
The Clock Tower, St. Albans: its Origin and History.

BY F. G. KITTON.

Remembering that the ancient Clock Tower is, with the exception of the Abbey Church, the most prominent architectural relic of antiquity in St. Albans, it becomes a matter for surprise that no comprehensive history of the structure has ever been written. In attempting to give as consecutive an account as possible under the circumstances, I have availed myself chiefly of the information afforded by the various histories of St. Albans, the Transactions of learned Societies, the Corporation Records, and other likely sources; and I must especially acknowledge my indebtedness to some manuscript notes on the subject by the late Dr. Ridgway Lloyd (kindly placed at my disposal by Mrs. Lloyd), which were prepared by him (but never completed) for a paper to be read before the St. Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archæological Society.

The historians of St. Albans unite in asserting that the origin and exact date of the Clock Tower are unknown, and various conjectures have been made concerning the purpose for which it was erected. There is a tradition which says that two Roman ladies of the City of Verulam, having wandered to where St. Albans now stands, were benighted, and from the site of the present Tower they first descried a light, which enabled them to retrace their steps; in order, therefore, to prevent the recurrence of such an accident, either to themselves or others, they caused a high tower to be built, whence might be more easily ascertained the way

out of the wood, for it must be borne in mind that, according to the old rhyme—

“When Verulam stood
St. Albans was a wood.”

It has also been supposed that the structure was built for the purpose of a watch-tower, to give alarm on the approach of an enemy to the town. Newcome erroneously assumed a connection between what we now call the Clock Tower and the *propugnaculum* on what has been wrongly described as “King Canute’s Tower” of “the Royal Castle of Kingsbury,” mentioned by Matthew Paris as existing in the time of Stephen. We must, however, discard these theories and conjectures, as well as the aforesaid tradition concerning the two Roman dames—which, by the way, I am unable to trace further back than 1815.*

Evidence is forthcoming which enables us to determine approximately the period of the erection of the Clock Tower, and proves its origin to be much more recent than certain chroniclers supposed; for, instead of dating from Saxon, or even Roman, times, we find in our civic records that this quaint structure must have been built early in the fifteenth century. Among the archives of the Corporation are several writings and deeds of the 15th and 16th centuries which refer to “le Cllokkehouse,” as it was then called. One of these documents is a deed or release (inscribed in Latin), dated the 29th of June, in the fourth year of King Henry IV (1403), by which Alice, the relict of Ralph att Lee, conveyed to Geoffrey Fylynden and others, all her right in a vacant piece of land in the town of St. Albans, in French Row, otherwise called Cordwainers’ Row (“*in villa de Sancto Albano in vico Francorum alias dicto Cordewaneresrowe*,”) measuring eighteen feet by thirty-two feet (“*in latitudine octodecim pedes et in longitudine triginta et duos pedes*.”)† In the opinion of that careful and industrious archæologist, Dr. Ridgway Lloyd, this was evidently the plot of land, then vacant, where the Clock Tower stands. The second deed (also in Latin) dated the 13th year of Henry IV (1412), contains

* Shaw’s “History of Verulam and St. Albans,” 1815.

† “Herts Genealogist and Antiquary,” Vol. I. p. 88.

the earliest allusion to "le Clokkehouse," so that from the evidence thus afforded, we must conclude that the Tower was built between the 29th of June, 1403, and Easter, 1412. Clutterbuck evidently did not know of the existence of the second document here mentioned, and refers to one dated 1427 (fifteen years later), as containing the earliest reference to the "Clokkehouse."

Historians and antiquaries have been puzzled not only as to the actual date of the Clock Tower, but also respecting the object of its erection. It has been reasonably assumed that its original purpose was to serve as a Watch Tower, or Beacon Tower, for which, by virtue of its commanding position on elevated ground in the heart of the town, it was eminently suited. Norden, writing in 1723, gives a list of beacons, or "beaukens," then within the County, and here we find that the St. Albans beacon was placed on the steeple of St. Peter's Church, the other beacons in Hertfordshire being at Graveley, Therfield, and Amwell. We must, therefore, suppose that the builders of the Clock Tower had some other motive in erecting it, and it was the opinion of Sir Gilbert Scott that the Tower was originally the old Town Belfry, somewhat equivalent to those in the ancient cities of Belgium, and this opinion most antiquaries will probably endorse. I think there can be no doubt that the structure was primarily designed to serve as a Bell Tower, or Campanile, other examples of which still survive in this country. For instance, in England we have a detached bell tower at Elstow, another at Evesham, and (I believe) a third at Ledbury, in Herefordshire, while abroad, among the most famous campaniles are the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and the remarkably ornate Tower of Florence, usually called "The Campanile of Giotto," which so strongly excited the admiration of Ruskin, who, writing of it, says: "The characteristics of Power and Beauty occur more or less in different buildings, some in one and some in another. But, altogether, and all in their highest possible relative degree, they exist, as far as I know, only in one building in the world, the Campanile of Giotto, at Florence."

Although clocks were invented a considerable time prior to the erection of the St. Albans Clock Tower, they were by no means common at that period. Lord

Grimthorpe informs us, in his work on "Clocks, Watches, and Bells," that the oldest clock mentioned in England is that which was put up in a former clock tower of Westminster, 1288, and it is interesting to learn that the clock, dated 1325, formerly at Glastonbury Abbey, and now at the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, is still going! The clock made in 1326 by Richard Wallingford, the leper Abbot of St. Albans, is said to have been a unique piece of mechanism, for it showed various astronomical phenomena. Owing to the scarcity of clocks and watches in mediæval times the people were made acquainted with the passing hours by means of bells, usually hung in towers, as, for example, that called the "Clockier," or Campanile, of St. Paul's Cathedral, a detached building which stood near Paul's Cross, and in which the large bell was rung to summon the citizens to the manifold duties of the folk-moot and to the assumption of arms. Stowe, in his "Survey of London," 1598, mentions "the great steeple there situate," and refers to "the common bell, which being there rung, all the inhabitants of the citie might heare and come together."

