

<b>St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016</b>	
<b>Building:</b>	<b>The Moot Hall, 25 Market Place</b>
<b>Researched by:</b>	<b>Marit Gruijs</b>
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>	

This is a timber-framed building with a high pitched, tiled roof and jettied first floor<sup>1</sup>, whose external appearance has been much altered in the Eighteenth Century. Some of the timber framing is false, the windows are Eighteenth Century sash windows with glazing bars in slightly projecting, moulded frames. Early Twentieth Century shop fronts on ground floor. Inside, a large number of exposed, heavy posts and beams, and much close stuffing.

The building commonly known as The Moot Hall or Old Town Hall<sup>2</sup> has been dated to around 1570<sup>3</sup>. Although locals refer to it as The Moot Hall ('moot' referring to a meeting or assembly), it is now known that the site of the Medieval Moot Hall is roughly where the Georgian Town Hall now stands. The long, lofty first floor room was the principal room, sometimes also referred to as Town Hall. Here meetings of the governing bodies of the town took place, court hearings, balls and assemblies. At each end of the hall was a square room, to the west the council chamber and to the east the jury room, both being entered from the Town Hall. On the ground floor was the borough gaol and living quarters for the keeper, including the kitchen, storage for the stocks and pillory, and stables which were later altered to house a fire engine. The jail had cells for men and women, it was crowded and they lived under grim conditions. The kitchen served the jailer's household, including the prisoners, and mayoral feasts.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century the building was known as The Counter and not much is known apart from information from the deeds about repairs and alterations to the interior<sup>4</sup>. The Town Hall was refurbished in the 1690s, hence the heavy corporation expenditure in 1698-1699<sup>5</sup>. By the end of the eighteenth century it was considered inadequate as a town hall, it was too small to house the Quarter Sessions of the borough and Liberty magistrates, the borough's prisoners, and the gaoler's living quarters.

In 1780 John Howard reported that accommodation for felons was limited and conditions were grim. Because it was too small, debtors were allowed to use part of the town hall in daytime. The large upper room could be divided by a wooden partition, one section was used by the court magistrates as court room - presumably the debtors had the use of the other section. On market days the area was busy with life stock penned in the street beneath the court's windows. As there was only one entrance to the upper room, the magistrates were obliged to pass through any crowd of people drawn to the court's proceedings<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Jettying is a building technique used in medieval timber-frame buildings in which an upper floor projects beyond the dimensions of the floor below.

<sup>2</sup> Also referred to as Numbers 25 and 27 Market Place and Numbers 2-8 Upper Dagnall Street (formerly 22 Market place).

<sup>3</sup> J T Smith - Hertfordshire Houses: selective inventory '93, pp. 155-56

<sup>4</sup> Gibbs 1890 St Albans corporation records/ J T Smith p.156

<sup>5</sup> Mark Freeman, St Albans, A history, Lancaster 2008, p. 146

<sup>6</sup> HCF Lansberry, The Building of St Albans Town Hall, 1829-31 in: Herts Archaeology, vol.1 1968 pp 92-93

In 1818 Thomas Buxton visited the gaol, he mentions “the female prisoner's day-room opened onto the street, the bars wide enough to admit anything, spirits could not be excluded”<sup>7</sup>. The day-room for men was not more than a dark closet lit and aired only by the crevices of a hole at the top of the room, hence the difference between night and day was hardly discernible, and the entrance to it was through the women's apartment. There was no heating. Buxton called the circumstances for the felons 'violations of natural justice' which are neglects more serious than the crimes the prisoners were committed for<sup>8</sup>. Prisoners were waiting their trial for less serious offences committed (murder and manslaughter for example were tried at Hertford).

By 1825 the Corporation was thinking of selling the Town Hall to build a new one. George Smith was engaged as architect and his first job was to dispose of the possibility that anything more could be done with the old hall. This was a formality, for a committee of the borough and Liberty Magistrates had come to this conclusion before Smith had submitted his report. Smith estimated that essential repairs would cost between £ 500 and £ 600. He produced a plan for rebuilding on the old site a hall costing £4000,-. However, he suggested the site was unsuitable as it had only two fronts which didn't suffice for security reasons and he recommended two alternative sites of which the one at St Peter's Street was chosen in the end.

After the new town hall was built, the old Moot Hall was sold by auction in 1831 for £914 10s to Mr. Harry Boome of London Colney<sup>9</sup>. At that time a part of the frontage had been removed and rebuilt. During excavations at the rear of the building remains of foundations came to light, which were believed to be of Roman origin and a number of ancient relics was also discovered.

In October 1884 the Old Town Hall was sold to the Gibbs family by Miss Boome of Hatfield for £2200, but it had been rented by them for a long time prior to that. The Gibbs family, of the printing business of Messrs Gibbs and Bamforth, were the founders of the Herts Advertiser. The first issue was printed on July 7<sup>th</sup> 1855 in the Moot Hall. The building soon was too small for the expanding business so they spread to new premises which then made the Moot Hall available for other purposes and the major part of it was leased to W.H. Smith and son but the publishing offices of the Herts Advertiser were still housed under its roof. At this stage there was an 18<sup>th</sup> century chimney piece in the west room on the first floor, which was lighted by a round headed window, which seems to have been the most important room.

In February 1930 during internal alterations, a large pit about 20 feet in depth and 4 feet in diameter was discovered. It was filled with rubbish, among which were discovered a penny dated 1666 and even older coins<sup>10</sup>.

In 1963 the Old Town Hall was bought back by the council, from then onwards W H Smith rents it from them. In 1971 the building was listed Grade II, for its special architectural and historic interest<sup>11</sup>.

Nowadays WH Smith is still housed in the building (25 Market place), next to what now is an empty shop but until recently was occupied by That Design Store (27 Market Place) and at the back of the stationers is Atlas Translations (6 Upper Dagnall Street).

Members of staff of WHSmith's have some 'ghost stories', one mentioned she experienced inexplicable things happening like books falling off the shelves, shadows appearing while no other people apart from her were around, and sounds of somebody whispering before opening hours.

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<sup>7</sup> T. F. Buxton on the State of Prisons, 1818 (2 pages sent to me by email by Jon Mein from SAHAAS)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “The Moot Hall. Interesting Historical Associations. A medieval centre of official and social life. The Birthplace of the Herts Advertiser”. A copy of this article held at SAHAAS

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Historic England online [www.historicengland.org.uk](http://www.historicengland.org.uk): The Old Moot House; list Entry Number: 1103069

According to an online article the building's haunted by a ghost going by the name of Henry. There are also stories about chains on the wall of the basement, where prisoners were kept but this could not be confirmed at this stage. . .

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