

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

<b>Building:</b>	<b>The Maltings, between Victoria Street and Chequer Street, St Albans AL1 3HL</b>
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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: <a href="mailto:museum@stalbans.gov.uk">museum@stalbans.gov.uk</a>	

The Maltings is a small shopping centre in St Albans. It's right in the centre of town, at the top of Holywell Hill and close to the Town Hall and the Market Place. It was opened in 1988 by Diana Princess of Wales as a new open 'pedestrian shopping street'. Almost 30 years later it is an attractive and well-used part of the town centre. It has a public library, a studio theatre and a private health clinic in addition to a wide range of shops, services and cafés. The brewery master's house, now called Brewmaster House, has been converted into offices for small businesses, and there is a multi-storey car park.

The centre is entered from Chequer Street, the London Road, or the car park. It is bounded by the ancient Chequer Street, and the much more recent 19<sup>th</sup> century Victoria Street, London Road and Marlborough Road. It is six acres in area, and has a very long and interesting history starting in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Chequer Street**

Chequer Street is one of the oldest streets in St Albans, some historians reporting that it was built before the Norman conquest. Archaeological evidence shows that there were wooden houses on the street in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. They are shown in early maps with cultivated land at the rear, an area called the 'town backsides'. The 'backsides' ended at Tonman's Ditch, the location of today's Marlborough Road. The ditch is thought to have been both a boundary marker, separating town lands from those of the Abbey, but built earlier as a defensive structure.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries wooden houses began to be replaced using stone, flint and cob. But in 1455 the First Battle of St Albans – a battle at the beginning of the Wars of the Roses - was fought in the centre of town. Chequer Street houses were damaged and had to be rebuilt.

Maltings and breweries existed in Chequer Street in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and Chequer Street was known as 'Maltchepyng' the Maltmarket.

The east side of Chequer Street, alongside the modern shopping centre, had many inns. The open space behind the buildings could be used for stables for visitor's horses.

### **Brewing**

Hertfordshire's oldest industry is brewing and was well established by the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the main ingredients of beer is malted barley. Traditionally, it was created in a malt house or maltings. This was a large building used for converting grain into malt. The grain was first soaked in water in a 'cistern' for a day or more then drained and transferred to a 'couch'. The grain would then generate heat and start to germinate after a day or two depending on the ambient temperature.

It would then be spread out on the 'growing floor', turned frequently, and left to grow for around 14 days. It would develop roots, but further development would be stopped by drying before the new stem broke through the husk. At this stage most of the starch would be converted into 'maltose'.

Traditional malt houses had to be quite large, a minimum of 20ft by 120ft. Brewing required much less space, so inn owners might brew their own beer, but buy malted barley from a maltster.

Malting and brewing became industrialised towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> C and large malt houses were no longer required.

### **The Kinder family and the St Albans Brewery**

The Kinder family were first recorded in 1600. They were butchers, living and working in the Market Place, and later in Dagnell Lane. They became prosperous, and were owners of much of the Maltings site until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1737 the Kinders bought the Three Horseshoes Inn in Smallford. By the 1770s they had become gentry, owning the old manor house and farm at Bemonds (or Beaumont) to the east of the town. They had inherited this by marriage from the Coxe family. In 1776 they opened the St Albans Brewery behind Chequer Street. In 1820 they rebuilt the Chequers Hotel and by 1822 they had a house, brewery, a malting, a storehouse, stables and granaries on the Maltings site. Kinder also bought up more inns.

By 1838 Kinder sold the St Albans brewery and malthouse to Adey and White. By this time they owned about 40 tied houses which they leased to Adey and White, selling them to Adey and White in 1910. In 1928 most of the Chequer Street buildings were demolished, and in 1936 Adey and White sold the business, 52 public houses and four off-licences to JW Green of Luton.

### **Development around the Maltings site**

The London Road was cut in 1790, replacing Sopwell Lane as the main route into London. From 1800 onwards the centre of St Albans developed rapidly. Verulam Road, planned as a bypass for Fishpool Street, was constructed in 1825, and the Town Hall built in 1831-32.

The Midland Railway station (the City station) opened in 1868, and in 1876 Shropshire Lane became Victoria Street. In 1877 the County Fire Office and fire engines were based at Adey and White's brewery, with the brewery providing their horses. Later – in 1880 - a Public Library and School of Art were built. The Library was replaced in 1911 by the Carnegie Library, now O'Neil's on the opposite side of Victoria Street. The Baptist Tabernacle was built in 1881, and the Fire Station in 1883. In 1897 a Training Home for Girls was opened, which became a Co-operative store in 1930. St Albans Cinema was built on part of the Adey and White brewery next to The Bell and opened in 1913. It was renamed The Chequers in 1927 and closed in 1974.

In 1897 the brewery master's house was built (now Brewmaster House) and in 1898 the Marlborough Road Methodist Church was built on an 'empty site' suggesting that the road was built at around this time. The houses in New Kent Road were built between 1897 and 1913 and those in Westbourne Terrace in 1899. London Road houses were probably built at the same time, but this area is now used for service access. By 1900 the Maltings site was surrounded by streets on all four sides. In 1922 Lloyds Bank was built on the garden of the master's house.

