

The Abbey Gateway

From prison to seat of learning

By Stuart Macer

On dark winter evenings the floodlit cross of the St Albans School War Memorial casts a dramatic, stark shadow against the mighty walls of the three-storey Abbey Gateway when viewed from Romeland.

The Abbey Gateway, facing Romeland, was once the exit from the great courtyard of St Albans Abbey, where royalty and famous people assembled, banners flying, as they prepared to leave the abbey. Monks in black habits, scholars in cassocks and tradesmen passed through the gateway as they went about their daily business.



St Albans School War Memorial casting a shadow against the walls of the Abbey Gateway

Little is known about the first gateway, adjacent to the west end of the church, but several chronicles agree that it was among the many buildings blown down during a great gale on January 5, 1362. The Norman spire of Norwich Cathedral was another casualty as 'The Great Wind' crossed the east of England, lasting five days in all.

The gateway had been used as a prison and fortress and its rebuilding, from the foundations upward, we are told would have been a matter of some urgency.

The first gateway was built by Thomas de La Mare, the 30th Abbot of St Albans (1349-1396). Thomas ordered a new, stronger replacement gateway to be built. It is the building we see before us today.

The Abbey Gateway was not just physically strong but also presented a psychological barrier between the town and monastery. Whenever there was unrest and disputes, the townspeople would gather in front of the gateway.

Most scholars agree that the rebuilding of the gateway was completed around 1365. Also, by this point the Abbey Gateway had become the town's prison.

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In 1381 anger and insurrection reached boiling point, not just in St Albans but across England, particularly in the south-east in areas close to London. The Peasants' Revolt had begun. Thousands marched and rioted across the land. Within the space of a few days, rebels, angry for many reasons, including high poll taxes, had exhorted concessions from the then King of England, Richard II.

In St Albans rioters broke through the Abbey Gateway, freeing most of the prisoners, and began attacking the monastery buildings. Many monks fled for their lives – but not the Abbot, Thomas de La Mare. He remained in place and negotiated with the rebels in the hope of saving the monastery.

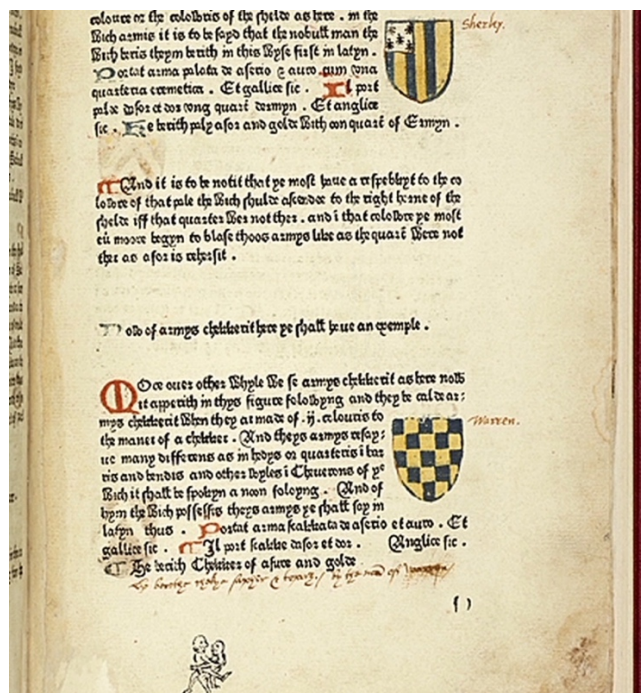
When news filtered back from London that the revolt's leader, Wat Tyler, had been killed by the King's men, the rebels began to lose hope. Over the coming weeks the King rescinded all concessions he had granted the rebels and began to execute and punish them.

Several leaders of the revolt were kept as prisoners in the Abbey Gateway and then hanged in St Albans in the presence of the King, who ordered the townspeople to pay the Abbot compensation for the damage caused by the riot. The relationship between the town and the monastery always remained tense, and the Abbey Gateway continued to symbolise conflict.

Following the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539 many structures of the monastery were demolished. Only the abbey itself and the Abbey Gateway survived intact. Ownership of the gateway transferred from the abbots to the crown.

From Charles Henry Ashdown, former science master at St Albans School, we learn that the lower portions of the Abbey Gateway appear to have been used as a prison up to the Reformation, the upper parts being used for various purposes. Further, that in 1479, the unknown "schoolmaster printer" of St Albans Grammar School, the "John Insomuch of Chauncy", issued his first work, his press being the third printing press set up in England.

