

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016	
Building:	The Old Workhouse, 58 St Peter's 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	

"Well, I'm only bricks and mortar I suppose, though I've outlived those that built me and all the poor I've harboured. Anyway here are snippets from my history..."

In 1724 the Abbey saw the need for a Workhouse to harbour the paupers and destitute of their parish and in 1732, the year Joseph Haydn was born; the same was felt by the Vestry of St. Peter's in compliance with the Old Poor Law. So on 17th May it was agreed to "Settle and determine about a Workhouse for the better employment of the Poor of the Parish." Three houses belonging to the parish, together with their yards and fields, were made into the workhouse and the Churchwardens were empowered to borrow the necessary funds until they could be repaid from the levied Rate. In July it was agreed "that John Dobyne shall administer sufficient physick and surgery to all such poor as now or shall hereafter become chargeable" for £10 a year.

On 18th September that year it was agreed that every mealman and baker in the parish "shall serve the workhouse with 'flower' at common market prices, each taking their turn." Then that "John Woodward be Wardman to the parish and be allowed a Greatcoat, Hat and Staff."

In June 1736 it was "Ordered that Wm. Hill be sent to the workhouse" and agreed "at the same time that Gladys Rainish be turned out of ye house." Then in July "That four of Daniel Lovetts children be taken into the workhouse." So, they came and they went and relief continued apace with "Widow Gee allowed 5 shillings a week to Michaelmas next and Ellis Beasley be allowed 3 shillings and six pence a week until further notice."

On 4th April 1738 the Trustees adjourned, as was its wont, to The Bell where they agreed that "Joseph Handley surgeon of St. Alban's shall administer sufficient physick and surgery for the year to all such poor who now or hereafter shall become chargeable" and his services were retained in 1739 at the same rate of £10.

By August 1738 a new Governor and Governess were in place, John and Elizabeth Howard at "fourteen pounds a year payable half yearly by equal portions for their care, trouble and pains." At that time the Poor rate was 1/- in the pound and in May 1739 there were 13 orders for out relief while, at the same time, "that Witton's children be taken into the workhouse."

On 11th April 1740 the Trustees adjourned, this time to the King's Arms, where William Tannott was appointed "Vestry Clerk for the year ensuing and do all the parish business" for £5-5-0, "and make all the orders of removal and take all examinations for the allowances." Power indeed, while Joseph Handley was again confirmed in post as surgeon.

At the end of March 1741 Robert Nicholls and John Lines were made overseers in place of Edward Fitch and John Ensom (who, interestingly, made his mark in place of signing his name) and the following month an edict was made that "all non parishioners bring their certificates forthwith or depart and if any refuse to take such persons before His Majesty's Justices," while in May it was

ordered that "Thos. Bacon of Hatfield barber and periwig maker will take six pounds off the parish with Henry Job as his apprentice."

In July the churchwardens and overseers decided to "Take account of the effects being in the workhouse" and that Benjamin Chandler and his wife go forthwith to the said workhouse as Master and Mistress."

On April 28th 1742 the Vestry met "for to make new rates for the poor and to putt down the workhouse and do other business" and "it was Ordered as followeth that this Vestry be adjourned to the Greyhound." It was also agreed that the "Officers of this Parish do go this evening and take an account of the numbers of persons in the Workhouse and report the same to the Vestry."

So it was that on 5th May 1742 the Poor Rate was kept at 1/- in the £ and that 'Farming Out' got under way with "the widow Carter have Sarah King, Mary King and Csezia Bockett and be paid five shillings a week for herself and the three children," and that "Henry Smith have Ann King and Lydia King for two years and Diana King for three years," and that "Thomas Agnew have James Wranch for three years from this day and find him meat, drink, washing and lodging and clothes."

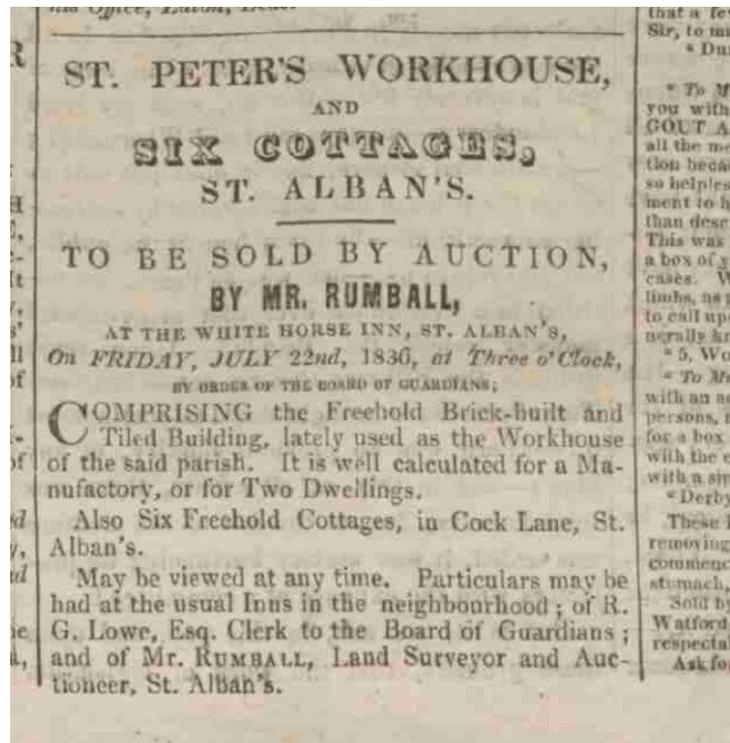
That the list of church wardens and trustees is a list of the parish worthies at the time is no surprise, some being remembered in our street names today; Kinder and Thrale, King and Reynolds and Dagnall. But something went awry as on the 8th May is was ruled "That the present overseers do give notice to the late overseers Mr Robert Nicholls and Mr John Lines that there is several mistakes in their accounts." So it was that messrs. Nicholls and Lines were made to pay back the missing £17 - 5 -03/4d.

Somewhat later, on 13th April 1757, a complete inventory of the furniture and furnishings was made which informs us that within the workhouse there were thirteen rooms containing in all 14 beds, including the Governor's. Which isn't to say there were only 14 residents as many would have to double up. And the rooms contained the means for the paupers to earn their keep, most having a spinning wheel and one, that of John Skegs, also having a spade, a fork and a weed hook as well as the bed and a chest.

"I was built on four levels, counting the cellar, with thirteen rooms and a Brewhouse, and was sold to Mrs Elizabeth Crowther on 15th October 1836, once my residents had gone to the new Union Workhouse. And she paid £350 for me together with £6-6-6d for conveyancing and such like but by 17th January 1837 I became the property of John Horner Rumball, namesake of my current occupants. Ironic in a way, built as a Workhouse for the poor and needy and now home to estate agents in an affluent society. Not that I've changed much in my 284 years, still being a place of work."

St Peter's Church and the green (on display in St. Alban's library, above the map cabinets)





St Peter's Workhouse sales particulars, 19 July 1836, page 1 Herts Mercury, British Newspaper Archive

Sources

- Hertfordshire Archives and Libraries Services, in particular microfilm DP/93/8/1 Vestry Orders 1711-1750. They also hold the will of Ann Chrismus, the aunt of the Mr Rumball who inherited the Workhouse building from her, she having bought it at a sale he conducted.
- The British Newspaper Archive.