

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

**Building:** 'The Mansion', 1 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](mailto:museum@stalbans.gov.uk)

### Introduction

Like many other buildings in St Albans, the Mansion is older than might at first appear; it has been altered over time, most significantly by the addition of a brick front to the original timber-framed building. Once described as one of the best of the pretty brick-fronted houses on the west side of St Peters Street, today most of its fellows have disappeared. The Mansion itself is now used as a shop. It is Grade II listed (and would have been Grade II\* were it not for the modern shop fronts which have somewhat spoiled the original exterior).

### History

No one knows when the building was first referred to as "The Mansion". The 1496/7 will of a butcher, Roger Porter, leaves his wife an interest in his tenement called the *Mansion* held under indenture from the Hospital of St Julien. This pre-dates the present-day Mansion, but may have been a reference to an earlier building on the site.

The Mansion as we know it today was probably built early in the 1600s (if not late in the century before). At heart, it is a timber-framed structure, evidence of which can be seen in the steepness of the roof. The brick façade was added around the end of the 1600s, a hundred years before the fashion for re-fronting in brick took off in St Albans in the early 1800s.

### Occupation and ownership

Records show that the Mansion has been owned by a number of influential local families. At one time it belonged to the family of Sarah Jennings, later the first Duchess of Marlborough, and was used as a dower house<sup>1</sup> for Sarah's mother. When Sarah died in 1744, she left it to her son John Spencer. That family name was given to Spencer Street when it was cut through what was the garden of the Mansion in the 1800s. In the late 1700s the house was owned by the Kentish family, five of whom occupied the office of Mayor of St Albans in that century.

### Description

Nikolaus Pevsner says that St Peters Street "gets off to a good start with no 1" while the 1908 Victoria County History of Hertford says that the Mansion was one of the best of the "pretty eighteenth-century brick-fronted houses" in the street.

The building consists of two storeys plus an attic. The roof is high pitched and tiled above a deep eave cornice supported by modillions<sup>2</sup> with three dormer windows<sup>3</sup>. There are seven windows at first-floor level, the middle one having been lengthened to form a door leading out onto a small balcony. This has wrought iron railings which date from the 1700s. The ground floor is mainly taken up by the shop windows with a central door.

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<sup>1</sup> Residence for a widow

<sup>2</sup> Ornate brackets

<sup>3</sup> Windows projecting vertically from a sloped roof

The brickwork is polychrome - the window dressings and quoins<sup>4</sup> are made in orange-coloured rubbed brick with blue headers in between. The windows have fleur-de-lys keystones (now badly weathered).

### Interior

Listing details from 1950 record that there are several older features inside the building. Massive tie beams and collar beams<sup>5</sup> with close set posts between were recorded as visible in the attic, whose floor showed a very heavy central beam running the whole length of house. One first floor room had a close studded timber wall; another more widely spaced framing with arch braces. Many heavy oak plank floors remained and Jacobean panelling.

Some of the best features, however, have been lost. A Burlington Magazine article from 1916 (see Appendix below) reports protests being made by both the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and local citizens against a proposal to detach oak panelling and a stone fireplace which a purchaser was proposing to ship to America. Illustrations survive but, sadly, despite protests (including publication of a letter in The Times), the panelling and fireplace are no longer with us. It is also reported that one owner, John Wells, who moved to New York in the 1890s to become an art and curio dealer had taken oak panelling and carvings from the Mansion with him to sell. Finally, it seems that yet more panelling may have been removed from the first floor in the 1930s.

