

The Revolt of 1381 in St Albans: a guided experience for teachers and students

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Introduction

This guide has been written to enable teachers from London and the South-East to better use the resources and opportunities available for an historic site visit to the town of St Albans. Situated less than half an hour away from St Pancras International Station, St Albans offers students from London not only the chance to visit museums and historical sites dating back to the Roman era, but also the opportunity to experience the physical layout of a medieval market town and how it has changed over time.

The impetus for this guide was a Historical Association Teacher Fellowship seminar on the Revolt of 1381, in which two of the authors of this guide were participants. St Albans was a key location in the course of the Revolt, due to its proximity to London and the importance of the Abbey to English ecclesiastical life. The priest John Ball, who held a central role in the rising, was brought to St Albans to be tried and executed in the days afterwards. We realised that St Albans offered a unique lens through which to view not only the Revolt of 1381 but also the world that shaped its experience of the Revolt.

St Albans was, in many ways, untypical for its time. It has been indelibly shaped by its location less than 15 miles from London, and from the Middle Ages it was the place in which someone might spend their first night on a journey north from the capital. However, its associations with London – which continue even today, with the St-Albans-City-to-St-Pancras season ticket now one of the most expensive commuter lines in Europe – have often obscured the importance that the town has had in its own right. St Albans Abbey was one of the richest of such institutions in medieval England. About 50 monks lived and worshipped there at its height in the thirteenth century, and there were monastic houses attached to the Abbey as far north as Tynemouth in Northumbria. The constant struggles between the Abbey and the townsfolk created the unique circumstances in which the Revolt would play out in the town.

We hope that even if you are unable to lead a school visit to the town at any time soon, you will find in these pages the information to help you to use St Albans as a valuable case study of life in the Middle Ages, offering an illustration of monastic life, religious values, town

governance and – most important of all – the agency of ordinary people to influence the world around them.

A history of St Albans: the long version

The site of modern St Albans was already marked out as important long before the Romans colonised the valley by the River Ver. As early as pre-Roman times, the **Catuvellauni** tribe settled in the valley basin and developed a settlement there called **Verlamion**. This was because the region is rich in important building materials such as clay, flint and chalk. It is also located along ancient pathways that connected other Celtic tribes. The king of one such tribe, Tasciovanus, issued coinage in the town, which remains important evidence of their settlement.

Once the Romans arrived in the first century C.E., things changed gradually. Archaeological evidence – as well as the town's Latinised name, **Verulamium** – indicates that, unlike some other settlements, the Romans adapted and took over the pre-existing settlement through increased economic contact rather than through abrupt conquest. It has also been suggested that Boudicca targeted the town due to its pro-Roman stance rather than any strategic value.

For the first time, and by no means the last, the area's proximity to London would dictate its destiny. Verulamium was just under a day's travel from Londinium, as well as being in an area rich in natural resources. Much of what we know about the Roman town was uncovered in the 1930s during excavations by the famous archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler, and today the remains of the forum can be seen near St Michael's Church and the Verulamium Museum at the west end of Verulamium Park.

There is some argument over the extent to which Verulamium declined or was abandoned abruptly, much of which mirrors views on the decline of Roman life in Britain in general. Earlier historians say that there was a dip in the town's fortunes in the late third century C.E., followed by what former mayor Elsie Toms calls a 'Constantinian recrudescence' in the early fourth century; however, evidence in recent years suggests that this could have been overstated. There is evidence of an abandonment of the numerous villas built around the town in the St Albans area from the late fourth century onwards, although there were clearly signs of an educated elite as late as the mid-fifth century, when Abbot Germanicus visited the town.

Germanicus's visit would ultimately represent the first signs of a change in fortune. While it is highly likely that a settlement would have developed at St Albans because of its chance location by water and in a region resplendent in natural resources, the town would become associated with the martyrdom of a Roman convert to Christianity. While some historians are not convinced that there was a person called Alban, stories of his martyrdom on, to quote Bede, a hill that was 'neither cliff nor crag, but a gentle rising slope made smooth by nature' linked the town with the first British martyr. This event, which has been dated to the first half

of the third century, regardless of its historicity, was clearly associated with later settlements long after Verulamium had been plundered for resources, and offers a possible explanation for why the old Roman settlement was not further developed in the way that towns such as Colchester and London were.

Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, however accurate, shows that the settlement of Verlamacaestir was already associated with Alban's martyrdom, and later in the same century the Saxon King Offa visited the town and *formalised* the first monastic settlement there. Benedictine monasticism, lived according to a strict rule of life summed up in the Latin motto *ora et labora* – 'prayer and work' – had spread rapidly from its origins in Northern Italy in the previous century. The contemporary website for St Albans Cathedral states that 'it is said that King Offa founded a monastery here in AD 793'; however, it is more likely that, given Bede's claim that healings and miracles were said to take place there, a community was already living on the site. Either way, Offa's actions gave the monastery some money and ensured that it was under his formal control. This came at a time when Offa was seeking to establish his control across the south of England as king of an expanded Mercia. Over a century later, St Albans was left vulnerable to attacks by Danish settlers, as it lay just south of the Danelaw; however, as the settlers gradually converted to Christianity, they began to visit and fund the growing shrine.

The development of the settlement on the hill, which was by now referred to as 'Holywell' after the story of Alban's martyrdom, led to a new and recurring development in the town's history. Right up to the present day there would be competing claims for power by the townsfolk and the Abbey. As the Abbey became more important, so did the potential for conflict between the people in the outlying areas and the monks. Early signs of this can be seen in the historical record of disputes with the settlement of Kingsbury, a royal 'burh' (fortified town) that historians now believe was found within the ruins of Verulamium. By the tenth century, we know that the Abbey was wealthy enough to purchase the land on which a fishpond had been dug and that, according to Matthew Paris, it had been causing a nuisance for the monastic community.

