

St Albans Museums: 'Talking Buildings' project, 2016

Building: Waxhouse Gate

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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

Echoing down the centuries to the sound of lost footsteps, Waxhouse Gate is a bustling passageway leading from the Abbey precincts and Vintry Garden to the High Street opposite the medieval Clock Tower.

Waxhouse Gate is not so much of a building as a space though a building. Number 15 High Street is sober three-storey 18th century brick house with six sash windows on the first and second floors, which were apparently remodelled in the 19th century¹. The top of a drainpipe on the front of the building shows the date 1723. The ground floor is occupied by a shop. One of the distinctive St Albans First World War memorial tablets can be found by the archway through the building.

The gateway is however, much older than the current building, it was built in about 1427 by the Abbot of St Albans, John of Wheathampstead as an entrance through the existing Abbey walls, providing access from the town to the Abbey. It was built at the same time as the Abbey was developing the tenement plots along the High Street in front of the Abbey walls for commercial purposes.²

The name of Waxhouse Gate is believed to be derived from the candles and tapers that were made or sold there for both the Abbey and the many pilgrims visiting the shrine of St Alban – although there do not appear to be any surviving records of candle manufacturers in the lane behind the gate.

Until 1878 the alley from Waxhouse Gate led to a narrow passage through the Abbey between St Albans shrine and the Lady Chapel³. At that date a new path was laid out connecting Waxhouse Gate to Sumpter Yard, running round the wall of the Vintry Gardens. These gardens were originally the 14th century vineyard for the Abbey and the site of the monks' graveyard.

The medieval Waxhouse Gate was sadly knocked down in 1722; however the internal arch survived with the new building being constructed around it. Beneath the building the foundations of the medieval gateway survive and are said to be almost two and half metres thick, made of massive blocks of chalk. Traces of the archway can still be seen and possibly the top of a well. The gateway built in 1427 may have in turn been built on the foundations of an even older gateway, there are references to it are found in a survey of 1396⁴.

The High Street on to which Waxhouse Gate fronts is claimed to be the oldest road in St Albans, having been in continued use for over 1,600 years. It was here, outside the gate in 1369 that the funeral procession of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, the first wife of John of Gaunt, assembled. Blanche is believed to have died from plague at the age of 23 in Staffordshire and her body was

¹ Domestic Architecture of Central St Albans c.1800 by John Bethell

² St Albans – A History, Mark Freeman, Carnegie Publishing (2008)

³ Vintry Garden information board

⁴ St Albans Buried Towns, Rosalind Niblett & Isobel Thompson, Oxbow Books – English Heritage (2005)

taken to London to be buried in St Paul's. The Abbott and all the monks escorted her funeral procession from Waxhouse gate towards London⁵.

Waxhouse Gate has witnessed the coming and goings of the townsfolk, pilgrims and clergy for at least 600 years and you can still buy candles in the gift shop which currently occupies Number 15.

⁵ Around St Albans, Geoff Dunk, SAHAAS (1985)