



— walk route (6.5 km)  
- - - options (xxxx adds ?? km)  
— foot paths  
 shopping areas     pedestrian areas  
— earlier Roman or Mediaeval locations  
— attractions named in blue  
Q references to notes  
 bus stops

0.5 km

**ST ALBANS** 20 m from King's Cross

|     |     |
|-----|-----|
| C   | D   |
| S6  | S1  |
| 84  | 301 |
| 601 | 302 |
| 602 | 305 |

## St Albans time line

The history of this location goes back as far as anywhere in England, the centre of population gradually migrating north and east.

An iron-age settlement appeared on a promontory overlooking the Ver called Brae Hill. As the Catuvellauni tribe expanded and became more powerful, they moved their capital from Wheathampstead to this area and called it Verlameon. When the Romans came they founded a town below the hill, on the south bank of the Ver, and called it Verulamium. This would be Britain's third largest town.

During this time, Britain's first home-grown saint, Alban, changed places with a priest who was sought to be executed. He was believed to have been beheaded and his body buried on the hill northeast of the Ver. The last Roman soldiers left Britain in 407 but the town was still going strong when St Germanus visited in 429. Soon afterwards the population began to drift away and it was probably abandoned in the late 5th century.

In 793 Anglo-Saxon king Offa founded a Benedictine monastery on the spot where Alban's bones were thought to be buried. He also founded a town under his own jurisdiction of the monastery called Kingsbury.

The 27-acre town's boundaries were roughly between today's Fishpool Street, Branch Road and Verulam Road, with a steep rampart on the south east. At the southern corner stood a timber castle where Ver Road is now.

The inhabitants created a fishpool for their livelihood by damming the river Ver. In 948 Abbot Wulsin (Ulsinus) founded the St Albans market in an attempt to draw trade away from Kingsbury and to establish a settlement within the confines of the Abbey. He rerouted Watling Street up Holywell Hill to increase trade and founded St Stephen's, St Peter's and St Michael's churches.

Wulsin's successor, Alfric, bought the great fishpool from King Edgar and drained it by cutting through the dam, effectively depriving the inhabitants of Kingsbury of their livelihood. Alfric destroyed as much of the town as he could but the King's officers retained a tower as officers headquarters. By the middle of the 12th century this had become derelict and King Stephen allowed it to be pulled down, and the town of Kingsbury razed to the ground.

Meanwhile, the town of St Albans belonged to the monastery, and the inhabitants were obliged to use its mills to grind their grain and full their wool (a main source of income for the town), a constant source of friction.

In 1539 St Albans Abbey was closed by the Reformation and the monks were pensioned off. The townspeople gained their independence and St Albans gained its first charter in 1553 with a mayor and corporation. They bought the monastery church to use as their own; the Lady Chapel housing the school.

St Albans witnessed action in both civil wars.

In the 18th century, St Albans remained a small market town with a population of perhaps 3,500, getting income from its markets and passing travellers.

When St Albans was linked to London by train from 1868 it lost many of the stagecoaches but it led to a rapid rise in the population of the city. From the late 19th-century, middle-class people lived in the city and commuted to London by train. The boundaries of St Albans were extended in 1835 and 1879.

In 1877, St Albans became the centre of a new Diocese, (having been in Rochester since 1846, London since dissolution, Lincoln before the mid-12th century) and was granted city status.

By the twentieth century it was attracting industries such as printing, seed merchants Ryder & Son (Samuel Ryder is better known today as the founder of the golfing trophy Ryder Cup), electrical and aircraft.

### **A Marlborough Almshouses**

Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough nee Jennings was born in St Albans in 1660. She wielded great political influence at Court and in St Albans, where she maintained her favourite home, Holywell House.

Possibly for political influence, she bought the reversion of the manor house of the Manor of Newlane Squillers in 1732, to “raise a noble building for the relief of 40 poor families of the town and Her Grace will leave a sum sufficient to endow it for ever”. The facade was restored in 1850.