There is documentary evidence that the Tower at St. Albans was known as the "Clokkehouse" as early as 1412—that is, shortly after its erection; but it is not quite clear whether it then actually contained a clock, or whether the time of day was announced by the ringing of a bell. There is testimony, however, of the fact that a clock existed in the Tower in 1485, for in that year a lease of the Clock House was granted by John Newbury (secretary to Abbot William Alban) and others to one Robert Grane, a smith, by which the tenant covenanted to "kepe, make and rewle the clokke, beyng in seid tenement, and to smyte and kepe his resonable howres, and dayly and nyghtly to rynge or do rynge the bell of the same clok by the space of half anyle wey betwene the houres of viij and ix of the same clok at after noone, and immediatly as he can or may after the houre of iiij of the same clok before noone, at hys owne propre costes, expenses, and labour, or hys assignes duryng the seid terme. And shall make and kepe all reparacons necessarye to the seid tenement and clokke Excepte the reparacons of the bell and the claper perteynyng to the seid bell, and excepte also

the stone werk and lede werk of the seid tenement, etc." Robert Grane, as stated, was a smith, and it was stipulated in the grant of the lease that it should not be lawful for him or his assigns "to make or to rere in the seid tenement duryng the seid terme any Smythes Foorge upon peyn of forfaittour of his seid terme." The expression that the bell was to be rung "by the space of half a myle wey" seems to have puzzled Dr. Ridgway Lloyd; but it was made clear by the late Rev. H. Fowler, who, when desiring to obtain (through the medium of *Notes and Queries*) a parallel to the curious phrase, stated that it evidently meant the time occupied in walking half-a-mile—that is, about ten minutes. In a later lease (1546), this meaning is made more obvious by the substitution of the words, "the space of a quarter of one houre." Thomas North, F.S.A., in his "Church Bells of Hertfordshire," states that this curious mode of measuring time occurs in the Statutes, under date September 29th, 1339, which Bishop Grandison settled for the Government of his collegiate establishment of Ottery St. Mary. Besides being used for notifying the flight of time, we learn that the bell in the Clock House (according to a document of 1547) was tolled "when any casualltie of Fyer or Fray made w^{thin} the said Townte," if the lessee were required to perform that office. *A propos* of the first Battle of St. Albans, 1455, we, in the Paston Letters, find the following interesting and quaint allusion to the Bell in the Clock House at St. Albans: "The inomy [enemy's] batayle was in the Market Place, and the Kynge's standard was pight . . . And Sir Rober Ocle tok VIc. men of the Marchis, and tok the Market Place or ony man was war; than the larum bell was ronge, and every man yed to harneys." This is evidently an instance of the use of the bell during "a casualltie of Fyer or Fray."

By reason of its great antiquity, the history of the Clock Tower is bound up with a good deal of the history of the town in which it stands. Since the Battles of St. Albans, perhaps the most exciting and dramatic incident witnessed by the venerable Tower was that which took place in 1643—the arrest by Cromwell and his soldiers of the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire, while in the act of reading to the assembled crowd of market

people and others a Royal Proclamation, advocating the raising of Train-Bands for the preservation of their homes from felonies. In 1427, the ownership of the Clock House was vested in a body of feoffees, from whom, in course of time, it passed to the Mayor and Corporation.* From the Clock House documents and the Corporation Minutes may be gleaned many interesting facts concerning the ancient structure and its various tenants. In the time of Henry VI. (1422-71), the roadway, or "King's Highway," on the east side of the Clock House, was called the "Crosse Chepyng." At a later date (1547) the Clock House is described as being situated "in a Strete called the Clock Howse Rowe," and in the reign of Philip and Mary (1553-58), the annual rent of the Clock House, for a 40 years' lease, was one mark—13s. 4d.† In a lease dated the 10th December, 37th Elizabeth (1595), the Mayor and burgesses of St. Albans demised to Robert Woolley, one of the principal burgesses of the same borough, "All that Tenemente Shopp, Shudds, roomes, and buildings comonly called by the name of the Clockhouse, with th'apprtennces scituat & beinge over ageinste the Crosse in the said Town of St. Albans. . . ."‡ The "Crosse" here mentioned was, of course, that erected near the south-east angle of the Clock House, in memory of Queen Eleanor, the base of which was demolished in 1701-2. The "Tenemente shopp" referred to in this lease was evidently the dwelling-house, with shop, which had been built up against the south front of the Tower, probably during the early part of Elizabeth's reign, and which is represented in engravings of a later period. By the counterpart of a lease, dated March 20th, 1694, it appears that this house was "formerly called or knowne by the name of the Rose and Crowne"§; it was not necessarily a public-house, or tavern, as in those days nearly all places of business were distinguished by signs.

In the Mayor's Accounts for 1610-11 we discover that Lathbury's Charity House stood next the Clock House, and that the rent of the latter was 20s. In 1673-4, the sum of £4 was paid to John Halford "for one whole

* Transactions, 1885, p. 38.