The other evidence for the growth of the town, or at least indicating its potential for growth, is found in the establishment of three churches on the main routes into the town: St Peter's in the north, St Michael's to the west (and over the remains of the Roman settlement) and St Stephen's to the south. These churches would have been served by the Abbey and were likely built to serve the increasing number of pilgrims coming to visit the shrine of St Alban. Their foundation, attributed to Abbot Ulsinus in the Abbey Chronicles, came at around the same time as Watling Street was diverted up Holywell Hill, which forms the main entrance to the town to this day.

The Abbey's development picks up pace in the two centuries following the Norman Conquest. As with many other places, the Normans imposed one of their own as Abbot in 1077. Paul de Caen was the nephew of Lanfranc, the Benedictine monk appointed by William to be

Archbishop of Canterbury after the conquest. Paul's relationship with Lanfranc meant that he was able to gain large amounts of money to help to fund the construction of a new Norman abbey, indicating both the Abbey's importance at the time and its importance to come.

During the Middle Ages, the Abbey experienced high and low periods, along with numerous moments of unrest in the late 1200s and early 1300s, partly due to unruly abbots and also because of the economic and social pressures of the time. By the 1300s, things were more or less settled under the rule of a powerful and long-standing abbot, Thomas de la Mare.

A history of St Albans: the on-the-go version

St Albans was settled around 2,500 years ago by a Celtic tribe called the **Catuvellauni**, who chose the site because there was an abundance of building materials and a nearby river and they could grow things. These were also the reasons why the Romans chose to settle in the area as well, when they arrived in the first century C.E. Most historians think that the Roman settlement, known as **Verulamium**, was a gradual process of cultural change rather than a violent defeat. Evidence for this is possibly the attack on the town led by Boudicca during her revolt.

The town's most famous resident was **Alban**, a Roman who, it is said, harboured a Christian priest called **Amphibalus** and offered to take his place when the authorities came to arrest him. The story goes that he was martyred on the hill above the town (now known as Holywell Hill, after a spring that miraculously appeared when he asked for water). He was Britain's first martyr, and there were pilgrims as early as the late 400s C.E.

King Offa paid his respects and gave his blessing to a monastic community in the area in the late eighth century C.E., partly as a way of asserting his authority in the region against increasing threats from elsewhere, as he tried to unify and strengthen Mercia. Later, during the time of the Danelaw, which began not far north of St Albans, even Norse converts to Christianity would come on pilgrimage to the town. By the beginning of the second millennium, there were churches at the main entrances to the town, a sign of the Abbey's prosperity and a possible sign of regular and sustained pilgrimage.

After the Norman Conquest, the new Norman Archbishop of Canterbury sent his nephew, **Paul of Caen**, to St Albans as Abbot. He brought with him architects and masons from Normandy, who redesigned the Abbey and gave the building its distinctive nave structure and square tower. Throughout the next 200 years, the Abbey enjoyed similar prosperity and growth to the country at large, as the Abbey benefited from a warmer climate and a closer connection to Rome and other European centres of learning.

By the late 1200s and early 1300s, things got worse and a series of reputedly incompetent abbots led to a series of risings. However, from the late 1320s onwards, a series of much more

competent abbots would reassert the Abbey's power and take control of its finances again. The rising of 1381 took place amid a context of national instability, an expensive and failing war in France and the aftershocks of the Black Death, exacerbating local grievances to breaking point.

Tour A: self-guided from St Albans City Station

Leave St Albans City Station by the main entrance, turn left onto Clarence Road and walk for five to ten minutes towards St Peter's Street.

1. St Peter's Church

You are now entering the town centre via one of the three main routes into St Albans. St Peter's was originally founded by Abbot Ulsinus in 948 C.E., along with St Michael's to the west and St Stephen's to the south. Even though historians aren't entirely sure whether the churches were founded exactly in this year, as the only source for the date comes from a monk of the Abbey called Matthew Paris, it tells us something important about St Albans. Firstly, the town was growing enough that they expected there to be a need for more churches. In addition, when abbeys established new churches, it was often a sign of their confidence, as it implied more visitors. We know that the Abbey also saw building work at this time too, so it makes sense that this shows the Abbey getting more powerful.

Walk down St Peter's Street, past the Town Hall and along French Row.

2. The Fleur de Lys Inn, French Row

The buildings in this street are some of the oldest in St Albans. This area was first developed as part of the town in the early 1300s, as it was growing. The town and the Abbey's fortunes were closely intertwined: when the Abbey did well, the town did well, and vice versa. The streets from the Town Hall down to the Clock Tower were where the medieval market was held. Medieval markets were strictly controlled and divided into sections. You are standing where the so-called 'women's market' was held, where typically women would sell butter, cheese, milk and other products. This street was also associated with shoemaking, as its original name was Cordwainers Row.

Why is this street called **French Row**? It is another sign of how important the abbey was. In the 1300s, England was at war with the King of France. What we now call 'France' – a stretch of land roughly the shape of a hexagon – was not always France. The king of England for many centuries controlled different bits of what is now western France, including Normandy and Brittany. In the 1300s and early 1400s, a series of wars was fought over who should be the

king of France. This was known as the Hundred Years' War, even though it lasted a little longer than that and was, in reality, a series of wars over the same issue.

The first of this series of wars started when King Edward III of England fell out with Philip VI of France. A series of battles was fought during the 1340s and 1350s, the last of which, at Poitiers, saw the new French king taken captive and held prisoner by the English. Edward III asked the Abbot of St Albans, **Thomas de la Mare**, to hold him as prisoner. This was a great honour for the town, and shows how important the Abbot was at the time. However, the French king spent one night in an inn on this street, which was later renamed the Fleur de Lys Inn (the fleur-de-lys is a symbol of France, a bit like the red rose is for England).