In June 2018, St Albans Museum and Gallery opened an exhibition in its new home in the city's Grade II-listed Georgian town hall, called *First Impressions*. The exhibition featured a book entitled *The Boke of St Albans*, which is thought to be the first printed in colour in the UK, which was produced by the St Albans Press in the Abbey Gateway. It was lent to St Albans Museum by the University of Cambridge. St Albans Press supplied the University of Cambridge with texts.



The Boke of St Albans printed in 1486 in the Abbey Gateway

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The exhibition also featured a replica of the Abbey Gateway printing press.



The replica of the printing press

The “schoolmaster printer” is on the St Albans City and District Council’s crest holding an ink ball or dabber, a tool for distributing the ink evenly across the plate or type to be printed.



*St Albans City and District Council's crest
(Images courtesy of St Albans Museums)*

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Eight known books were printed on the city's first press by the "schoolmaster printer". Six were in Latin, one was *The Chronicles of England* by Thomas Walsingham and the last was *The Boke of St Albans*, partly written by Juliana Berners.



Printing tradition carried on by boys in the Gateway in 1977

(Photograph courtesy of St Albans School Archive)

It was in 1626 that John Harmar became Master of the School. A clergyman, educated at Winchester and Oxford, he came to St Albans having been usher at Magdalen College School, Oxford. Harmar was a scholar, writing grammatical texts for Magdalen College School and St Albans School, but his weakness was self-interest. He was delighted to welcome Charles I to the school in 1626. An impressive chimneypiece in the Abbey Gateway bearing the arms of the monarch commemorates his visit to the gaol.



The chimneypiece bearing Charles I's coat of arms

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In the year 1815, the Liberty gaol consisted of that part of the Abbey Gateway nearest the church, the gaoler being appointed by the Lord-Lieutenant of Hertfordshire. There was a spacious courtyard for the use of the prisoners, whose daily allowances of food amounted to a pound and a half of bread for each person. No firing was allowed in winter, and the inmates endeavoured to alleviate their pitiful condition by begging from passers-by. Their method of collection was generally by means of an old shoe attached to a string, which was lowered from one of the upper windows; any money collected in this extraordinary manner was spent in the purchase of firewood. The remaining part of the building on the west side of the road was called the House of Correction, to which vagrants were committed until they could be forwarded to their respective parishes.

In 1867, the Abbey Gateway proved to be too small for accommodating the numbers of prisoners, and a new gaol was erected near the Midland Railway Station (the City Station as we know it today).

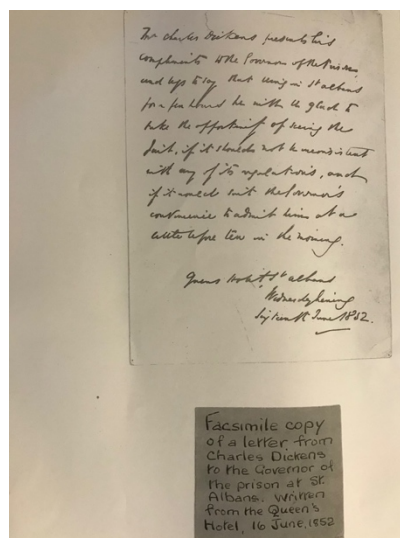
With the completion of the move to the new gaol in November 1867 it left the Abbey Gateway free for other purposes. A petition signed by 529 inhabitants of the town demanded that the character of the gateway should be preserved and that it should not be sold for the purposes of trade. The Marquis of Salisbury, as Sheriff of the Liberty of St Albans, agreed to any use provided that it was for ecclesiastical or educational purposes. He insisted that there should be no public auction.

From the school's point of view this was fortunate. The Church wished to make use of the Lady Chapel, which was occupied by the school at the time, for it had plans going forward for the restoration of the abbey, and therefore it did not enter the field for the purchase of the gateway and the school was left as the sole potential bidder.

The Rev W.J. Lawrance, as Rector of the Abbey and also Chairman of the School Trustees, was in an ideal position to manage the business, and at a meeting held at the rectory on April 16, 1868, with the Earl of Verulam in the chair, a resolution was passed "that a committee be formed for the purpose of securing the Gateway premises etc. lately used as the Liberty Gaol, including the meadow adjoining, with the view of exchanging them for the Lady Chapel of St Albans Abbey". It was decided to offer the Liberty Justices the sum of £1,050, later increased to £1,100, and a subscription list was opened. By August nearly £1,000 had already been promised across the county, and the final total was £1,200 1s.

As soon as the purchase was completed the old warder's house abutting the gateway was pulled down, and materials were sold at an auction in July 1869 and the money applied to fencing and immediate repairs. The next step was to provide a residence for the headmaster by alterations to the house of the former prison governor, Mr Deayton, and to carry out more extensive repairs to the gateway. Mr (later Sir) Gilbert Scott estimated this would cost a further £2,400.