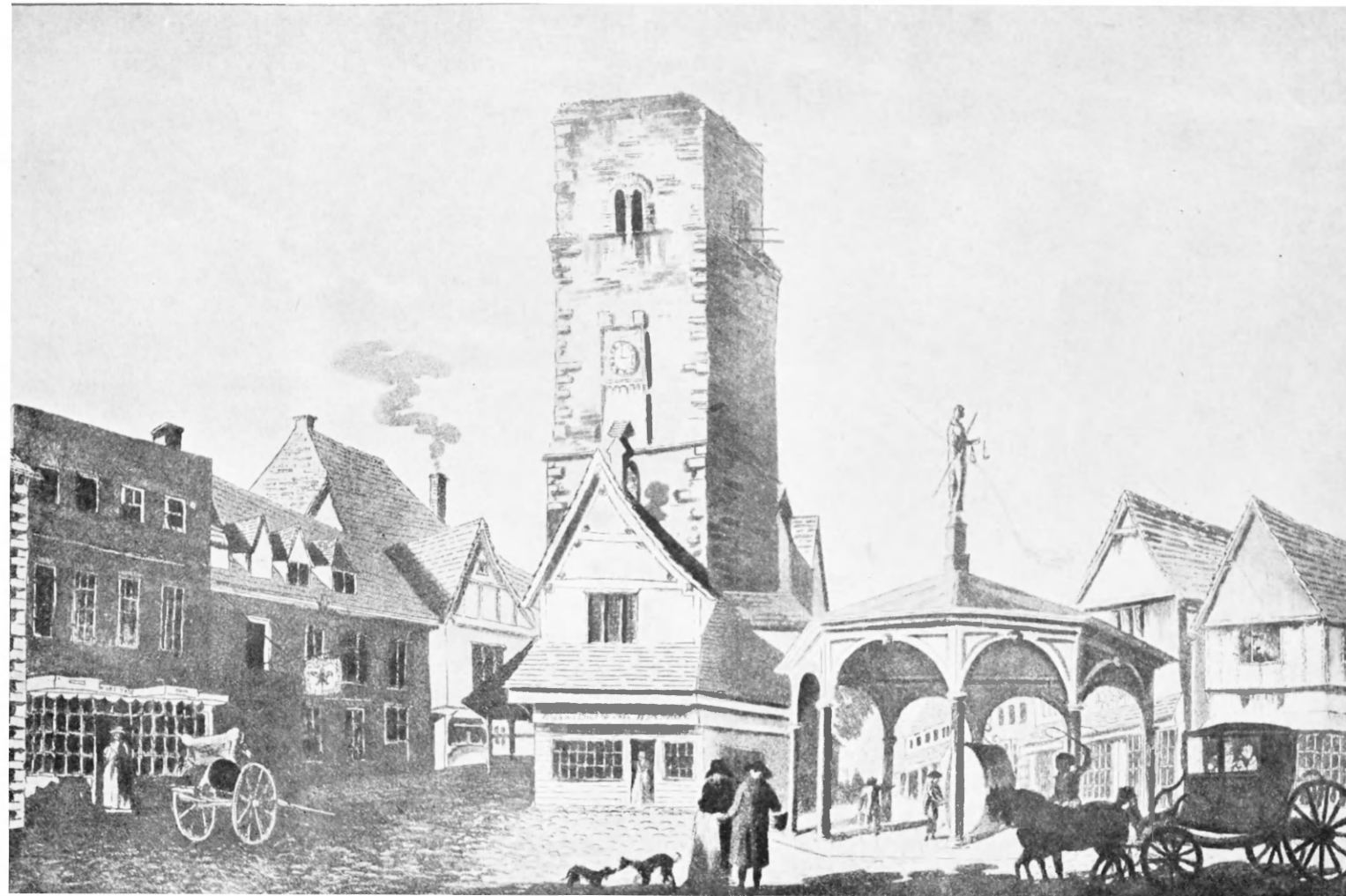
† "Herts Genealogist and Antiquary," Vol. I., 92.

§ Dr. Ridgway Lloyd's Notes.

‡ *Ibid.*

year's wages for keeping the clock and ringing the town bell." There is an interesting deed, dated 14th June, 1676, by which "the Mayor, etc., of St. Albans, demise to John Winstanley, cittizen and Painterstainer of London, all that their Messuage or Tenement with the Shopps, Shudds, Penthouses, roomthis, buildings, etc., called the Clockhouse . . . situate over against the late Crosse [Queen Eleanor's] in the Crosse Markett Place and adjoining to a messuage of the sd Mayor, etc., formerly called the 'Rose and Crowne' . . . on the north part (except and always reserved the Clocke and the Towne Bell now hanging and beinge within the Clocke house aforesaid), and all that part and roomes of the said Clocke house wherein the said Clocke now standeth and the said Towne Bell now hangeth with Libertie for the weights of the said Clocke to goe downe through the roomes of the said messuage soe farr as they have heretofore been accustomed to goe downe, together with the Staires and Staire Case which leadith up to the said Clocke and Bell—for a term of 21 years, at the annual rent of £5."* We here obtain a clue as to the kind of clock then in use here, and it is fair to assume that the lessee, John Winstanley, described as a "cittizen and Painterstainer of London," was a near relative of Henry Winstanley, the designer and builder (twenty years later) of the first Eddystone Lighthouse, 1696, and who, before he retired to amuse himself with curious mechanical inventions, was in business as a mercer in London. An examination of those early documents shows that the leases granted to the mediæval tenants of "le klokke-house" required them to regulate the clock, ring the "Angelus" (or Curfew) Bell morning and evening, and to toll the same in the event of fire or other serious casualty; but did not bind them to repair the fabric. Coming to more recent times, we find in the Court Book that in 1829 the Clock House had been then lately tenanted by Mr. George Washington Gibbs (an uncle of Mr. Alderman Richard Gibbs, J.P., of St. Albans), and that a small fish shop then stood on the east side and butchers' shambles on the west. In September, 1830, the lessee of the Clock House applied to the Court for permission to remove the watch-box at the corner of the

*"Herts Genealogist and Antiquary," Vol. I. 92.



The Market Cross and Conduit at St. Albans, Hertfordshire.
From the Etching by J. Schnebillie, 1787.