Cross George Street towards a passageway and follow the path down towards the Abbey. Stop at the entry to the Vintry Garden on your left side.

3. The Vintry Garden

You can now see the Abbey in front of you. Even today, the Abbey is the biggest building in St Albans and can be seen for many miles around. It is at the top of a hill, at the bottom of which is now a park where you might want to have your lunch. Thousands of years ago, it was the sight of the Roman town of **Verulamium**, one of the most important Roman settlements in Britain. It is where, according to legend, in around the 200s C.E., a man called Alban agreed to help a Christian called Amphibalus hide from the Roman authorities. Alban became a Christian himself and was sentenced to death on the hill. There are many stories about his **martyrdom** (dying for his Christian faith); however, according to the most famous one, Alban prayed for water as he was thirsty, and a spring of water appeared. As a result, the hill got the name 'holy well' or Holywell.

Alban's martyrdom was very significant for the town. As early as the late 400s C.E., there were visitors to his shrine, and in the 700s C.E. the Saxon King Offa gave his blessing to a community of monks here. During the course of the Middle Ages, more and more people came to visit Alban's shrine, and as a result the town and Abbey became richer and richer. However, over time, this gave rise to problems between the townsfolk and the Abbey. At its height, there were about 50 or so monks in the community. By the 1300s C.E., there were a number of different ways in which you could be a monk, and they very often suffered from similar problems. An individual, normally someone who became a saint, would set up a community of Christians who wanted to live their life as close to God as possible, by shutting themselves off from the world. That individual would create a Rule – a set of instructions for how to live.

The Rule of St Benedict dates from the 600s C.E. and became very popular in Northern Italy and then began to spread. It is the Rule that the monks of St Albans Abbey would have followed. It told them when to say their prayers, when they should be working and how to

balance these demands. They summed up their way of life as **ora et labora** – literally ‘prayer and work’ in Latin. However, over time, they became victims of their own success. They made large amounts of money from the lands that they were able to control, and as the monks made promises not to own money themselves or have children, the monasteries became very rich. Some monks thought that this was not what God wanted them to do. In France in the 1100s, a new group of monks were not happy about the idea of monks wearing underpants – a luxury item in those days! – and set up a stricter community called the **Cistercians**. The monks in St Albans remained Benedictines and, as in other places, were resented for their wealth.

The Vintry Garden was once where grapevines were grown (there were also grapevines at the bottom of the hill). It reminds us that the climate in the Middle Ages was very important. From the late 900s to about the early 1300s C.E., the temperature was slightly higher, and historians call it the ‘medieval warming period’. However, by the mid-1300s C.E., the temperature was cooling and there had been a number of crop failures, which would have made life harder for ordinary people. The path that you have just walked down is also very important. It was a right of way for the townspeople for those crossing the Abbey’s land for many hundreds of years. The people of St Albans took these rights very seriously. In the early 1870s, the Abbey tried to redirect the route, but it led to riots and the Abbey backed down!

Walk down towards the Abbey and follow the path right around the Abbey. Walk towards the Visitors’ Centre and continue left, with the Abbey on your right side. Continue underneath an archway with a side entrance to the Abbey on your right, and stop when you come out into a wider space, with the Abbey on your right and an open space sloping downwards to your left. Follow the path along the side of the Abbey until you are around the middle. On the side of the building the remains of arches should be evident in the masonry.

4. The cloister and Abbot’s Parlour

Churches were buildings that represented many different things. On one level they were prayers in stone, and even at the time of the Peasants’ Revolt the Abbey represented centuries of Christians coming to this site to pray to God and ask St Alban to pray on their behalf. However, the Abbey was also a way in which for nobles to show their importance as much as their faith in God. The main layout of this building was devised by architects from Normandy and dates back to the time just after the Norman Conquest, when Norman French nobles were taking power. William I appointed **Paul of Caen** as the Abbot, and he spent lots of money creating a large building using Norman styles. Later abbots used more up-to-date styles for their time.

On the wall, you can see the remains of a covered walkway known as a **cloister**. It was built in the late 1320s C.E., shortly after a mini-victory of the monks over the townsfolk. The people

of the town and the surrounding countryside came into conflict with the monks for different reasons, some of which included:

- The right to fish in local ponds, known as **fishpools**. The Abbey's fishpools were at the bottom of the hill (face away from the Abbey and look down the slope), as well as further down what is now called Fishpool Street.
- The right to hunt in local forests.
- The right to use **hand mills** for grinding their wheat into flour, rather than the Abbey's mills, for which they had to pay a fee.

Local risings happened every few decades or so; however, by the early 1300s, the Abbey was going through a rough patch. The abbots had not looked after the monastery's finances properly, and by the 1330s the Pope himself ordered an investigation. In the middle of this there was an uprising in 1327 over the rights above. The townsfolk heard that in Bury St Edmunds there had been an uprising, and they hoped to achieve the same results in St Albans. In the process, a servant of the Abbey and a townsman were killed, and things could have turned far uglier. The townsfolk cited the Domesday Book, which referred to St Albans as a 'borough'. They claimed that they were not arguing for anything new, but wanted a 'return' to the privileges that they had enjoyed in the past. The king at the time was a teenager, Edward III, and authority was weak. In the end, the King agreed to their demands and the Abbot had to give in, although they were still not allowed hand mills.