### **B St Peter’s Church**

St Peter's church was founded by Ulsinas at the northern entrance to the medieval town. Over time the building has been altered out of all recognition; the tower dates from around 1801.

### **C Pemberton Almshouses**

A row of 6 one-storey dwellings built in 1627. They were a gift left in the will of Roger Pemberton, one-time High Sheriff of Hertfordshire.

Legend says that one day when Pemberton was out hunting, he shot a poor widow with his bow and arrow by mistake, so building the almshouses was his way of atoning for his guilt.

### **D St Albans Museum/Town Hall**

In 1828 an agreement was reached between the Corporation and the Justices to build a combined Town Hall and Court House, on the condition that the freehold remained with the Corporation. Eventually the courts took over the building with certain rights being retained by the Corporation. Now it is the location of St Albans museum. Designed by George Smith and built in 1830, its ‘giant portico of four fluted Ionic columns, placed on a plinth of full ground floor height with the main entrances between robust Tuscan pillars’ is highly unusual.

### **E Clock Tower**

The Clock Tower was constructed between 1403 and 1412. It is claimed to be the only remaining medieval town belfry in England, and was initially built as a protest against the power of the local abbey.

The Tower allowed the town to sound its own hours and, until 1863, the curfew.

The Tower was designed and built by Thomas Wolvey a former Royal Mason. The Clock Tower's bell rang out for the first Battle of St Albans during the Wars of the Roses in 1455.

### **F Vintry Gardens**

The former vineyard to the monastic abbey, is now a tranquil walled garden, open to the public.

### **G Cathedral Church**

Although the abbey was founded by King Offa, the first Norman Abbott (Paul of Caen) raised the Saxon buildings and started a brand new edifice, using material gleaned from the Roman town (an additional challenge). To take maximum use of the hilltop the Abbey was oriented to the south-east. The tower is the only 11th century great crossing tower still standing in England, with special thick supporting walls and four massive brick piers. The entire four-level structure weighs 5,000 tons and is 44m high.

While unlikely to win a beauty competition, the building more than makes up for this in size (second longest nave at 85m and 43.9m in height), its age and interest. In the current structure the original Norman arches survive under the central tower and on the north side of the nave. It contains some of the earliest bits of Romanesque architecture left in England; the arches in the rest of the building are Gothic, following mediaeval rebuilding and extensions. The abbey was extended in the 1190s by Abbot John de Cella (John of Wallingford). An earthquake shook the Abbey in 1250 and damaged the eastern end of the church. In 1257 the dangerously cracked sections were knocked down — three apses

and two bays. The thick Presbytery wall supporting the tower was left.

In 1323 two piers on the south side of the nave collapsed dragging down much of the roof and wrecking five bays. Rebuilding was done matching the Early English style of the rest of the bays but adding distinctly 14th-century detailing and ornaments.

Planned towers at the western end of the building never survived.

Restoration work was carried out by Gilbert Scott and more controversially by Baron Grimthorpe.

### **H** Abbey Gateway

This large and forbidding-looking mid-fourteenth century flint structure, three stories high, complete with attic and dungeons, survived the destruction of the rest of the monastic buildings at the dissolution, because of its suitability as a prison. In 1868 George Gilbert Scott was commissioned to restore and convert this building into the school, considerably restoring the windows. Ever since the Reformation, the school had been housed in the fourteenth-century Lady Chapel.

### **I** Fishpool Street

One of the principal routes into and out of the town after Watling Street was diverted, Fishpool Street is one of the oldest roads in the city, first documented around 1250.

When the railway and the construction of Verulam Road diverted traffic and therefore commerce away, much of the historic fabric escaped being redeveloped. This has meant that there are visible survivals from many periods, including much from the ancient medieval origins. Many of the buildings on Fishpool Street and St Michaels Street date from the C16 and C17 and many were re-faced during the C18 in order to keep up with the changing style of the times, without the expense of complete rebuilding. 90% of the buildings are statutorily or locally listed.