Clock House fronting the "Fleur-de-Lis" Yard, and to enclose the corner. In 1833 a complaint was made through the Sergeant-at-Mace that the Town Clock could not be distinctly heard, as the tenant had closed the windows of the Clock room with boards, whereupon the Court ordered him to remove the obstruction.

The earliest known representation of the Tower, and of the town of St. Albans, is undoubtedly the drawing at the head of one of the folios of the Charter of Charles II., which is preserved among the Corporation muniments. In this somewhat fanciful picture of the place as it then appeared we see the Clock Tower, the Abbey, the Churches of St. Peter and St. Stephen, while on the left is depicted, in its then integrity, the building that succeeded the Nunnery at Sopwell, viz., the mansion of Sir Richard Lee, now in ruins. The first serious attempt to portray the Clock House was made by Benjamin Green (drawing-master at Christ's Hospital, London), who, about 1790, produced some half-dozen etchings of buildings in St. Albans, including a soft-ground etching (in an oval border) of the Clock House and Market Cross; although not quite accurate in its proportions, it is a clever rendering of a very picturesque subject.* The next illustration in point of date was made by Jacob Schnebbilie, draughtsman to the Society of Antiquaries, to which office he was appointed by the then President, the Earl of Leicester, who, in his park near Hertford, accidentally saw him for the first time, while sketching. Schnebbilie, of Swiss parentage, was born in London in 1760, and in 1787-8 he drew and etched three views of the Abbey and one of the Market Cross, which were aquatinted by F. Jukes. After a brief and industrious career, Schnebbilie died in 1792, in the 32nd year of his age, having suffered from an illness occasioned by "too intense an application to professional engagements, which terminated in a total disability of body." In his view of "The Market Cross and Conduit at St. Albans" are represented not only the rugged old Tower, with the old house abutting on the south front, but also the "Fleur-de-Lis" Inn and a part of the old "Christopher" in French Row. Here, the windows of the Clock House certainly suggest the Saxon period, and the stone quoins at the

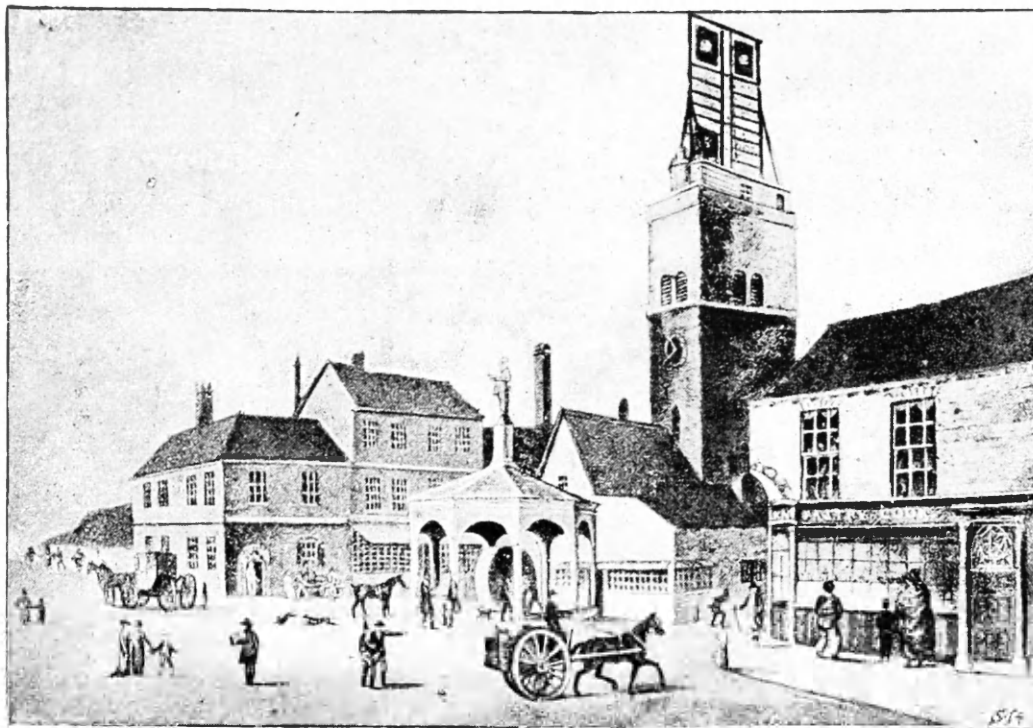
* A series of etchings was published by the Artist in 1795 as drawing copies.

angles of the Tower are similar to what is called "long and short work" of the same date; but, as we have seen, the building is of a much more recent construction. The Pridmore Collection of Drawings (in the possession of Baron Dimsdale) contains a representation of the Clock Tower as seen about 1803, and a few years subsequently that indefatigable artist, G. Shepherd, included among his illustrations for "The Beauties of England and Wales" (1805, etc.), a picturesque view in St. Albans, incorrectly described as "High Street," but which is really a view of the Market-place, looking south, and showing the Clock House, with the tower of the Abbey beyond. A striking feature of this print is the curious telegraphic apparatus which was erected by the Government in 1808, on the roof of the Clock House, together with a kind of shelter for the operator. The signalling was performed by means of large movable wooden discs, having in the centre a circular aperture, and these were placed in a lofty wooden frame, their positions indicating the nature of the message to be conveyed; it is wonderful with what rapidity this primitive form of telegraphic communication was effected (that is, during clear weather), for it is recorded that intelligence could be sent to Yarmouth, and an answer returned, in the short space of five minutes, the distance from point to point being about a hundred miles. The apparatus, which was maintained by the Admiralty, was removed in 1814, but the small room or shed remained some time longer. A clearer representation of the telegraphic apparatus is given in a large coloured print by W. Sutherland, 1812, showing the Clock House and its immediate surroundings, as viewed from the High Street, looking north-west; here we see the old "Great Red Lion," and the pastrycook's shop at the corner, where the tobacconist's is now. With respect to the telegraph, an interesting letter, signed "An Old Inhabitant," was published in the *St. Albans Times* about forty years ago, in which the writer said: "When George III. was King, and the French war was raging, it was of paramount importance that the Government should receive, and have the means of transmitting, intelligence with the greatest possible despatch. The electric wire was then unknown, so a system was adopted of signs and signals, which were hoisted in high positions