For a few years, the townsfolk enjoyed their rights. However, in 1331, the new abbot, **Richard of Wallingford**, was in a position to reassert the power of the Abbey. After showing himself as reasonable and able to manage the accounts, he began to prosecute some of the townsfolk for 'moral offences', such as having affairs outside of marriage. The townsfolk rioted and as a result over 60 people were held in the Abbey's gaol [see #5]. They hoped that they could get a sympathetic jury of townsfolk; however, Richard of Wallingford 'packed the jury' with people from the region who liked him more than the people of the town, and in the end the Abbot was able to convict two prominent local men and assert his control. As a result, the townsfolk gave up their charter and even surrendered their hand mills.

From the cloisters to the end of the **nave** (the long part of the Abbey) was the Abbot's Parlour. This was where the Abbot received and entertained his guests. Richard of Wallingford received 80 hand mills in total. At the time, this area was being redeveloped, and he ordered that the millstones be built into the floor of his parlour as a reminder of the Abbot's victory.

Now walk to the end of the nave and turn right, so that you are standing in front of the main entrance.

5. West entrance/Abbey gaol

By the 1380s, much had happened. Earlier, you learned that England was at war with France: by the 1370s, things were not going well and the war was costing a lot of money. The country was also dealing with the after-effects of the Black Death. Many local landowners were demanding land rights that they had not claimed for a long time. In 1376, the heir to the throne, Edward the 'Black Prince', unexpectedly died. He had been a great soldier and many hoped that he would be a strong king as well. As a result, his son, Richard, became king a year later. Richard was just ten when he became king, and his uncle, John of Gaunt, was put in charge of the country.

Where you are standing now was once the site of medieval fairs, so people were used to it as a gathering place. In front of you is the **Great Gateway**, which had been built about 20 years or so before. Even now it looks impressive, and it would have looked just as impressive and powerful to the people of the town. It would have made sense for the people of St Albans to have gathered here in June 1381, as people across England began to rise up against different authority figures. A term used by people at the time for the events of 1381 was 'the rumour', and this helps to explain why what began as a rising in Kent and Essex over increasing taxes spread far and wide, even as far as Yorkshire.

As the rumour spread, people began to feel inspired by their own grievances and issues. There would not have been many people still alive who remembered the humiliation of the events of 1331, but they knew of it: anyone who walked into the Abbot's Parlour would have been reminded as they looked at the floor! This is why, when the rumour of rising reached St Albans, the Abbey was the target of the people's anger. They also already had a good idea about what exactly they wanted: the reinstatement of the liberties that they had won in the early 1300s.

Much of what we know about the events of the Peasants' Revolt in St Albans happened here. It is likely that it was from here that the prior and some of the monks fled the Abbey on 12 June after the townsfolk presented their demands. It was the main target when the rebels returned from London, fired up by events. They broke through the gateway and into the adjacent **Abbey gaol**, releasing the prisoners inside. However, they were not indiscriminate: one of the prisoners, John Baron, was executed by the townsfolk themselves, after being found guilty by them of his crimes. Remember that while they were aggrieved, they were not irrational.

6. Romeland

You are now standing in a space that represents the crossing between the Abbey and the town. In recent years, historians have become very interested in the importance of the space, who was allowed there and what it represents. Some historians argue that this area was more

important than the marketplace in front of the Clock Tower. It was here that the townsfolk would gather for meetings with the monks of the Abbey. It is called 'Romeland'. The name comes from the word 'roam', as in to wander, and is associated with the idea that people had freedoms in the past that they wanted back.

A fair was held in this area three times a year during the Middle Ages, and it was an obvious space for the townsfolk to air their grievances with the Abbey. It also offered a comfortable space from which the abbot could address the townsfolk. It was here that the Abbot Thomas de la Mare met with the rebels. Initially fleeing the Abbey, he returned and performed delicate negotiations. Over the course of the days after the rising, the Abbot agreed to their demands, realising that he had little choice. Later, chronicles – written, it should be said, by those supportive of the Abbey – praised his courage at this time: one of the main chronicles suggests that over two thousand people were at one such gathering. While we do not know how many people were in St Albans at the time – the tax records were burned in the market square during the Revolt – it is likely that large numbers would have been present.

This would be a good place to take a break or sit down on the grass in front of the west entrance, weather permitting. Walk along the northern side of the Abbey towards the Vintry Garden and turn left, back up towards Waxhouse Gate and the Clock Tower. Some things to point out on the way include:

- **Site of St Andrews Chapel:** This was built adjacent to the northern side of the nave in the years following the Revolt, under the abbacy of John of Wheathampstead, and represents a kind of reconciliation with the townsfolk. It was demolished after the Dissolution, when the Abbey itself became the parish church of St Albans.
- **Grave of Rev. Robert Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury:** Runcie was the Bishop of St Albans in the 1970s. During the 1800s, so many people moved to St Albans and Hertfordshire that it was decided that more dioceses were needed. St Albans Abbey now became the Cathedral and Abbey Church of St Alban, and the town received its first bishop. Runcie was in St Albans during the centenary celebrations. His biggest legacy as Archbishop of Canterbury was beginning the work to enable women to become priests: the first woman was ordained in the Church of England in 1994.

7. Clock Tower

We are back in the main market square. For centuries, a cross was placed in the middle of this square and dedicated to Queen Eleanor, the Spanish wife of Edward I. When she died in 1290, Edward ordered that a cross be built in all the places where her body stayed on its way from Lincoln back to London. Only one original remains, and it is **not** the one that now stands in what was once the village of Charing, just outside Westminster: that is a Victorian replica. To quote from the *Gesta*, one of the main chronicles that we have of what happened in St Albans:

'In the town square, near the cross, they consumed in flames the obligations with certain muniments and rolls of the Abbey which they had extorted from the Archdeacon, for they had not thought to resort to civil or ecclesiastical laws for the future.'