### **J** Kingsbury barn, mill, manor house

Kingsbury Manor is said to have been bought by Alfric, Chancellor to King Ethelred, and subsequently and given by him to the Abbey. The proceeds of the Manor were assigned to improve the victuals of the Abbey until dissolution. At the river crossing are several buildings remaining from the Manor. The highest listed is the tithe barn, being of medieval origin (1390s). The mill is probably Elizabethan, refronted in C1800s Georgian style. The manor farm house was built circa 1700 but has been much altered, and has another barn attached.

The bridge (erected by the Turnpike Trust in 1765 and believed to be the oldest in the county) crosses the river, while the mill and farm sit back behind a small green

triangular verge, with the Victorian school, former school house and public house all juxtaposed in an informal village group.

### **K** Gorehambury

Just off the map is Gorehambury House. As the manor of Westwick, the manor was granted to the abbey by Ethelred. Geoffrey de Gorham was the 16th Abbot of St Albans and the first person to build a manor house there in 1130, using materials from the Roman remains. The Gorhams managed illicitly to appropriate the land for themselves and it remained in their hands until sold to the Oxford de Veres. The 9th earl of Oxford was 'attaindered' and the estate reverted to the crown, who sold it back to the Abbey. On dissolution, the crown sold again and eventually it was bought by Nicholas Bacon, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal during the first half of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. He built a new house in 1563-8 using materials from the old one. His son, Sir Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, built an additional house on the estate - Verulam House. Eventually the estate came into the hands of Harbottle Grimston, through marriage. In 1777-84 the Grimstons built their own palladian style house in portland stone and left the Bacon house to ruin. In 1815 James Grimston, 4th Viscount Grimston, became Earl Verulam.

Verulam had previously represented St Albans in the House of Commons.

Gorehambury retains much of the old Roman town, including the **Roman Theatre**, the only one in Britain having a stage rather than an amphitheatre.

### **L St Michael's Church and village**

Compared to Fishpool Street, the scale of most buildings is more uniformly modest and two storey, white paint and timber framing dominating. With the narrowness of the street and level pavements, the character is more coherent and with its origins as part of the separate parish, its character is village like.

The street includes a large number of C17 listed buildings, one with exposed timber frame and several buildings of Georgian appearance, c.1800, with brick façades and classic door cases. There are two houses of larger scale and particular note on St Michael's Street on opposite sides at its southern end. On the west side and straddling the line of the Roman Road is St Germain's, a c.1800 house of two storeys with a two storey, north extension with a jettied front, from a much earlier building. On the east, Darrowfield House, the former Dower House of Gorehambury sometimes known as "New House", is a fine example of a formal Queen Anne house of c.1700 with

a remarkable red and blue diapered patterned brickwork façade, which is set well back behind walls. This was a setting for the TV series *All Gas and Gaiters*

### **M Verulamium Museum**

Verulamium Museum is filled with ancient treasures and some of the finest mosaics outside of the Mediterranean. Free to local residents.

### **N Verulamium Park**

Verulamium Park is set in over 100 acres of parkland. Verulamium Park was purchased from the Earl of Verulam in 1929 and today is owned and operated by St Albans City and District Council.

During the 1930s archaeologists Sir Mortimer Wheeler and his wife Tessa excavated large areas of the Roman town. One of their major finds was an 1800 year old underfloor heating system, or **hypocaust**, which ran under an intricate mosaic floor. The section visible today is only about half of the original floor. The western part of the town remains within the Gorehambury estate.

### **P Ye Olde Fighting Cocks**

Much is claimed about the Old Fighting Cocks without any real evidence.

An octagonal medieval pigeon house was probably re-erected here as a house

between 1600 and 1622. and afterwards a chimney was added. There is no evidence of cock fighting having taken place. The earliest evidence it was trading as an alehouse was in 1756 under the sign of the Three Pigeons.