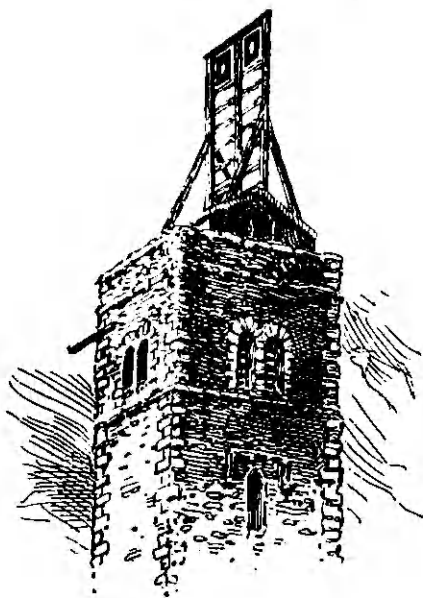
throughout England, known as telegraph stations. The Clock Tower at St. Albans was one of these, on the line from Dover to Liverpool. On the top of the Tower was built a small wooden room, about eight feet high; this was the observatory; still higher, on the roof of this, was an apparatus consisting of signal boards, flags, etc.; and in the wooden walls of this observatory, on all four sides, were sight-holes for telescopes and other instruments to enable the officer in charge to read and hoist communications to and from the next stations, near Hadley one way, and at Dunstable the other. Many an army has started *en route* to the coast, or to be shipped for a foreign country, by signals hoisted at the top of the old Clock Tower!" It seems that the telegraphic clerk (Bunker by name) was a cobbler, and "when rumour was so rife that the French were coming over in shoals in flat-bottomed boats to invade England, this learned cobbler, who could decipher the telegraphic enigmas, had no easy time of it, public excitement and anxiety keeping him constantly on the watch for information; and Bunker probably occasionally imposed on the credulity of the worthy inhabitants by 'tipping' the marvellous as well as their boots and shoes! However, there was at last a time of leisure for him, when the comforting intelligence was telegraphed that Bonaparte was confined at Elba. On his escape thence the telegraph was again used until he was re-captured and safely lodged at St. Helena." In 1816 there was published in a small topographical work a coloured aquatint of the Market Cross, showing the south front of the Clock House as seen from the High-street, looking east. It is, I believe, the only representation of the Tower from this point of view, and is interesting on that account. It was drawn, engraved, and published by J. Hassell, and the artist enables us to realise what High street then looked like, particularly at the north-west corner; in the distance, on the right, there is a glimpse of the old "Peahen." There has been recently added to the Lewis Evans Collection of Prints at the Museum a lithograph of the Clock House, by J. C. Oldmeadow, *circa* 1820, which, as it is the only copy I have seen, must be somewhat rare. The next print in chronological order is dated 1828, and was engraved from a drawing by James Burton, jun. Here we find

that not only had the semaphore been removed and an ugly chimney erected on the summit of the Tower, but the quaint Market Cross (formerly in front of the Clock House) had also been swept away. The Market Cross, sometimes alluded to as the "Market House," was ordered to be built in 1703, "and set upon the waste ground where the old Cross [that is, the Eleanor Cross] lately stood." The Plait Market was held here until 1804, and in 1810 the Market Cross, being considered dangerous to traffic, was ordered to be taken down, and railings put round the Town Pump, as shown in this engraving. The present Fountain, presented to the town by Mrs. Worley in 1874, indicates the site of the pump, as well as of the Market Cross and the Eleanor Cross. In the etching by L. S. Cranstone, of a later period (1849), the Clock House differs but little from Burton's print, and is specially noteworthy because it includes a representation of the old Market House, on the site of which the present Corn Exchange now stands.

In Shaw's "History of Verulam and St. Albans," 1815, the Clock House is described as consisting of "a high square tower, formerly embattled, constructed of flint and pebbles; in the interior is a stone staircase, at present in a very ruinous state. The lower part, with the addition of a lean-to attached to it, has of late years been occupied as a dwelling house." Professor Donaldson, when examining the building in 1861, found that the original construction of the Tower was of a most substantial nature. Owing to neglect, however, it suffered much decay, and has on more than one occasion been threatened with demolition. At a meeting of the St. Albans Town Council, held on January 31st, 1700, "it was resolved by eight votes to five that the Clock House should be pulled down and a new Market House built." This was about the time when the beautiful Eleanor Cross (or what remained of it) was carted away. Happily, the Clock House escaped destruction, and in 1702 it was resolved to repair the building and let it to the highest bidder. About a century later (1804) the Court decided to restore the Clock House at a cost of £38 9s. 6d., and to have a new clock put in, after which nothing seems to have been done in the shape of reparation for years. It was in 1848, by the way, that



The Clock House from High Street.
 From the Print by W. Sutherland, 1812.
(Block lent by the "Herts Standard" Printing Company).



**The Clock Tower with
 Semaphore.**
*(Block lent by the "Herts Standard"
 Printing Company).*



The Clock Tower from the Market Place.
 From a Drawing by F. G. Kitton.

the Clock House was first called the "Clock Tower," although many of the inhabitants continued to refer to it by the original name, probably owing to force of habit.