Earlier, in June 1852, we know that Charles Dickens stayed at the Queens Hotel in Chequer Street whilst writing his novel *Bleak House*. He wrote to the above-mentioned Mr Deayton and a facsimile copy of the letter is held in St Albans Library:



A copy of the letter from Charles Dickens
Courtesy of St Albans Library

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The letter reads as follows:

Queens Hotel, St Albans

Wednesday evening, sixteenth of June 1852.

To: John Deayton

Governor of the Prison

“Mr Charles Dickens presents his compliments to the Governor of the Prison, and begs to say that, being in St Albans for a few hours he will be glad to take the opportunity of seeing the jail, if it should not be inconsistent with any of its regulations, and it suit the Governor’s convenience to admit him on or a little before ten in the morning”.

John Deayton, the Governor of the Abbey Gateway Prison, received the great man with courtesy.

In December 1870, 60 employees of Miskin’s, who had been responsible for the restoration of John Deayton’s former house, were provided with supper at the Peahen by the Restoration Committee as an acknowledgment of their efforts, and on Easter Tuesday, 1871, the gateway was open for inspection by the subscribers and their friends.

At the beginning of the summer term, seven boys under the charge of Under-master, Mr Overton, (the Rev Henry Stretton having departed the previous year, and his successor, the Rev Thomas Marshall, not arriving until midsummer), began a new chapter in the school’s history by taking up residence in the new quarters.

The move to the Abbey Gateway opened up entirely new possibilities for the school. Although the accommodation must have been cold and bare by modern standards, it was certainly no worse in this respect than the Lady Chapel, and in other ways the gain was substantial. For the first time it was now possible to divide the school into separate forms in separate form-rooms, and to provide in some measure for variations in curriculum made necessary by changing demands.

After the Rev Thomas Marshall left in 1873, the Rev Matthew Perkins became headmaster and in his seven years of office he made real progress at the school. Perkins was the first headmaster to have the Headmaster’s House:



The Headmaster’s House, circa 1890

Photograph courtesy of St Albans Museums

Average entry during Perkins’ headmastership was 15 and the size of the school was thus restored to the level of Henry Hall’s day (1845-1863), somewhere around 40 boys. When Frank Wilcox took over as headmaster in 1880 it was 42.

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School photograph 1883

Photograph courtesy of St Albans School archive

To conclude my research, I looked into the work of Percival Blow. The Assembly Hall block was sensitively designed by former pupil Blow, who became largely responsible for the view of the school as seen by most of the public today. It comprised an assembly hall with a gallery, four classrooms opening off the ground floor and another four off the gallery. Lit by electricity, it was linked to the gateway by a cloister.



The Assembly Hall

Photograph courtesy of the St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society

The foundation stone for the Assembly Hall was laid in great ceremony on April 22, 1907. It was essentially a masonic ceremony, attended by a large number of freemasons as well as parents, former pupils and residents. The procession, which included the Mayor and the Corporation, attended by the city beadle and mace-bearer, began at the Town Hall and made its way to the school via Chequer Street, the High Street and George Street. This was evidence of just how much the school was regarded as an integral and valued part of the city.

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The procession for the laying of the Assembly Hall foundation stone

Photograph courtesy of St Albans School Archive

On Saturday March 14, 1908, the buildings were finally opened by Lord Verulam, who made express reference to the fuss over the cost. His reported remarks showed he was quite convinced of the beneficial influence of attractive surroundings on young boys.

The next step was for better accommodation for the headmaster and his family and for boarders. In November 1910 the governors accepted the tender for what became known as School House, built once again to designs by Percival Blow, which harmonised the previous building. Work began the following spring and by April 1912 the headmaster had finally moved into his new house as the old one was pulled down to make way for a new drive. With boarding accommodation for 35 boys it was financed from reserves, the proceeds from further land sales and a bank loan.



Abbey Gateway and St Albans School House.

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Photograph courtesy of St Albans School Archive

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The Abbey Gateway, by Peter Watkinson

Born Not For Ourselves: the Story of St Albans School, by Nigel Watson, 2014

Herts Countryside Magazine, vol 34, Dec 1979, by Frank I. Kilvington, entitled *The Mysteries of the Abbey Gateway*

St Albans Historical and Picturesque, by Charles H. Ashdown, illustrated by Frederic G. Kitton, 1893

St Albans Architect Percival Blow by Patricia Bond, Sue Mann and Jonathan Mein, 2019

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