There is lots of language here that shows the one-sidedness of the Abbey's chronicle, such as the word **extorted**, as well as the implication that the rebels were acting irrationally. In fact, their focus throughout was on the legal documents that they knew the Abbey held and their respect for the word of law. Freeman peasants upwards would have had a strong understanding of the law and knew how to use it if they needed to, and their focus on ensuring the destruction of these documents was not just symbolic but also practical.

However, for the Abbey at least, the *Gesta* implies that there was help at hand. In the wake of the death of Wat Tyler, the King slowly began to reassert control. On 19 June, Sir Walter atte Lee, a knight and Member of Parliament from Hertford, arrived and brought 50 men-at-arms and archers with him. He arrested Grindcobbe and some of the other rebels. So began the uneasy and bumpy road to an uncertain justice.

Walk straight ahead, with the Clock Tower on your left side, and back towards the Town Hall. Make sure to point out WH Smith on the left-hand side as you walk.

8. Moot Hall/Town Hall

In the mid-1530s, the monasteries were **dissolved**, which is a polite way of saying that they were destroyed, their monks dispossessed and the lands sold off for the benefit of the King. Unlike other towns with monasteries that declined, St Albans continued to benefit from its association with the Abbey. One of the longest-lasting legacies was the status of the town as the centre of the Liberty of St Albans. During the time of the Abbey, it gave power to the Abbey to assert its control; however, with the Abbey gone, the town inherited the powers of the liberty. This meant that the town had the right to dispense justice, and this was done in the Moot Hall. For many years, people thought that the Moot Hall was the building you saw that is now owned by WH Smith; however, it is now thought that the site of the Town Hall was the true location of the Moot Hall.

As we heard earlier, justice was very important to the rebels and the townsfolk. All the way through, their language implied a *return* to a lost innocence, rather than trying to change things radically, as they have been portrayed by others and those at the time. This building, now a museum and events space, was a court house until the 1950s, and St Albans even now has the right to a Crown Court, at which certain crimes are allowed to be prosecuted. In the case of the rebels, however, the trials were heard in the county town of Hertford. There is one other figure involved in the rising in St Albans whom we have not mentioned so far: Richard II himself. He arrived in mid-July in order to ensure that justice was delivered and that the rebels would swear loyalty to him. The justice was delivered about a mile south-west of

here, in an area called Eyewood, where gallows stood at the edge of the Abbey's lands in St Albans. Richard oversaw the execution by hanging, drawing and quartering of 15 of the St Albans rebels, among them William Grindecobbe, as well as John Ball. They were hung until nearly dead, and then had their vital organs removed slowly (i.e. drawn out) until they died. Then their bodies were cut into four pieces and the remains were sent to different places.

A few days after he left, the townsfolk led one final, futile act of rebellion. Some of the townsfolk sympathetic to Grindecobbe and the rebels took the bodies down and buried them. When Richard II heard about this, he was very angry, and ordered that the rebels exhume (unearth) the bodies and rehang them. They would not be taken down until the next summer. It was a reminder to the people of Richard's power, and that of the Abbey.

Alternative routes

*If arriving by Abbey Flyer to **St Albans Abbey Station**, it is advised to walk through Verulamium Park, passing Westminster Lodge and the athletics track on the left-hand side. When you arrive at the lake, turn right and follow the path, bearing right when you arrive at Ye Olde Fighting Cocks. Walk up the hill towards the Abbey and bear right, passing under the arch of the Chapter House. Follow the path around the Abbey and keep to the side of the Abbey until you see a passageway leading into the town. Walk uphill until you see a World War I memorial soldier and the entrance to the Vintry Garden on your right-hand side, and start from Stop 3. Then follow all the stops chronologically until you reach Stop 7, when you can include Stop 2 as desired. Additional information is included below about Ye Olde Fighting Cocks.*

1a. Ye Olde Fighting Cocks

You are now about to enter the central part of the estate of St Albans Abbey as it was in the Middle Ages. The park that you have just walked through was landscaped in the 1930s as a way of providing work when jobs were scarce. One of the good things about doing building and construction work for historians is that it often gives archaeologists the chance to excavate the site beforehand. In the 1930s, a famous archaeologist and her husband led an excavation of the land, revealing the street plan of the Roman town of Verulamium.

There are lots of hints around us as to how the Abbey got its money, as well as many of the things that led to the townsfolk coming into conflict with the Abbey. The stream that you have just walked over was the site of one of the Abbey's fishpools, where the Abbey held the rights to fish. Early in the town's history, there were arguments between the people who lived nearby and the monks as to who owned the ponds. During the Revolt in 1381, the rebels would drain the ponds as an act of defiance.

If you were to continue up the hill on the left-hand side toward the Great Gateway, you would be walking along **Abbey Mill Lane**. This was one of the main routes toward the Abbey's mills. The Abbey made lots of money from locals bringing their grain to the Abbey's mills to be ground into flour for use in baking bread. Some villeins tried to use hand mills to grind the

flour for a cheaper price; however, the Abbey strictly defended its exclusive right to control milling, as you will find out later.

Tour B: a tour in conjunction with the St Albans Museum and Gallery and St Albans Abbey

1. Moot Hall/Town Hall

This is the St Albans Town Hall. The current building dates back to 1826, and a Georgian courtroom is still visible, albeit used now as a tearoom. However, there have been trials held on this site for hundreds of years. It is right to begin a tour of St Albans' role in the rising of 1381 at this place, as it symbolises a lot of things that the townsfolk would have thought very important to them. Justice was very important to the rebels and the townsfolk. All the way through, their language implied a *return* to a lost innocence, rather than trying to change things radically, as they have been portrayed by others and those at the time.