### **Q Abbey Mills**

There was a mill there in Saxon times, if not before, operating from a man-made mill stream. In at least part of the Monastic period, there was a fulling mill as well as a corn mill, controlled by the Abbot.

Archaeological evidence suggests that milling ceased on the site during the 15th century, but a mill of some sort is shown there on Hare's 1634 map.

Charles Woollam found a vacant site at the old St Albans Abbey Mills to build a silk throwing mill (converting silk cocoon filaments into continuous silk thread) with machinery powered by water and steam. It opened in 1804, with a large work force, mainly of women and children, and soon a second mill building was added.

Abbey Mill House is thought to be built over medieval mill foundations around 1830.

By the end of the century the demand had declined and employment was down to 250. In 1906 ownership changed hands, yet operation, with some diversification, continued until 1938.

## **R Sopwell Nunnery**

The Priory of St Mary of Sopwell, for a prioress and 12 nuns, was founded around 1140 by the abbot of St Albans, Geoffrey de Gorham under the jurisdiction of the Abbey. Following dissolution in 1539, Sopwell Priory was bought by Sir Richard Lee, a military engineer and commander of King Henry VIII. He tore the priory down and in the 1550s built a house on the foundations which he named Lee Hall. The new building retained many features of the medieval plan including the cloister/courtyard; the nave of the church was rebuilt as a hall with a fireplace in its north wall.

Lee also obtained the grounds and monastic buildings of St Albans Abbey (but not the Abbey itself).

The Sopwell estate was sold to Sir Harbottle Grimston in 1669; much of the house was pulled down and some materials were reused on his estates. In 1964 it was sold to St Albans City Council.

Visible remains include the gatehouse, one wing of an H-shaped structure, the adjoining cross-wing and a kitchen at the back.

## **S Watercress Nature Reserve**

Originally one of many small commercial watercress beds in Hertfordshire based on fast flowing chalk streams. The watercress was picked at dawn and pulled on trolleys to the nearby old station to be on London

restaurant tables for lunch. Production ceased in 1972. In 1990 the Watercress Wildlife Association won the competition for local amenity development.

It is a peaceful, green place containing: a shallow lake called The Mere, a boggy area, an orchard containing a wide variety of fruit trees (developed in 2002 with the planting of new native Hertfordshire fruit trees), a butterfly garden, small wooded glades and ponds.

There are many birds, waterfowl and insects, and on occasion, Kingfisher, Water Rail, Little Grebe or Muntjac deer.

## **T Odyssey Cinema**

This cinema is a locally listed Art Deco building. Originally built in 1931 as the Capitol Cinema, the current building stands on the site of an earlier film theatre, the Alpha Picture Palace, that had opened in 1904.

## **U Signal Box**

Built in 1892, this Midland Railway signal box contains a 44 lever frame dating from 1904 or before. It is the largest such box in preservation, and one of the few boxes open to the public (on limited occasions).

## **V Clarence Park**

The park was laid out in early 1894, on fields associated with St Peter's Farm which formed part of Earl Spencer's Estate, and comprises a 16-acre municipal sports

ground and a 9-acre public park and pleasure ground.

The benefactor, Sir John Maple, (owner of Maple's furniture store on Tottenham Court Road) who lived at nearby Childwickbury, donated the land and paid for the laying out, planting and construction of the buildings; the layout of the park itself was designed by the City Surveyor, Mr G. Ford. A striking water fountain of Aberdeen granite, which can still be seen today, was donated by Lady Maple.

## **References to some sources used**

- <https://localhistories.org/a-history-of-st-albans/>
- <https://www.hertsmemories.org.uk/content/herts-history/towns-and-villages/st-albans/the-town-that-time-forgot>
- <https://www.stalbanshistory.org/category/buildings/historical-buildings>
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