### Sources

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3. Chris Saunders guide (Medieval St Albans) from Museum's Dropbox which also has pictures
4. JT Smith and MA North: St Albans 1650-1700 "A thoroughfare town and its people" (2003), pp17, 20 & 26
5. Kate Morris: Lecture "St Peter's in The Borough" 26 November 2010 (Arc & Arc website) [http://www.stalbanshistory.org/page\\_id\\_345.aspx](http://www.stalbanshistory.org/page_id_345.aspx)
6. St Albans Conservation Area Character Statement (Prepared 2014/ Published 2016) [http://www.stalbans.gov.uk/Images/16.03.03%20Area%20a%20-%20Commercial%20Centre%20FINAL%20JD\\_tcm15-53958.pdf](http://www.stalbans.gov.uk/Images/16.03.03%20Area%20a%20-%20Commercial%20Centre%20FINAL%20JD_tcm15-53958.pdf) p73
7. Victoria County History of Hertford Volume II (online) (1908) <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/herts/vol2/pp469-477#p12>
8. British Listed Buildings website <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/en-163417-1-and-3-st-peter-s-street-hertfordshire#.VyCoJuT2aU>
9. JT Smith: "Nine Hundred Years of St Albans: architecture and social history" (1993)
10. JT Smith: "Hertfordshire Houses Selective Inventory" (1993)
11. Tour Guide Walk Notes for Historic walk
12. Notes from talk by John Bethel (2013)
13. Notes from green badge "Georgian" lecture (2013)
14. Tour Guide walk notes for Medieval Lives
15. Burlington Magazine Vol XXIX April-December 1916 (extracts reproduced in the Appendix)
16. List of St Albans mayors from the Council website [http://www.stalbans.gov.uk/Images/MayoralCount\\_tcm15-34883.pdf](http://www.stalbans.gov.uk/Images/MayoralCount_tcm15-34883.pdf)

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<sup>4</sup> Masonry blocks at the corner of a wall

<sup>5</sup> Type of horizontal beam connecting two rafters

## APPENDIX

### Society of Antiquaries

12 December 2003

*[transcribed by Christine Bain 28.4.16]*

The Burlington Magazine – Vol. xxix      April-Dec. 1916

No.1 St Peter's Street. St Albans

The proposal to detach oak panelling and stone fireplaces from this historic building has called forth some deserved criticism both from the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and prominent citizens of St Albans.

A letter has been published in "The Times" and overtures have been made to the purchaser in order to prevent these unique specimens of Elizabethan craftsmanship from crossing the Atlantic. It is to be hoped that some means will be found to retain the house and fittings intact, for it is the finest example of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> C. Design, both externally and internally in a city justly famous for unique domestic buildings.

Judging from old maps of St Albans, and comparing the style of the interior of the house with other work in the neighbourhood, the building was erected late in the 16<sup>th</sup> C. on a site north of the Moot Hall, which is still in existence.<sup>6</sup> Towards the end of the reign of Charles II the framed timber front was replaced with the present 2 storied brick elevation of 7 windows, and 3 pedimented dormer windows were inserted in the roof, which was re-tiled with a diaper pattern of burnt tiles. A notable feature of this alteration was the massive oak door and the projecting balcony with its wrought iron railing of characteristic severity.

Till quite recently this house was known as "The Mansion", probably from its association with the civic life of St Albans, for from the late 16<sup>th</sup> C. to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> C. it is on record that several mayors had their residence here. Here it was that Queen Elizabeth was received by the mayor on her way to visit Nicholas Bacon at Gorhambury in 1572, again in 1573, and four years later, when the gallery was added at Gorhambury in view of this visit. At the time of the first visit John Gape was mayor, in 1573 William Rolfe, and in 1577 the office was shared by John Clarke and John Sibley.

Nicholas Bacon began his mansion at Gorhambury in 1563 and completed it in 1568. Therefore it is reasonable to suppose that the interior woodwork which distinguishes No. 1 St Peters St. is of contemporary workmanship, and that the master craftsman engaged at Gorhambury turned his attention in the following year to design and execute the panelling and fireplace in "The Mansion".

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Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> C. alteration the hall was the principal apartment, with a magnificent stone fireplace ornamented with a Tudor rose; this is still extant, but is obscured by a passage. The original ceiling to the hall, formed of intersecting beams into four panels and subdivided into a trellis pattern with moulded ribs is still in situ.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Tudor Town Hall at the junction of Dagnall Street with Market Place used to be referred to as the Moot Hall but it is now known that the site of the Moot Hall is roughly where the Georgian Town Hall now stands.*

Another interesting detail concerning the treatment of the roof in the 18<sup>th</sup> C. is to be noted in the design of the heads of the three dormer windows, which were originally straight sided and segmental.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> C. the "Mansion" was the residence of five mayors, notably William Kentish in 1744-5, William Kentish (son) in 1773, Joseph Vandermeulen 1780-93, John Kentish 1787-94.

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It is satisfactory that a movement is on foot to preserve this historic building of Drake's time, and it is to be hoped that the citizens will not be left without support from sympathisers outside the boundaries of the city

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