| St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016 | |
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| **Building:** | **The Turf Hotel, 8-10 Chequer Street** |
| **Researched by:** | **Richard Howard** |
| This research was undertaken by volunteers and is not an exhaustive history of the building but captures what intrigued them during the project. <br> 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 | |

The building is on the east side of Chequer Street and comprises of numbers 8 and 10 Chequer Street. It stands on the site of the medieval Chequers Inn that gave its name to Chequers Street, a thoroughfare formerly known the Malt Market. This area of the town was lined with inns and alehouses providing accommodation, food and refreshment for the many travellers and business visitors {1}. The Chequers Inn is mentioned in descriptions of the first battle of St Albans in 1455 as the site of a breakthrough by the Yorkist forces as they attempted to overthrow the Lancastrians who were occupying the town centre {2}.

The current building dates from the 1820s when the famous racehorse trainer Tommy Coleman rebuilt the medieval Chequers Inn as the Turf Hotel. It continued to be known by this name until Coleman left St Albans in around 1845. The building then ceased to be a hotel and was converted to a straw plaiting factory for a few years with an alehouse on the left side of the gateway before once more becoming a hotel in 1852 when it became the Queen's Hotel. The hotel was a popular local landmark until it finally closed in the early 1980s to allow the development of the Maltings shopping centre to the rear of Chequers Street.

The three-storey building is of similar appearance to neighbouring buildings that also date from the 19th century or the Edwardian era. The second and third storeys are of red brick and the both number and style of the windows above the modern shop frontages closely reflect the building as it is shown in a contemporary drawing of the Turf Hotel dating from 1832 (see below). The roofscape of this and the adjoining buildings is generally small scale and varied which is characteristic of the period. As with many similar former inns in Chequer Street and Holywell Hill the original archway that provided carriage access to the rear of the building has been retained. This now provides access to businesses premises above and modern residential properties at the rear. The building is locally listed by St Albans District Council.

The following images enable us to compare the similarities between the current building and the Turf Hotel in 1832 {3,6}. The latter being part of the St Albans Steeplechase set by James Pollard (part of the Government Art Collection.



Numbers 8-10 Chequer Street



St. Albans Grand Steeple Chase, 8 March 1832: Plate 1: Preparing to Start. Artist: James Pollard. Engraver: Charles Hunt I. Part of the Government Art Collection: http://www.gac.culture.gov.uk/work.aspx?obj=24141

The Turf Hotel was built to a high standard and was renowned for its good food and wines, a billiard room and bathrooms with hot water. The hotel became a meeting place for the most famous society and sporting figures of the day such as Lord Bentinck, George Osbaldeston and Prince Esterhazy, between the 1820s and 1845 it was the headquarters of sporting activity across the northern part of the Home Counties and beyond {4}.

This was entirely due to the involvement of the racehorse trainer Tommy Coleman who came to Hertfordshire in 1816 to train racehorses at Brocket Hall for such prestigious owners such as the prime ministers, Lord Palmerston and Lord Melbourne. In around 1820 Coleman moved to St Albans and rebuilt the former Chequers Inn as the Turf Hotel. At the same time Coleman approached Lord Verulam with a view to training his horses in Gorhambury Park. Permission was granted and the grounds of the Park subsequently became the location of the Gorhambury Races that were held for two days each June from 1830-1845.

Other sporting events organised by Coleman included shooting matches and prize fights that were often held on Nomansland Common. One of the most infamous of these was the fight between Simon Byrne, the Irish champion, and 'Deaf' Burke that was held in 1833 and lasted for over 3 hours. Byrne was knocked out and died four days later and although Burke was tried for manslaughter he was later acquitted. This was the last documented prize fight held in St Albans {5}.

Coleman's main claim to fame however is that of being the founder of Steeplechasing in England and that it was at the Turf Hotel that Coleman drew up the conditions of the first contest to be held on 8 March 1830. All horses were to carry 12 stones and race was to be run over not less than four miles. The race was held over land near Harlington in Bedfordshire and was won by a grey horse named Wonder owned by Lord Ranelagh and ridden by Captain MacDowall.

Such was the interest generated by this event that it became known as the St Albans Steeplechase and in the following years it became one of the main events in the local and national sporting calendar. Large crowds stayed in the town's many hotels and inns and Coleman organised stagecoaches to bring spectators to the event.

The race was run over a range of courses around St Albans including Tyttenhangar Green in 1833, Colney Heath in 1835 Gorhambury in 1836. The race of 1832 is the subject of a set of six colour aquatint prints by James Pollard that are now part of the Government Art Collection {6}. The following reproductions below show two scenes from the race. The front of the Turf Hotel shown above, alongside the present day appearance of the buildings is taken from the same set.



St. Albans Grand Steeple Chase, 8 March 1832: Plate 2: First Leap. Artist: James Pollard. Engraver: Henry Pyall. Part of the Government Art Collection: http://www.gac.culture.gov.uk/work.aspx?obj=23607



St. Albans Grand Steeple Chase, 8 March 1832: Plate 6: The Winning Post. Artist: James Pollard. Engraver: Charles Hunt I. Part of the Government Art Collection:http://www.gac.culture.gov.uk/work.aspx?obj=19210

These years proved to be the highpoint of the St Albans Steeplechase. Opposition was being voiced by local farmers and public interest was falling due to reduced field sizes and the growing availability of other forms of entertainment in town such as theatres. The final race was run in 1839, the year of the first Grand National Steeplechase to be held in Liverpool thus providing a link between a local event in St Albans with a present day event that is famous all over the world. A certain Captain Becher, who finished second in the 1830 race, rode in the 1839 Grand National at Liverpool. He fell at a fence which today bears his name, Becher's Brook.

The Turf Hotel is not only famous for its sporting history. Charles Dickens was a regular visitor to Hertfordshire when he was a reporter in the 1830s and was known to have stayed at the Turf Hotel in 1852. Two of his stories have local references. In Oliver Twist, Bill Sikes travelled from Hatfield to St Albans before returning to London and in Pickwick Papers there is an illustration of the Abbey by Hablet Knight Browne {7}.

Politics also features in the early years of the Turf Hotel. In 1835 it became the headquarters of the local Conservative party during the first election to be held under the Municipal Corporation Act following the Reform Bill of 1832. After much dissent from the local Aldermen, who envisaged losing their authority and power, a new and more democratic council was elected by resident ratepayers {8}.

Following the demise of the St Albans Steeplechase in 1840 Coleman left St Albans in 1845 and never returned. In spite of his success in attracting the rich and famous to his hotel and sporting events he was not a wealthy man, often losing money on his racing enterprises. Tommy Coleman died in 1877 at the age of 81 and is buried in Hertingfordbury churchyard. His headstone contains the inscriptions 'a man of original ideas and great observation' and 'a trusted Councillor on matters connected with horseflesh to some of the greatest men of the time'. These attributes can certainly be recognised in his time as the proprietor of the Turf Hotel.

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| 3 | http://www.closedpubs.co.uk/hertfordshire/stalbans_queenshotel.html<br>Former Queens Hotel | |
| 6 | http://www.gac.culture.gov.uk/work.aspx?obj=15105<br>St Albans Grand Steeple Chase, 8 March 1832 | |