrubs of various kinds, a good kitchen garden, melon ground, orchard, and about two acres of pasture land adjoining*".

The specific reference to a melon ground is particularly interesting in terms of what it tells us about the likely tenants. Melons have been cultivated in this country for many centuries but the British climate does not suit them and they are (still) difficult to grow successfully. In the early 1800s the cultivation of melons would generally have been found only on country estates belong to the upper classes. They require significant heat to grow which would most likely have been generated through the use of large amounts of fresh rotting horse manure.

As a result, melon grounds would generally be found in the farther reaches of the grounds so that the inhabitants of the house were not bothered by the smell. In the case of the Grange, there were also apparently the smells and sounds of the stables, the pigs and the fowls to contend with. No wonder the "pleasure ground" or private garden was walled!

The advertisement describes the Grange as having every convenience for the accommodation of a genteel family. The inclusion of the reference to the melon ground indicates that the family would possibly be one aspiring to a social status a little above the merely genteel.

The Lady in Grey

There have been reports in the press and online to the effect that people working for the Council and the Nationwide have seen the ghostly apparition of a lady wearing a long grey dress walking around the building. It has been suggested she may be the ghost of Dorothy Osborn, daughter-in-law of John Osborn who is said to have committed suicide after discovering that her husband was having an affair.

The building

Nikolaus Pevsner described the Grange as the best house on the east side of St Peters Street. It is two storeys with five windows facing on to St Peters Street. The south side has two canted bays (polygonal or square bays), each with three windows and a fine Venetian window between. However, it has been extensively modified over time.

According to a report apparently prepared at the time of the 1980s renovations, around 1800 the house did not have a frontage onto St Peters Street but was oriented at right angles to the road. The main entrance was on the south side with four windows overlooking the gardens. Another four windows at the back looked out over extensive courtyards. At that time there was an attic storey.

Based on an analysis of the proportions of the arrangement of architectural features, the report concludes that the original building had been extended along St Peters Street, probably in the early 1800s. On the same basis the authors conclude that the south elevation was partly or completely rebuilt at a date later than the St Peters Street extension.

The interior

The 1980s report (see Appendix below) says that internally, many features of the architectural detail confirm a history of repeated change. It identifies an element of incongruity in some of the decorative details, notably in the elaborately carved decoration in the former drawing room on the south-east corner of the ground floor and says that, in a sense, they are too grand for the rest of the house being more in keeping with a much larger property.

The report goes on to suggest the possibility that an owner in the early nineteenth century, perhaps with more money than taste, set out to improve the property in his own eyes by adding the bay windows, installing elaborate decorated ceilings and architectural mouldings and so on without consulting an architect to ensure that the new works fitted a coherent whole - consistent perhaps with the aspirations hinted at by the growing of melons!

Sources

1. Nikolaus Pevsner: The Buildings of England "Hertfordshire", Second edition revised by Bridget Cherry (1977) p324
2. Kate Morris: Lecture "St Peter's in The Borough" 26 November 2010 (Arc & Arc website) http://www.stalbanshistory.org/page_id_345.aspx
3. Article by Liz Rolfe in Arc & Arc Newsletter 199 (February 2016) p23 http://stalbanhistory.org/documents/February_2016_Newsletter.pdf
4. St Albans Conservation Area Character Statement (Prepared 2014/ Published 2016) http://www.stalbans.gov.uk/Images/16.03.03%20Area%204a%20-%20Commercial%20Centre%20FINAL%20JD_tcm15-53958.pdf p71
5. Eerie place website: <http://eerieplace.com/haunted-st-albans-discover-the-granges-ghostly-grey-lady/> supported by articles from the Herts Advertiser identified from the Central Library's index

6. British Listed Buildings website <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/en-163428-the-grange-hertfordshire#.VxYWseT2aUk>
7. JT Smith: "Nine Hundred Years of St Albans: architecture and social history" (1993)
8. JT Smith: "Hertfordshire Houses Selective Inventory" (1993)
9. "Looking at Buildings" text from Tour Guides
- 10.** Report on the Grange (undated and with no author but accompanying plans dated July 1986) found in the files at Arc & Arc, the full text of which is reproduced in the Appendix
- 11.** List of St Albans mayors from the Council website http://www.stalbans.gov.uk/Images/MayoralCount_tcm15-34883.pdf

APPENDIX

Report on The Grange accompanying plans dated July 1986

[transcribed by Christine Bain 20.4.16]

Report on
The Grange
16 St Peters Street
St Albans

The Grange is a prominent building on St Peters Street in the centre of St Albans. It appears to be a Georgian building with later extensions at the back. Investigations of the building carried out as part of the exercise of designing a new extension to replace the existing late Victorian one have shown that its history is far more complex and varied than first impressions suggest.