In 1852 the Tower was in such a state of dilapidation that a committee was appointed by the Town Council to report as to its condition. The unsightly shed on the summit was removed, and the committee's report was referred to Professor Donaldson, whose suggestions the Court decided to adopt. That they were not carried out, however, is proved by an entry in the Corporation Minutes four years later, stating that the Clock House was in a dangerous state, and in 1858 the dwelling-house at its base was demolished, thus causing the dilapidation of the Tower itself to be more apparent. The pulling down of the dwelling-house (by which an ancient and picturesque landmark disappeared) excited great interest among the inhabitants of the town. For many years this tenement bore the sign of the Elephant and Castle, and it is said that one of its occupiers (surviving in 1885) was employed, when a boy, to travel between Gorhambury House and the St. Albans Post-office with letters, which he usually carried riding on the back of a large dog.* A newspaper account of the demolition of the old house stated that "the base of the Tower, being now exposed to view, shows its original height, and gives quite an altered, and, we may say, improved, appearance to the centre of the town. The space thus thrown open in the front, and at each side, shows it to great advantage." Professor Donaldson was again requested to inspect the Clock House, and he accordingly sent in a second report. The consent of the Treasury having been obtained, a committee was appointed to collect subscriptions for the restoration, the Corporation agreeing to undertake the work. Professor Donaldson's investigations revealed the serious insecurity of the "Gabriel" bell, disintegration of the flint work of the walls, and failure in the foundations. In submitting his plans and drawings to the Council, he observed that he had not shocked their feelings by introducing any new idea in the proposed restoration, but had confined himself strictly to the originality of the ancient architecture of the edifice. He arrived at the conclusion that

* *Hertfordshire Illustrated Review*, Feb. 1893.

formerly the Tower had a turret for access to the lead flat at the top, and he therefore introduced one in his design analagous to those he found at the east end of the Abbey. "If the works are carried out as suggested," he said, "the noble Tower would endure for ages, as a memorial of the taste and skill of past ages, and of the enlightened public spirit of the present times."

Shortly afterwards a new proposal was submitted for consideration by the Council—a scheme for the repair of the Clock House and for the conversion of the lower part thereof into one or more shops. The plans for erecting shops on the vacant ground previously occupied by the Elizabethan tenement were apparently approved by the Council, who ordered them to be exhibited for a week for the information of the public. At the next Council meeting plans were produced by a Luton man, recommending the erection of butchers' shambles round the Clock Tower instead of shops, and this scheme was regarded by some Councillors as likely to prove a good investment; whereupon Councillor Harris pointed out that, if the object of the Corporation was to make money, he should advocate the pulling down of the Clock Tower altogether, but if the building were looked upon as an object of antiquity which should be preserved, then it ought not to be spoiled by shambles. Mr. Thomas Hill, a St. Albans architect, protested against the scheme for erecting shops, which would effectually preclude the chance of the effective restoration of the Tower by subscription. Writing in a non-official capacity as Hon. Sec. of the St. Albans Architectural and Archæological Society and of the 3rd Herts Rifle Volunteers, Mr. Hill proposed, with the conditional sanction of both, that the subscription list for the restoration should be handed to the Society, and that the Volunteers should occupy the ground floor at an annual rent, "by which arrangement the exterior of the Tower would not be disfigured." A member of the Council thought there was no possibility of restoring the building, to which he referred as "our great, unsightly incubus," and as "a disgrace to the Corporation and the town." Even if there were a chance of restoring it, he asked, "what benefit would it be to the town? It would not bring anything to the Borough fund." He therefore

proposed that the shops should be erected; his resolution was adopted, and the contract signed for carrying out the work. The Mayor expressed the opinion that the Tower had become a public nuisance, and humorously suggested that if it were used as an armoury for the Rifle Corps, they should "stick up a rifleman at the top, and thus give it a military appearance!"

When the decision of the Council was made known, both the Press and the public were warmly opposed to it, and at a Council Meeting held on June 5th, 1861, Mr. Thomas Ward Blagg (the Town Clerk) read a memorial, signed by the Earl of Verulam and eighty-seven inhabitants (including the principal gentry and tradespeople) praying the Council to rescind their resolution, and to take proper steps for the restoration of the Tower. At a Committee Meeting of the St. Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archæological Society, it was proposed by the Earl of Verulam, seconded by Mr. Solly, and carried unanimously:—"That should the Restoration, in whole or in part, of the Clock Tower be taken under consideration by the Town Council, the Executive Committee of the Society will contribute £30 towards the actual expenses of restoration, provided the plans shall meet with their approval." This offer was announced at the Council Meeting, whereupon a prominent member of the Council said he thought it very likely the St. Albans Archæological Society would not approve of the plans. After some discussion it was decided to rescind the order to erect shops, and a committee from the Council was appointed to obtain subscriptions for the restoration. At this juncture a letter appeared in the *St. Albans Times* on the subject of the Tower, which, by reason of the fact that it was written by a notable man residing in St. Albans at that time, is well worthy of quotation. The letter bore the signature of Peter Cunningham, son of Allan Cunningham, the eminent poet, novelist, and miscellaneous writer, and who was himself the author and editor of several well-known works, and an antiquary. It reads thus:—

"Sir,—The Clock Tower of your disfranchised Borough is full of historical and architectural associations. England has not elsewhere anything to show of the kind.

The Clock Tower of St. Albans does not belong to St. Albans only—it belongs to a people, it is National; it belongs to those who utter

‘Words which wise Bacon and brave Raleigh spake.’

