

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016	
Building:	The White Hart, 23 – 25 Holywell Hill
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<p>This research was undertaken by volunteers and is not an exhaustive history of the building but captures what intrigued them during the project.</p> <p>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</p>	

During the Middle Ages, the original building was probably a guest house for the nearby Abbey. In 1535 the Inn at 23 and 25 Holywell Hill, was known as the Hartshorn and was being leased by the Abbot of St Albans to John and Elizabeth Broke (or Brooke). It is referred to in the Corporation records of 1571.

The Inn passed to several licensees during the 16th and 17th Centuries including John Moseley, passing to his widow Anne and then to their son, Edward. Edward Langford, the owner in 1750 was mayor in 1752 and when he died his widow, Mary was providing stabling for 50 horses.

The oldest part of the current building is to the South of the carriageway and was probably formed around an inn built in 1500, the range along the street being built in the 17th Century. The building to the north of the carriageway is dated around the late 16th Century and the ground floor is used now as a shop. The important and authentic Elizabethan mural described later is on one of the walls of this shop. The buildings are timber-framed with high pitched tiled roofs and gabled dormers (windows that project vertically from a sloping roof).

In the 18th Century the front of the building was plastered and given new windows but in the early 20th Century, the plaster was removed revealing the old timber frame and old windows (replaced with new windows with leaded panes of 17th Century style).

The White Hart was a posting house, that is, a house where post-horses were kept for the convenience of couriers and others who desired to travel quickly by relays of horses. An old inhabitant of the town remembers that : “when they were posting up for Parliament it was an exceedingly lively time at this and other inns in St Albans; the post-boys were all up at the corner of High Street in their white smocks on the look-out, and as soon as their services were required they would pull off their smocks and be ready to start at once. The stables were well manned with ostlers (stablemen), who, directly the coaches arrived, took out the horses and rubbed them down. The passengers demanded some good beer to clear their throats in dusty weather, but the coachmen would not allow them to dally with their drink, and when they cried ‘time’s up’ all unconsumed liquor had to be left, which ‘was a good thing for the houses’.”

The Venus & Adonis mural

In 1985, whilst renovations to the White Hart Hotel were being undertaken by Benskins, the brewers, a mural of 20ft x 10ft was discovered over one wall of what is now a pottery workshop in the part of the hotel uphill of the archway.

A medieval archaeologist, Dr Clive Rouse, together with experts from the Warburg Institute at London University, confirmed that it was one of the most important examples of an Elizabethan work depicting the Death of Adonis, the theme of Shakespeare’s narrative poem, Venus and Adonis. The work dates from about 1600, a few years after the publication of Venus and Adonis in 1593. The mural includes

possible Rosicrucian symbolism - Rosicrucianism was 17th and 18th century movement professing esoteric and occult wisdom with emphasis on mysticism and spiritual enlightenment. Some research suggests that it constitutes evidence that the author of the Shakespeare plays may have been Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, who lived only two miles away in Gorhambury...

The giant painting may cover all three walls of this room. It must have been commissioned for a special purpose, probably for meetings of a Rosicrucian lodge. In 1803 fire destroyed most of the outbuildings and their contents; the greater part of the house seems to have escaped, more damage being done to furniture by being thrown out of the windows than to the structure.

It was owned in 1872 by Benjamin Bennett, a brewer of Harpenden, and kept by James Brazier.

The White Hart Hotel continues to host travelers today and is one of the few hostelries still in place of major significant importance in the life of the St Albans Inns.

References and bibliography

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