

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

**Building:** The Samuel Ryder Office and Seed Hall, 27 – 29 Holywell Hill

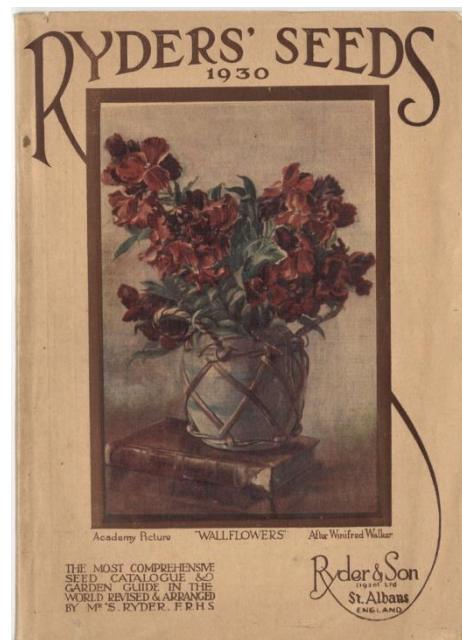
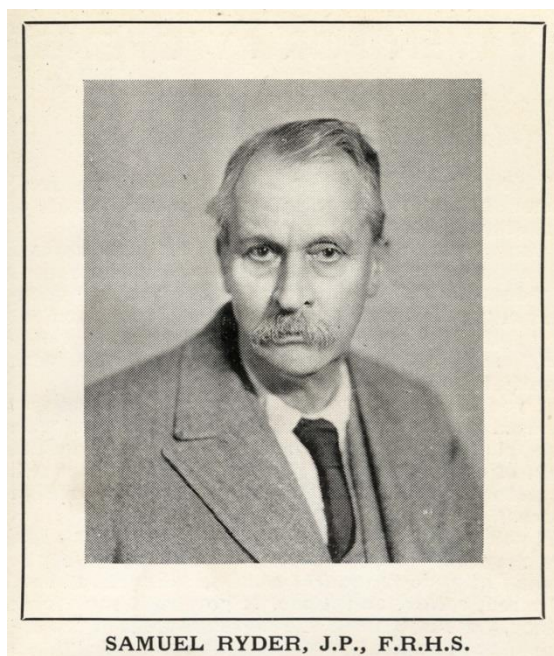
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This research was undertaken by volunteers and is not an exhaustive history of the building but captures what intrigued them during the project.

If you have any memories you'd like to share, or any queries about the research, please do let us know: [museum@stalbens.gov.uk](mailto:museum@stalbens.gov.uk)

Numbers 27 and 29 Holywell Hill, are by appearance two separate premises, but they are in fact joined by history. The Bull Inn, an early coaching inn shown by a deed dating from 1548 and in the Parish Records of St Peter's, stood on the site before becoming a private residence called the Priory.

However, the most important development of the site was made by Samuel Ryder (1858-1936) who built his head office on part of the site dealing with the sorting and posting out of the seeds produced by his thriving world-wide seed production business, Ryder's Seeds.



*Portrait of Samuel Ryder and Ryders' Seeds Catalogue, 1930.*

The current Clarion Hotel was the first of two new buildings commissioned by Mr Ryder on this site and was constructed in 1911. The building cost approximately £6,000 to build. The architect was Percival Blow, a friend and sometime neighbour of the Ryders, and built by local builders Miskins. The decayed old building was demolished and in its place was built a new suite of offices in Georgian style in red brick with bath stone dressings. The façade is embellished with two scenes of men ploughing and sowing and women harvesting. Inside there was a magnificent oak and mahogany hall and staircase leading up to Samuel Ryder's office. The fireplace in the office has been restored and the original mahogany surround carved with his initials remains.

On 21 July 1911 a time capsule was buried between the stones containing a short history of his business, the latest Ryder's catalogue, a few packets of seeds and some coins of the realm. Two local newspapers were also placed in the cavity. Mr Ryder considered that the building would be so

robust and would last hundreds of years and that when it was eventually pulled down, future generations would know all about his work.

Samuel Ryder was also Mayor of St Albans in 1905-6 and many buildings in the town are dedicated to him or by him.

In 1908, after a spell of ill-health, Mr Ryder was encouraged to take up golf and played at nearby Verulam Golf Course. During the next few years he became so passionate about involving people in the sport that he encouraged team competitions, locally at first. Then, during 1927, the first Ryder Cup match was played between Great Britain and America, with the prize, a magnificent gold cup manufactured by Mappin and Webb and worth about 100 guineas, having been donated by Samuel Ryder. The Ryder Cup matches have been a major part of the golf calendar ever since.

The Post Office leased the building for twenty years from St Albans Council until 1991 after which time a company named the CI Group decided to use it as their new offices. They spent more than £15,000 on refurbishing the severely neglected building particularly the fine mahogany staircase, the fireplace in Samuel Ryder's old office and the beautiful stained glass dome on the first floor. The glass dome, at its original inception, was used as one of many environmentally-friendly ideas in the building. The use of the large amount of glass in it and other areas gave natural lighting to the whole building

With the interior now retaining many of the original features. In 1999, when the newly refurbished building opened as the Comfort Hotel, the fireplace was reinstalled after building work, retaining a monogram of Samuel Ryder's initials elaborately carved into the mahogany surround with elaborate harvest images.

At the time of purchasing the site for his new offices, Mr Ryder also purchased the adjoining site, two premises at the time, up to the corner with Albert Street. He considered that he would expand the business on to this site in some way in the future.

In 1931, a beautiful new building was opened to become the Exhibition Hall for Ryders' Seeds and plants. In the Art Deco model and also designed by Percival Blow and built by Miskins, the hall was constructed from reinforced brick and concrete. It was about 55 feet square with supporting pillars and was coated, both inside and outside, with specially produced cream cement. The floor tiles were also cream to add light with the beautiful leaded glass windows and roof.

In 1952, after the death of Samuel Ryder, his widow, Joan who was then Chairman of the firm, reopened the newly refurbished hall as the 'Floral Hall'. It had a model golf green display stand in his honour.

Joan remarried and around 1966 had decided to retire and relocate to Sussex. The building was also taken over by the Post Office under the council lease and was used by them for administration and sorting process until 1992.

With both the buildings being considered as Grade II listed, it was then a difficult task to decide what to do with them and it was decided that a competition would be opened for proposals for the future of the site.

The Clarion Hotel and Café Rouge are the present day result of these changes and the two buildings have been refurbished to high standards but retain a majority of the original features of their inception.

### **References and Bibliography**

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