One of the longest-lasting legacies was the status of the town as the centre of the **Liberty** of St Albans. In the Middle Ages, it gave power to the Abbey to assert its control; however, with the Abbey gone, the town inherited the powers of the liberty. This meant that the town had the right to dispense justice, and this was done in the Moot Hall. For many years, people thought that the Moot Hall was the building you will see on your way to the next stop, which is now owned by WH Smith; however, it is now thought that the site of the Town Hall was the true location of the Moot Hall.

The history of St Albans has been defined by two main factors beyond its control: religion and the martyrdom of St Alban in the mid-200s C.E., and its location close to London. Both of these things helped to make the town prosperous. It was also geographically convenient at many important moments. In the time of the Saxon King Offa, it was on the edge of Mercia, and so establishing an abbey and a charter of liberties for the town was a way of asserting its place as a Saxon location. During the time of the Viking rule of the North of England, known as the Danelaw, it was again close to the border with that land, and over time it became a place of pilgrimage even for Norsemen. Today it is a prosperous commuter town, and the train line that you possibly used to get here is one of the most expensive in Europe. The rising of 1381 was not the first (and not the last) time that the townsfolk had problems with authority, and it played out differently across the country. This is St Albans' story.

2. The Fleur de Lys Inn, French Row

The buildings in this street are some of the oldest in St Albans. This area was first developed as part of the town in the early 1300s, as it was growing. The town and the Abbey's fortunes were closely intertwined: when the Abbey did well, the town did well, and vice versa. The streets from the Town Hall down to the Clock Tower were where the medieval market was held. Medieval markets were strictly controlled and divided into sections. You are standing where the so-called 'women's market' was held, where typically women would sell butter,

cheese, milk and other products. This street was also associated with shoemaking, as its original name was Cordwainers Row.

Why is this street called **French Row**? It is another sign of how important the Abbey was. In the 1300s, England was at war with the King of France. What we now call 'France' – a stretch of land roughly the shape of a hexagon – was not always France. The king of England for many centuries controlled different bits of what is now western France, including Normandy and Brittany. In the 1300s and early 1400s, a series of wars was fought over who should be the king of France. It is known as the Hundred Years' War, even though it lasted a little longer than that, and was, in reality, a series of wars over the same issue.

The first of this series of wars started when King Edward III of England fell out with Philip VI of France. A series of battles was fought during the 1340s and 1350s, the last of which, at Poitiers, saw the new French king taken captive and held prisoner by the English. Edward III asked the Abbot of St Albans, **Thomas de la Mare**, to hold him as prisoner. This was a great honour for the town, and shows how important the Abbot was at the time. However, the French king spent one night in an inn on this street, which was later renamed the Fleur de Lys Inn (the fleur-de-lys is a symbol of France, a bit like the red rose is for England).

3. The Vintry Garden

You can now see the Abbey in front of you. Even today, the Abbey is the biggest building in St Albans and can be seen for many miles around. It is at the top of a hill, at the bottom of which is now a park where you might want to have your lunch. Thousands of years ago it was the site of the Roman town of **Verulamium**, one of the most important Roman settlements in Britain. It is where, according to legend, in around the 200s C.E., a man called Alban agreed to help a Christian called Amphibalus hide from the Roman authorities. Alban became a Christian himself and was sentenced to death on the hill. There are many stories about his **martyrdom** (dying for his Christian faith); however, according to the most famous story, Alban prayed for water as he was thirsty, and a spring of water appeared. As a result, the hill got the name 'holy well' or Holywell.

Alban's martyrdom was very significant for the town. As early as the late 400s C.E., there were visitors to his shrine, and in the 700s C.E. the Saxon King Offa gave his blessing to a community of monks here. During the course of the Middle Ages, more and more people came to visit Alban's shrine and, as a result, the town and Abbey became richer and richer. However, over time this gave rise to problems between the townsfolk and the Abbey. At its height, there were about 50 or so monks in the community. By the 1300s C.E., there were a number of different ways in which you could be a monk, and they very often suffered from similar problems. An individual, normally someone who became a saint, would set up a community

of Christians who wanted to live their life as close to God as possible, by shutting themselves off from the world. That individual would create a Rule – a set of instructions for how to live.

The Rule of St Benedict dates from the 600s C.E. and became very popular in Northern Italy and then began to spread. It is the Rule that the monks of St Albans Abbey would have followed. It told them when to say their prayers, when they should be working and how to balance these demands. They summed up their way of life as **ora et labora** – literally ‘prayer and work’ in Latin. However, over time, they became victims of their own success. They made large amounts of money from the lands that they were able to control, and as the monks made promises not to own money themselves or have children, the monasteries became very rich. Some monks thought that this was not what God wanted them to do. In France in the 1100s, a new group of monks were not happy about the idea of monks wearing underpants – a luxury item in those days! – and set up a stricter community called the **Cistercians**. The monks in St Albans remained Benedictines and, as in other places, were resented for their wealth.

The Vintry Garden was once where grapevines were grown (there were also grapevines at the bottom of the hill). It reminds us that the climate in the Middle Ages was very important. From the late 900s to about the early 1300s C.E., the temperature was slightly higher, and historians call it the ‘medieval warming period’. However, by the mid-1300s C.E., the temperature was cooling and there had been a number of crop failures, which would have made life harder for ordinary people. The path that you have just walked down is also very important. It was a right of way for the townspeople for crossing the Abbey’s land for many hundreds of years. The people of St Albans took these rights very seriously. In the early 1870s, the Abbey tried to divert the passageway, but it led to riots and the Abbey backed down!