“Its state at present is not even outwardly clean; inwardly, it is all but useless. The masonry of the Tower is strong enough to outlive many mayoralties, and, if handled with skill and skilled labour, may not only be restored to St. Albans but to all England. Let it not be said of St. Albans that, having destroyed its Queen Eleanor Cross—that, having concurred in the destruction of the house of ‘The Great Lord Chancellor of Human Nature’ (as Bishop Warburton called Lord Bacon), it will now endure a third demolition—and allow the Clock Tower of so far-famed a Borough as St. Albans to share the fate of its Eleanor Cross. The High Court of Parliament (whether properly or not is of no moment) has destroyed some of the many charms of St. Albans. Let not St. Albans lose all its associations; and by so doing drive visitors away. I am ready to find an accomplished architect who will restore your Clock Tower to what it was, without drawing on the corruption of your Borough—but by the aid given to the Corporation through the hands of its active and intelligent mayor.—I am Sir, your obedient servant, PETER CUNNINGHAM.”

St. Albans, 18th June, 1861.

The Council now decided to confer with Professor Donaldson on the subject of the cost of restoring the Tower, then fortunately saved from the fate which threatened it. In the meantime, a laudable attempt was made to raise a fund locally, but subscriptions did not flow in very rapidly, probably because the inhabitants had just defrayed the cost of a new organ for the Abbey, which was opened about this time.

In 1863, permission was given to the British and Irish Magnetic Telegraph Company to carry their wires over the houses in the town, instead of underground, conditionally that a telegraph-station was still maintained at St. Albans; whereupon the lower part of the Clock Tower was leased to the Company for that purpose. In the same year attention was again directed to the sad condition of the Tower, and it was again seriously

proposed to demolish it altogether. In a letter to the *St. Albans Times* a Town Councillor said: "The majority of the Council were influenced by several members connected with the Archæological Society, who held out hopes that if the valuable part of the property were destroyed, the Society would not take the sacred and venerable Tower under their protection and restore it to its pristine beauty (if it ever had any). For five years it has stood in its present dilapidated state, and during that time several sums of money have been expended upon it to no purpose, but to make it more ugly in its appearance. Surely it is but right to expect that the Archæological Society will carry out the restoration of the building and make it look decent, when it is considered the public have been deprived of an annual income to favour their wishes and views." On June 4th, 1864, at a meeting of the committee appointed by the Council to report on the matter, it was decided "that Mr. Gilbert Scott be requested to make a report on the state of the Clock Tower, the probable expense of its restoration," and its adaptation to some useful purpose," though why Professor Donaldson's advice was not acted upon is not clear. Mr. (afterwards Sir) Gilbert Scott considered that the Tower was "quite within the reach of restoration," and well worthy of careful treatment: he described it as a very curious structure, and believed it to be unique in this country.* If restored as he proposed, the town (said Mr. Scott) would possess a very handsome Tower, recalling a feature in its past history which ought by no means to be lost. He suggested that it should be put to a three-fold use—as a Clock Tower (with chimes added), a belfry, and an armoury for Volunteers. He estimated the expense of restoration at £700 (the actual cost was nearly £1,000), of which £400 had already been subscribed, including the sum of £30 promised by the St. Albans Archæological Society in aid of the scheme.

In his Report, Mr. Scott gave the following interesting particulars concerning the Tower. "The lower storey

* Other examples had existed in the County, for Mr. Thomas North, F.S.A., in "Church Bells of Hertfordshire," speaks of a Clock Tower at Hoddesden, rebuilt about 1730, and of another at Layston, dating from 1749, while Dr. Ridgway Lloyd called attention to the existence of similar structures at Newton Abbot and at Keswick.

has evidently been built for a shop, having two fronts with stone benches, for the display of goods; the one on the south, the other on the east. One storey over the shop seems to have been in the same occupation with it, and was approached by a separate stair, having also a guardrobe or necessary of its own. It is probable also that the use of one or more of the upper storeys may have been allowed to the same person, should he have the charge of the bells, though provision is made by a distinct staircase and guardrobe for their possible occupation by another party. . . . The great object to be aimed at is to avoid over-restoration, and to retain, as much as may be, the character of the ancient structure. This is rendered somewhat difficult by the great extent to which decay and mutilation have gone, which necessitate the renewal of the stone dressings. I believe, however, that the original design of them may in nearly all cases be recovered. It should be the object to strengthen the structure wherever it is cracked or become weakened; to restore its architectural features, retaining all ancient portions which can possibly be retained, and reproducing exactly those which are perished. I would not recommend the use of the lower storey as a shop, as its difference for modern usage would cause constant desires for alterations, which would be most injurious to its antiquated value.—GEO. GILBERT SCOTT."

This Report proving satisfactory, and a considerable portion of the required sum having been obtained, the restoration was begun, under the personal superintendence of Mr. Hill (the architect previously referred to), and completed during the following year, 1866. The original plan was not wholly adhered to, as, instead of a spire in the centre, a capped turret, or spirelet, carrying a vane, was erected at the north-west corner. Nearly all the external stone dressings were renewed and the flints raked out and made fast with cement; battlements were added to the Tower, it having been formerly embattled; eight new windows, of the style of the 15th century, were inserted, having trefoil heads and square labels; a stone cornice was added, with four gargoyles at the corners, and ornamented with pateræ, as also the battlements and turret; the stone staircases were restored, and the roof

of the Tower entirely renewed. A new clock, with an illuminated dial, was also placed in the Tower. (Mr. John Harris, C.E., asserts that a sundial formerly existed on the front of the Tower, where the clock-face is now). During the process of restoration, the workmen discovered on the northern side a small window, which had been blocked up; this was, of course, reinstated. What Sir Gilbert Scott feared, viz., over-restoration, is certainly apparent in the present aspect of the Clock Tower; its great antiquity seems to have been almost entirely obliterated, externally at least, by the amount of reparation which became absolutely essential in order to preserve the structure. Owing to its sadly mutilated condition, such a thorough restoration was doubtless justified, and the eminent architect passed on all that he found, and introduced what he believed must have been something like the features of the original building. Thus, the natural consequence of so many years of neglect should act as a warning to those who have the custody of our ancient monuments, and I venture to suggest that the Civic authorities (its present custodian) should order a periodical inspection of the structure. At the present time considerable decay is going on in the external stone work, while internally, in the upper storeys, there are large fissures in the walls which seems to threaten the safety of the Tower. A member of the Council has already called attention to this matter, and it has been decided to carry out necessary repairs. A lightning-conductor should also be fixed to the Tower, as a precautionary measure.