A map in the Council offices dating from the mid-seventeenth century shows St Peters Street as lined by small terraced houses or cottages on either side, with no larger houses. More recently, the Grange had extensive gardens on one side and courtyards and outbuildings on the other. It is fairly certain that a number of smaller properties were demolished to create a larger site, probably in the early eighteenth century.

It is possible that elements from the earlier buildings were incorporated into the structure when the new house was built, though there are no obvious features visible, other than some timberwork in the cellars which may have been salvaged from demolition.

A history of the Adey family, who lived in the house from 1791-1802 describes the house and its surroundings, and it is evident from this description that the building has been extensively modified since that time. Around the year 1800, the house did not have its *[sic]* present frontage onto St Peters Street. It was oriented at right angles to the road, with the main entrance on the south elevation. It had four windows to the front overlooking the gardens, and four to the back, looking out over extensive courtyards. There was at that time an attic storey.

There is no documentary record of the changes to the house in the early nineteenth century. However, certain inferences can be made from the architectural arrangement of the elevations.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a period in English architecture characterised by the revival of certain classical concepts in building design. Of particular interest in this case is the use of proportional systems in the generation of plans and elevations.

The St Peters Street elevation conforms to classical proportional systems in the arrangement of its architectural features, but in a rather unusual way. It is noticeable that the elevation is not symmetrical, and analysis shows that it is based on a combination of differently proportioned modules. The elevation taken as a whole does not fit any of the simpler ratios, such as 1:1, 1:2, 2:3, or 1:1.618 (the "golden section"), but is broken down horizontally as three squares plus golden section, and vertically as square plus golden section. The location of the windows and portico conforms to this module with a high degree of accuracy. The building was extended along St Peters Street by an architect with knowledge of classical techniques who made his new elevation work within this tradition by applying elaborate rules of proportion. The line of the cornice and the plinth is an integral part of this, confirming that their location at least dates from this same period, probably the early nineteenth century.

The south elevation faced into the gardens, and its most noticeable feature is the large bay windows. The overall proportion of the elevation is a straightforward golden section, but none of the other elements of bay and window can be located within a coherent system. This suggests that the elevation was partly or completely rebuilt, and at a later date than the St Peters Street elevation. The elaborate cornice featured as part of this extends to the front of the building. This could be

either because an existing cornice detail was reproduced and extended or that a simpler cornice on the St Peters Street elevation, possibly to the same pattern as surviving cornices on the north and east elevations, was replaced.

To the rear of the building, on the east side, is a large extension. From its style and detail it is obviously last nineteenth or early twentieth century, with mid-twentieth century additions of appalling [*sic*] banality. The only interesting feature of this is a pleasantly detailed brick chimney which will be retained as part of the new extension.

It is evident that the building extended into this area in the early nineteenth century. The main house has no servants' quarters or kitchen, and the cellars extend behind the dividing wall on the east side. It is possible that a seventeenth century building was extended in the eighteenth century, and demolished in the nineteenth century to make way for an extension to its own extension!

The history of the building, and the architectural theory informing its design have been considered in the design of the new extension. In particular, a system of proportion based on classical techniques has been applied in the design of the elevations.

Internally, many features of the architectural detail confirm this history of repeated change. It is clear that there is no coherent stylistic treatment extending through the building, and that many changes have been made to the internal planning. There is an element of incongruity in some of the decorative details, notably in the elaborately carved decoration in the former drawing room on the south-east corner of the ground floor. In a sense, they are too grand for the rest of the house; more in keeping with a much larger property. An attractive theory is that an owner in the early nineteenth century, perhaps with more money than taste, set out to improve the property in his own eyes by adding the bay windows, installing elaborate decorated ceilings and architectural mouldings and so on without consulting an architect to ensure that the new works fitted a coherent whole. Having said that, the quality of the plasterwork in particular, and especially the cornices, is exceptionally fine.

The policy in terms of the interior of the building is to restore as much as possible the finest elements of the eighteenth and nineteenth century work. In some of the rooms this will be a rather piecemeal exercise as so much of the former interiors has been removed or badly damaged. Where skirtings and architraves survive, new sections can be made to match their profile. Surviving doors can be used as a pattern for new doors. Several fireplaces, some of very high quality, survive more or less intact and can be restored.

In general, architectural features are obscured by heavy layers of overpainting. Existing paint will be removed as far as is practical given the condition of the surface beneath. It may be that in some cases mouldings are held together by the paint layers, and any such works will have to be carried out by specialist contractors.