4. The cloister and Abbot’s Parlour

Churches were buildings that represented many different things. On one level they were prayers in stone, and even at the time of the Peasants’ Revolt the Abbey represented centuries of Christians coming to this site to pray to God and ask St Alban to pray on their behalf. However, the Abbey was also a way in which for nobles to show their importance as much as their faith in God. The main layout of this building was devised by architects from Normandy and dates back to the time just after the Norman Conquest, when Norman French nobles were taking power. William I appointed **Paul of Caen** as the Abbot, and he spent lots of money creating a large building using Norman styles. Later abbots used more up-to-date styles for their time.

On the wall, you can see the remains of a covered walkway known as a **cloister**. It was built in the late 1320s C.E., shortly after a mini-victory of the monks over the townsfolk. The people

of the town and the surrounding countryside came into conflict with the monks for different reasons, some of which included:

- The right to fish in local ponds, known as **fishpools**. The Abbey's fishpools were at the bottom of the hill (face away from the Abbey and look down the slope), as well as further down what is now called Fishpool Street.
- The right to hunt in local forests.
- The right to use **hand mills** for grinding their wheat into flour, rather than the Abbey's mills, for which they had to pay a fee.

Local risings happened every few decades or so; however, by the early 1300s, the Abbey was going through a rough patch. The abbots had not looked after the monastery's finances properly, and by the 1330s the Pope himself ordered an investigation. In the middle of this, there was an uprising in 1327 over the rights above. The townsfolk heard that in Bury St Edmunds there had been an uprising, and they hoped to achieve the same results in St Albans. In the process, a servant of the Abbey and a townsman were killed, and things could have turned far uglier. The townsfolk cited the Domesday Book, which referred to St Albans as a 'borough'. They claimed that they were not arguing for anything new, but wanted a 'return' to the privileges that they had enjoyed in the past. The king at the time was a teenager, Edward III, and authority was weak. In the end, the King agreed to their demands and the Abbot had to give in, although they were still not allowed hand mills.

For a few years, the townsfolk enjoyed their rights. However, in 1331, the new Abbot, **Richard of Wallingford**, was in a position to reassert the power of the Abbey. After showing himself as reasonable and able to manage the accounts, he began to prosecute some of the townsfolk for 'moral offences', such as having affairs outside of marriage. The townsfolk rioted and as a result over 60 people were held in the Abbey's gaol [see #5]. They hoped that they could get a sympathetic jury of townsfolk; however, Richard of Wallingford 'packed the jury' with people from the region who liked him more than the people of the town, and in the end the Abbot was able to convict two prominent local men and assert his control. As a result, the townsfolk gave up their charter and even surrendered their hand mills.

From the cloisters to the end of the **nave** (the long part of the Abbey) was the Abbot's Parlour. This was where the Abbot received and entertained his guests. Richard of Wallingford received 80 hand mills in total. At the time, this area was being redeveloped, and he ordered that the millstones be built into the floor of his parlour as a reminder of the Abbot's victory.

5. West entrance/Abbey gaol

By the 1380s, much had happened. Earlier you learned that England was at war with France: by the 1370s, things were not going well and the war was costing a lot of money. The country

was also dealing with the after-effects of the Black Death. Many local landowners were demanding land rights that they had not claimed for a long time. In 1376, the heir to the throne, Edward the 'Black Prince', unexpectedly died. He had been a great soldier and many hoped that he would be a strong king as well. As a result, his son, Richard, became king a year later. Richard was just ten when he became king, and his uncle, John of Gaunt, was put in charge of the country.

Where you are standing now was once the site of medieval fairs, so people were used to it as a gathering place. In front of you is the **Great Gateway**, which had been built about 20 years or so before. Even now it looks impressive, and it would have looked just as impressive and powerful to the people of the town. It would have made sense for the people of St Albans to have gathered here in June 1381, as people across England began to rise up against different authority figures. A term used by people at the time for the events of 1381 was 'the rumour', and this helps to explain why what began as a rising in Kent and Essex over increasing taxes spread far and wide, even as far as Yorkshire.

As the rumour spread, people began to feel inspired by their own grievances and issues. There would not have been many people still alive who remembered the humiliation of the events of 1331, but they knew of it: anyone who walked into the Abbot's Parlour would have been reminded as they looked at the floor! This is why, when the rumour of rising reached St Albans, the Abbey was the target of the people's anger. They also already had a good idea about what exactly they wanted: the reinstatement of the liberties that they had won in the early 1300s.

Much of what we know about the events of the Peasants' Revolt in St Albans happened here. It is likely that it was from here that the Prior and some of the monks fled the Abbey on 12 June after the townsfolk presented their demands. It was the main target when the rebels returned from London, fired up by events. They broke through the gateway and into the adjacent **Abbey gaol**, releasing the prisoners inside. However, they were not indiscriminate: one of the prisoners, John Baron, was executed by the townsfolk themselves after being found guilty by them of his crimes. Remember that while they were aggrieved, they were not irrational.

6. Romeland

You are now standing in a space that represents the crossing between the Abbey and the town. In recent years, historians have become very interested in the importance of the space, who was allowed there and what it represents. Some historians argue that this area was more important than the market place in front of the Clock Tower. It was here that the townsfolk would gather for meetings with the monks of the Abbey. It is called 'Romeland'. The name

comes from the word 'roam', as in to wander, and is associated with the idea that people had freedoms in the past that they wanted back.

A fair was held in this area three times a year during the Middle Ages, and it was an obvious space for the townsfolk to air their grievances with the Abbey. It also offered a comfortable space from which the Abbot could address the townsfolk. It was here that the Abbot, Thomas de la Mare, met with the rebels. Initially fleeing the Abbey, he returned and performed delicate negotiations. Over the course of the days after the rising, the Abbot agreed to their demands, realising that he had little choice. Later chronicles – written, it should be said, by those supportive of the Abbey – praised his courage at this time: one of the main chronicles suggests that over two thousand people were at one such gathering. While we do not know how many people were in St Albans at the time – the tax records were burned in the market square during the Revolt – it is likely that large numbers would have been present.

