

Shining a light on the Shrine of Amphibalus

by Stuart Macer

*The St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society held its first ever History Fair last September at Marlborough Road Methodist Church. Julia Low's presentation on the restoration of St Amphibalus' Shrine in St Albans Abbey provided the inspiration for **Fishpool Street writer Stuart Macer**, who recounts how the statement 'Without Amphibalus, there would be no St Alban' came to rest at the heart of this project.*

Around the year 300AD an un-named Christian cleric, fleeing persecution, was given refuge in Roman Verulamium by a man called Alban, who was so impressed with the cleric's teaching that he converted to Christianity.

When Roman soldiers came searching out Christians, Alban exchanged cloaks with the cleric and gave himself up to the authorities. Refusing to go back to worshipping the Roman Gods and Emperor meant the death sentence for Alban and he was executed somewhere near where our Abbey stands today.

Much less is known of the cleric. It's believed he escaped wearing Alban's cloak and journeyed to Wales to carry on converting the population to Christianity. But later he was forced back to Verulamium in chains and executed somewhere near Redbourn.

The cleric was given the name of Amphibalus by Geoffrey of Monmouth, a Greek word for a liturgical vestment that harks back to the cloak exchanged by the two men.

The bones of Amphibalus were installed in St Albans Abbey around the 1170s, as recorded in the Deeds of the Abbots. In 1539 the dissolution of the monastery led to both shrines, of Alban and of Amphibalus, being smashed and used to build the walls separating the Lady Chapel from the Abbey Church.

Not until the early 1870s, when the walls came down, was the fate of the shrines known. The stones were recovered and the Alban Shrine was restored, but the Amphibalus Shrine did not do so well. By the early 1900s it was moved to a dark corner of the north ambulatory aisle and largely ignored.

Fast-forward to 2020 and the restoration of the shrine became a central part of the 'Alban, Britain's First Saint' project. The decision was taken to place Amphibalus's restored shrine in the Chapel of Our Lady of the Four Tapers – close to Alban but separate enough to provide an area of calm and prayer.

Covid 19 arrived as the pieces of the shrine lay in the restoration workshop. Five tons of replacement stone were shipped to the studios of Yorkshire-based Master Carvers Alan Micklethwaite and Alan Coward. The restored shrine was finally unveiled in January 2021.

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The restored Shrine of Amphibalus

In some respects, the medieval masons can be seen as the social commentators of their time. Their carvings, especially of heads and faces, could reflect ordinary people. For the restored shrine several new heads have been placed in the layer below the top parapet. Some expressions are frightening, some have a tongue poking out, and some are smiling.

And to reflect the 21st century pandemic, a contemporary image of a masked figure has been added following in the age-old tradition.



The new Covid masked figure

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Visitors to the Shrine of Amphibalus

Like many of you, no doubt, I've had many visitors from across the globe who wish to learn about the history of our magnificent Abbey. In October 2022 I had a close friend from Amsterdam visit me and we headed for the Shrine of Amphibalus where I was able to photograph this magnificent structure. Searching for the Covid masked figure was great fun.

Just recently my granddaughters Daisy and Islay, age 13 and 11, paid a Christmas visit to Fishpool Street from their home in Sydney, Australia. I showed them not only the Shrine of Amphibalus but also the nave screen where St Alban and St Amphibalus are depicted side by side, as well as a wall-painting of the two men, before concluding our visit by lighting a candle for them both.



St Amphibalus and St Alban, third and fourth from left, on the nave screen

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Digitally enhanced image of the wall painting of the two saints. Copyright Julia Low



Granddaughters Islay and Daisy lighting candles

The restored Shrine of Amphibalus is a great testament to the restorers and carvers and a true tribute to the man, without whom there would be no St Alban.

Acknowledgements

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