In 1969 the Conservation Area was established. This included the buildings on Victoria Street and Chequer Street, but not London Road or Marlborough Road. The Chequer Street Comprehensive Development Area was approved in 1974.

### **The end of brewing**

Much of the malthouse was demolished in 1928 and Adey and White sold the brewery in 1936. Later that year the site was bought by St Albans Council. During the war some of the remaining buildings were used as a local Defence Headquarters and as a bomb shelter.

After the war the site remained derelict and the land was used as a car park. But in 1962 the Chequers Cinema was bought by a property company who wanted to convert it into a supermarket. Permission was refused because a comprehensive redevelopment of the site was planned. The cinema continued as a cinema and social club, and was compulsorily purchased by the Council in 1974.

### **Development of the Maltings**

In 1965 the Council designated the site for development. By 1969, after various surveys and proposals, St Albans City Council gave the go-ahead to a partnership arrangement with a development company, based on a 125 year ground lease. The designated St Albans Conservation Area included the buildings on the Chequer Street and Victoria Street boundaries of the development site, but not the London Road, Marlborough Road or New Kent Road boundaries.

The 1960s and '70s was a period when many towns and cities were replacing their old town centres with new modern covered shopping centres. The Council entered a partnership with a national developer who had undertaken similar projects elsewhere. A comparable proposal was made for the Chequer Street site: a large enclosed building shut at night. There were exhibitions of possible developments which were met with many objections. In August 1977 the Civic Society prepared a report setting out their concerns: that it would be ugly and inappropriate in such an old town centre, and out of keeping with the rest of the city; that the district could not support such a large shopping development financially; and that it would undermine St Peter's Street as the main shopping area. But in October 1977 the Council gave planning permission for the enclosed shopping centre.

There were meetings and objections throughout 1978, and concerns raised about the lack of competitive tendering. The Chequer Street Action Group was set up, who were very active in promoting their case through meetings, newsletters and articles in the national press. People were writing to the Department of the Environment threatening to withhold their rates. In May 1978 the BBC broadcast a programme about the dispute and in July there was a mass protest outside the Town Hall with banners and 'campaign badges'. In December an independent development company was commissioned to review the Council's proposals. They confirmed the concerns of the objectors.

In early 1979 a further exhibition was held of two enclosed, and two open, schemes. And an historian was commissioned to prepare a report on the history of Chequer Street. National Opinion Polls was commissioned to undertake a questionnaire and interview survey to identify the wishes of residents. This again confirmed their objection to a large enclosed shopping centre and in July 1979 the Council decided not to continue with the developer's scheme. In October 1979 a new 'developer's brief' was prepared, inviting submissions from other developers.

From 1980 to 1984 local archaeologists excavated the site and interesting finds were made.

In 1980 four potential new developers were selected and in May 1981 the Council gave planning permission for a smaller, open, shopping development, along the lines of the proposals from the Civic Society and the Chequer Street Action Group in 1979.

In July 1981 an agreement was signed with Bredero Consulting Ltd for an open 'street' development, with a library, supermarket, two large retail units, 42 flats, a department store, an exhibition/meeting room, and car parking for 650 vehicles. The financial arrangements were also agreed. But in the event a department store was not recruited.

In 1983 the name of the shopping centre was changed from the Chequer Street Shopping Centre to The Maltings, and the project was divided into two phases. In phase 1 the buildings on the periphery of the site were restored and converted, in phase 2 the interior was constructed. This included Lloyds Bank, and the brewery master's house, which was converted into offices for small businesses and renamed Brewmaster House.

In 1979 the first developer had served a writ on the Council to cover their expenses from 1971. This was settled out-of-court in October 1983. The project was topped-out in 1986, and opened by Diana, Princess of Wales in April 1988.

### **Postscript**

The development of this sensitive and historic, but run down, site took many years, from 1965 to 1988. But the outcome is, I think, generally liked. Most of the older buildings in Chequer Street and Victoria Street were restored, and the new Maltings didn't pull large stores away from St Peter's Street. Much of the Maltings is built in red brick on a domestic scale, echoing the Victorian buildings on the boundaries of the site.

Town centre development post-war assumed that shopping would provide income for the town from high shop rents. Large covered shopping centres were in fashion as they were seen to be 'modern' and to attract visitors, but they sometimes destroyed trade in historic shopping streets. And old buildings were demolished for these new developments. The St Albans Town Hall and the Courtroom, for example, were under threat of being converted to commercial use.

St Albans was perhaps very fortunate to be late into modernisation. There were several shopping centres within easy distance and Oxford Street was not far away by train. There was also the Action Group and the Civic Society who argued for a more modest and appropriate scheme, and who used the media very effectively. The make-up of the Council also changed over this period, with two major parties rather than one. At the same time the national emphasis changed from modernisation to conservation. The future of tourism might now be in old buildings rather than modern shops!

This part of the City has been a shopping district since the 11<sup>th</sup> century. But shopping is moving increasingly online. Can we predict what the Maltings will be like in ten years' time? Perhaps there will be more homes, and community, educational and leisure facilities as was proposed in 1981?

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