This would be a good place to take a break or sit down on the grass in front of the west entrance, weather permitting. Walk along the northern side of the Abbey towards the Vintry Garden and turn left back up towards Waxhouse Gate and the Clock Tower. Some things to point out on the way include:

- **Site of St Andrews Chapel:** This was built adjacent to the northern side of the nave in the years following the Revolt, under the abbacy of John of Wheathampstead, and represents a kind of reconciliation with the townsfolk. It was demolished after the Dissolution, when the Abbey itself became the parish church of St Albans.
- **Grave of Rev. Robert Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury:** Runcie was the Bishop of St Albans in the 1970s. During the 1800s, so many people moved to St Albans and Hertfordshire that it was decided that more dioceses were needed. St Albans Abbey now became the Cathedral and Abbey Church of St Alban, and the town received its first bishop. Runcie was in St Albans during the centenary celebrations. His biggest legacy as Archbishop of Canterbury was beginning the work to enable women to become priests: the first woman was ordained in the Church of England in 1994.

7. Clock Tower

We are back in the main market square. For centuries, a cross was placed in the middle of this square and dedicated to Queen Eleanor, the Spanish wife of Edward I. When she died in 1290, Edward ordered that a cross be built in all the places where her body stayed on its way from Lincoln back to London. Only one original remains, and it is **not** the one that now stands in what was once the village of Charing, just outside Westminster: that is a Victorian replica. To quote from the *Gesta*, one of the main chronicles that we have of what happened in St Albans:

'In the town square, near the cross, they consumed in flames the obligations with certain muniments and rolls of the Abbey which they had extorted from the Archdeacon, for they had not thought to resort to civil or ecclesiastical laws for the future.'

There is lots of language here that shows the one-sidedness of the Abbey's chronicle, such as the word **extorted**, as well as the implication that the rebels were acting irrationally. In fact, their focus throughout was on the legal documents that they knew the Abbey held and their respect for the word of law. Freeman peasants upwards would have had a strong understanding of the law and knew how to use it if they needed to, and their focus on ensuring the destruction of these documents was not just symbolic but also practical.

However, for the Abbey at least, the *Gesta* implies that there was help at hand. In the wake of the death of Wat Tyler, the King slowly began to reassert control. On 19 June, Sir Walter atte Lee, a knight and Member of Parliament from Hertford, arrived and brought 50 men-at-arms and archers with him. He arrested Grindcobbe and some of the other rebels. So began the uneasy and bumpy road to an uncertain justice.

If arriving by Abbey Flyer to St Albans Abbey Station...

It is advised to walk through Verulamium Park, passing Westminster Lodge and the athletics track on the left-hand side. When you arrive at the lake, turn right and follow the path, bearing right when you arrive at Ye Olde Fighting Cocks. Walk up the hill towards the Abbey and bear right, passing under the arch of the Chapter House. Follow the path around the Abbey and keep to the side of the Abbey until you see a passageway leading into the town. Walk uphill until you see a World War I memorial soldier and the entrance to the Vintry Garden on your right-hand side, and start from Stop 3. Then follow all the stops chronologically until you reach Stop 7, when you can include Stop 2 as desired. Additional information is included below about Ye Olde Fighting Cocks.

1a. Ye Olde Fighting Cocks

You are now about to enter the central part of the estate of St Albans Abbey as it was in the Middle Ages. The park that you have just walked through was landscaped in the 1930s as a way of providing work when jobs were scarce. One of the good things about doing building and construction work for historians is that it often gives archaeologists the chance to excavate the site beforehand. In the 1930s, a famous archaeologist and her husband led an excavation of the land, revealing the street plan of the Roman town of Verulamium.

There are lots of hints around us as to how the Abbey got its money, as well as many of the things that led to the townsfolk coming into conflict with the Abbey. The stream that you have just walked over was the site of one of the Abbey's fishpools, where the Abbey held the rights to fish. Early in the town's history, there were arguments between the people who lived nearby and the monks as to who owned the ponds. During the Revolt in 1381, the rebels would drain the ponds as an act of defiance.

If you were to continue up the hill on the left-hand side toward the Great Gateway, you would be walking along **Abbey Mill Lane**. This was one of the main routes toward the Abbey's mills. The Abbey made lots of money from locals bringing their grain to the Abbey's mills to be ground into flour for use in baking bread. Some villeins tried to use hand mills to grind the flour for a cheaper price; however, the Abbey strictly defended its exclusive right to control milling, as you will find out later.

Practical information

Getting to St Albans

There are two main lines that run to St Albans. The most reliable is the **Thameslink** service to **St Albans City Station**. From St Pancras International, there is a direct service that takes about 20 minutes, and a slower service that calls at all stations and takes approximately 35 minutes. It is then about a 15-minute walk from the main station exit to the Abbey. Additionally, there is the **Abbey Flyer**, the town's older train route, which runs from London Euston to **St Albans Abbey Station**, just opposite the eastern entrance to Verulamium Park. However, the Abbey Flyer runs far less frequently and is more likely to involve a rail replacement service, so this is not recommended. If arriving by coach, it is possible to park in the car park at Verulamium Museum, at the western end of the park nearest to St Michael's Church, off Bluehouse Hill (the A4147). There is also coach parking at Westminster Lodge at the western entrance to Verulamium Park.

Accessibility information

Be advised that there are several sloping and slightly uneven paths, with which members of your group might require assistance. It is possible to access Romeland without using the gate with steps when approaching from the Abbey's west entrance, by following the path through the Great Gateway.

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