

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016	
Building:	The Great Red Lion, 26 High Street
Researched by:	Penny Thei
<p>This research was undertaken by volunteers and is not an exhaustive history of the building but captures what intrigued them during the project.</p> <p>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</p>	

Built in 1446, it was known as the Cornerhall and owned by the Nunnery of St Mary's Sopwell. By 1486 it was known as the Lyon, left in the will of Dame Constance Cressy to Robert and Alice Exmew, bringing to them the rent of 10 shillings a year. The Marian survey of 1556 has it as the Great Red Lion.

It was one of the larger inns in the town, being described in the 17th century as having about 14 chambers, the same size as The Christopher in French Row, making it only slightly smaller than the Bull on Holywell Hill with 23 chambers (now the site of the Clarion Hotel) and slightly larger than the White Hart with 11. During the 16th and 17th centuries the Great Red Lion is mentioned on a number of occasions in the Mayor's accounts and in Council minutes for the payment of food and wine for councillors and jurymen. It was very common for the Council to meet in various inns around the town until the Town Hall was built in 1831.

In 1606 the accounts of the grammar school refer to payments from the third wine licence "to the use of the Schoolmaster" from Robert Wolley who passed it to Richard Wolley on his death. (The first 2 wine licences were awarded to the town by Queen Elizabeth I, at the request of Sir Nicholas Bacon to pay for the salary of the schoolmaster. The third was awarded by James I).

In 1643 Thomas Coningsby the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire was arrested by Oliver Cromwell's men in the inn's yard, because he was attempting to recruit men to the cause of Charles I. During the late 17th century, the inn passed to the Sellioke family, John Sellioke becoming Mayor in 1684 and 1700. It is said that John threatened the town's innkeepers and alehouse keepers if they did not turn out to vote for Lord George Churchill in 1685 and that troops would be billeted at their premises for so very little payment it would ruin them! In 1739 the earliest Hertfordshire freemason's lodge met here.

In 1792 the inn was re-fronted and enlarged according to Frederick Kitton, "in a crude and inartistic manner". It was probably at that time the name on the inn sign was changed to the Great Red Lion to distinguish it from the 3 other Red Lions in the town. There are numerous mentions of the Great Red Lion in court records, theft, pickpocketing and drunkenness being commonly mentioned, though there is one instance of a report by the Drainage Committee in 1848 of the discovery of an offensive manure heap on the premises of the Great Red Lion and offensive pigsties and an accumulation of liquid manure on the opposite side of the road.

The inn was important for its underground stabling for 10 or 12 horses. It was a posting inn and a regular coach service ran from the inn to Watford. The inn was demolished in 1895 and presumably the stables with it. It was then rebuilt on the site in 1896 and by 1898 it was the Great Red Lion. Kitton comments: "*That terrible affliction, the Great Red Lion - Far too Great and a deal too red.*" The inn closed in 1981 having been a commercial hotel, wine and spirit merchant's and garage and eventually became a glass and chinaware shop until later the Italian restaurant (Zizzi's) opened.

Bibliography:

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