

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016

Building:	Waterend Barn, 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	

It was in 1938 that Waterend Barn found a new home in the centre of St Albans. The 17th century barn was moved timber by timber from the outskirts of Sandridge to the St Peters Street site by Lord Brockett, who no longer had use for it as a farm building. The barn was leased to the Thrale family, who opened it as a restaurant in 1939. Since then Waterend Barn, has been at the centre of the St Albans community¹. It's the historical significance of the building which adds to its aura and ambience. The large barn was moved from Waterend House and Farm, formerly part of the Brockett estate². It's claimed the house was the birthplace of Sarah Jennings, who was born on the 5 June, in 1660, and baptised in the same month in the Abbey of St Albans³. Sarah went on to become the first Duchess of Marlborough. It is said that Sarah played regularly in the barn as a child⁴.

Royal and Churchill Connections

The Jennings. (Jeyns)

Sarah Jennings's father was Richard Jennings, (Jenyns), a Member of Parliament for St Albans, as his father had been before him. Sarah's father died when she was 8 years old⁵. Sarah, her sisters and her mother were regular attendees at court and it was there that Sarah became a lifelong companion of the future Queen Anne. While at court she also met and married Colonel John Churchill, eldest son of Sir John Winston Churchill. As a dowry Sarah was given Holywell House in St Albans and her and her husband acquired the family home - Water End House, near Sandridge.⁶ The couple became the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough following Churchill's famous victory at Blenheim. The Duchess of Marlborough had a lifelong involvement with St Albans; she is remembered not only through the barn she played in, but also the Marlborough Buildings which were erected for the poor people of St Albans, in Hatfield Road.

Queen Anne and Sarah Jennings

Sarah Jennings first met Anne when Anne was 5 and Sarah was 10. Sarah grew up to be one of the 'greatest beauties of her age', and in 1677 married a young army officer, John Churchill. Their joint advancement was bound up with their close relationship with Anne.⁷ Queen Anne was the second daughter of James II and Anne Hyde. She was born in St James Palace in 1665. She married George, Prince of Denmark. The last Stuart monarch, Queen Anne succeeded her brother in law William of Orange in 1702. She inherited a turbulent political relationship with France, over the Spanish

¹ A Newer Thralia, R. Thrale, 2005, p.118

² Herts Genealogy: Places, p.7

³ Ibid, p. 7

⁴ Thrale, 1973, p. 110)

⁵ The Marlboroughs: John and Sarah Churchill, 1650- 1744, C. Hibbert, Viking Press

⁶ Around St Albans with Geoff Dunk, 1985, p.59.)

⁷ The Kings & Queens of England and Scotland, DK, London, 1996, ed. Simon Adams. p.152

succession. The conflict gave the British, under the leadership of John Churchill four great victories in battle and established Britain as a major European power. She died without an heir in 1714.⁸

The Duke

In gratitude for his victory at Blenheim against the French in 1704, Queen Anne gave to Marlborough the royal estate of Woodstock, near Oxford and promised to build for him and his wife a house at her expense, Blenheim Palace, named after his famous victory in Bavaria. The building was not finished when the Duke of Marlborough died in 1722.⁹

The Barn: structure

It is a timber framed aisled barn. It has 7 bays. The older smaller barn is unaisled and dates from the 16th century. The small barn has four bays and heavier timbers than the big barn.

www.greatbarns.org.uk/waterend_barn_stalbans

It took only 9 months to re-erect by a team of skilled joiners. Their wages were 1/6d per hour with an extra 3d for working with hard wood.¹⁰ Every single piece of material and plant had to come under the St Peter's Street archway, adjacent to the Bank. The width of the site didn't allow the full length of the original barn to be used, so one bay was used as repair timbers. The architect, H. Hopson Hill oversaw the building work. The gardens behind the barn were designed and created by the local firm Ryders, of Samuel Ryder fame. The barn was officially opened on the 8 June 1939. On the day, in a speech by the Vicar of Lemsford, The Rev N.A Lash said 'the barn was the kind of place where anyone might fall in love.' In future years the barn was probably responsible for more engagements and marriages than anywhere else in the county¹¹.

The Herts Advertiser report of the opening describes the barn as follows: 91 feet by 33 feet; timbers reckoned to be 350 years old, that more than 1200 pieces of timber were dismantled and re-erected. The lease for the barn was signed in July 1939, and was for 32 years at £1,300 per annum.¹²

Events

With the declaration of war and an uncertain start, business at the Barn soon began to flourish. Thrale's recognised they would need to expand. In 1949, they had purchased a barn from Brick House Farm, at Great Hornead, dismantled it and stored it at nurseries in St Albans¹³. It was moved to the site in 1964. Following acrimonious negotiations with Lord Brockett, in 1962 the Thrale's surrendered the 1939 lease and were granted a new 42-year lease covering all their holdings.

Through the war years and for the next 30 years, regular Thursday night, pay at the door, dances took place. The Barn also held private functions, employing waitresses through the Northumberland rooms, in Trafalgar Square.¹⁴

The early 50's saw the Barn continue to be at the centre of St Albans Community life¹⁵ Saturday morning coffee sessions were symbolic of this. Societies and clubs met there on a regular basis. But

⁸ Adams, p.151-2

⁹ Ibid, p.154

¹⁰ Thrale, p. 118

¹¹ Thrale, 2005, p. 119

¹² R Thrale, p.119-121, 2005

¹³ Thrale, 2005, p.121

¹⁴ Thrale, 2005, p. 128

¹⁵ Thrale, 2005, p. 131

by the 70's, changes had occurred in business and leisure pursuits and the demand for dinner dances and band nights had almost disappeared.

Ownership

In 1978 the Thrale's sold the Barn to Simmons of Hatfield, an established baking and catering company. They were forced to change the business, it retained its wedding venue but it marked the end of the old dance hall era. It then passed to the Cole Family who ran it as a restaurant. In 2005 it was taken over by Weatherspoon's and underwent a two million pound refurbishment.¹⁶

Inside the Barn

Window

Thrale Coat of Arms: this can be seen on the great southern window of Waterend Barn. It has four blazons- the left one of the Jennings family, middle left of the Brocket family, middle right of the City of St Albans and on the right hand side that of the Thrale family.¹⁷

The Tapestry

The tapestry is said to be 300 years old. It depicts people dressed in Tudor style costume, and hangs in the small barn.

The Plaque

There is a stone plaque mounted on the wall in the entrance to the barn, this gives a brief account of the barns historical significance and its connection to Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough. It is dated 1939, the year the barn opened.

The Blenheim Room

Towards the rear of the large barn a small room has been sectioned off, this is the Blenheim room. Following the Duke of Marlborough's success at the battle of Blenheim he was rewarded with the beautiful Cotswolds house, Blenheim Palace. It was here that Winston Churchill was born in 1891. Pictures of Sarah Duchess of Marlborough and Sir Winston decorate the walls.

The Worley Fountain

This famous monument which had once had pride of place beside the Clock Tower in St Albans, was discovered buried in the gardens behind Waterend barn when the gardens were being transformed. It was renovated and moved to the prison site.¹⁸

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www.greatbarns.org.uk/waterend

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¹⁶ [www.weatherspons talbans waterend.](http://www.weatherspons.talbans.waterend)

¹⁷ R. Thrale ,2005, p.196

¹⁸ Thrale, 1973, p.110