I have ascertained from actual measurement that the height of the south front of the Clock Tower to the top of the parapet is 77 feet; that the spirelet at the north-west angle is about 14 feet above the roof; and that the width at the base, externally, is 20ft. 6in. by 18 feet, which proves that the building is not square in section, the eastern and western sides being broader than those facing north and south. The Tower contains five rooms superimposed, viz., the ground floor, now a harness-maker's shop; the first storey, used as a store-room for harness, etc.; the second storey, which is the Clock Room; the third storey, called the Dial Room, from the fact that the clock-dial is placed there; and the upper

compartment, where the Bells are suspended. There are two stone staircases, one in the north-east angle, leading from the harness-maker's to the front storey, and the other in the north-west angle, whence the upper rooms are reached; the latter is in communication with each room except that on the ground floor. There are two stone fireplaces of the Jacobean period, one in the clock-room and the other in the shop. The clock, which cost £200 in 1866, is wound up every fourth day, and is automatically (but not brilliantly) illuminated at night by gas jets.

The history of the Clock Tower would be incomplete without some reference to its two Bells, one of which possesses unusual interest. The smaller, known as the Market Bell, was cast by Richard Phelps (who also cast the eight larger bells of the peal of twelve at St. Peter's Church, close by); an inscription round the waist reads: "Thomas Robins, Mayor of St. Albans, 1729." Its diameter is $14\frac{3}{4}$ inches; weight (without clapper), 2 qrs. $14\frac{1}{2}$ lbs.; note, D3 in alto. It is said that this Bell was intended not only for market purposes, but as an alarm-bell for fires; it formerly hung in the old Market House, until that building was demolished in 1855 (to make room for the present Corn Exchange), and was placed in its present position when the Tower was restored, to be used as a fire-bell should occasion arise; but there seems to be no remembrance of its ever being so utilised. In the Corporation Records, under date 1702, the following mention is made of an earlier bell: "Ordered that the Market Bell should ring at ten o'clock every market day, and that no corn should be sold before that hour." Thomas North, F.S.A., in his work on "English Bells and Bell Lore," 1888, says that the custom of ringing a market-bell is of ancient date, and was formerly rung in many towns to give notice when selling should commence, so providing against forestalling. A market-bell hung in the church steeple at Watford in 1552, and at Sleaford, in Lincolnshire (says Mr. North), a small bell hanging in the church spire is known as the butter-bell, which (according to tradition) was formerly rung to announce to the inhabitants that the sale of butter was about to commence, and so enable them to secure what they required before purchasers from



The Clock Tower, St. Albans.
From a Drawing by F. G. Kitton.

a distance were allowed to buy. It is the larger of the two bells in the Clock Tower, however, which calls for special mention. It is familiarly known as "Gabriel," from the fact that it was appropriately dedicated to the Archangel Gabriel (the Angel of the Annunciation), as the following rhyming inscription testifies :—

Missi De Celis
Habeo Nomen Gabrielis.

("I have the name of Gabriel, sent from Heaven"). Newcome, in his "History of St. Albans Abbey," states that "Roger de Norton (24th Abbot, 1260-1291) caused a very large and deep-sounding bell to be made and hung up, to be struck every night at the time of curfew." This Bell probably hung in the oak lantern which formerly existed on the roof of the Abbey Tower, and Mr. Thomas North and others consider that it was actually the "Gabriel" bell. Mr. John Harris, C.E., in his paper read before the British Archæological Association in 1870, states that the date of the Bell is variously given as 1070, 1077, and 1260, which dates (he says) must be wrong, as is evident from the lettering of the inscription. He is of opinion that the Bell was cast about 1335, and was provided by Michael de Mentmore, the 29th Abbot of the Monastery, who dedicated it and other two bells of the Abbey (called "Amphibal" and "Alban" respectively), which were recast by him, and he caused "Amphibal" and the new bell, "Gabriel," to be rung at curfew. Mr. Harris is not prepared to say how "Gabriel" became the property of the Corporation; but I offer the suggestion that when the oak lantern surmounting the Abbey tower was demolished in the 15th century, the Curfew Bell (assuming that it hung there) was transferred to the town belfry. The diameter of "Gabriel" is 3 ft. 10½ inches, its weight about one ton, and its note F natural. It is described by Mr. North as a most beautiful casting; the lettering of the inscription is very large and handsome, examples of it being rare, and the initial cross rarer still (having at the terminals a conventionalised leaf), the only other instance at present known being on a bell at Gloucester Cathedral; the cross at the end of the inscription has a well-defined fleur-de-lis at each

terminal, and is identical with that at the end of the inscription on the sixth bell in All Saints' Church, Sudbury, Suffolk; Mr. C. H. Ashdown therefore conjectures that, as this church belonged to the Abbots of St. Albans, the All Saints' bell was made in that town.* The oak framing for the Bells in the Clock Tower was renewed during the restoration of 1865-6, and it is almost certain that the bearing-brasses and bolts of "Gabriel" are contemporary with the bell itself.

Not every resident in St. Albans is acquainted with the interesting fact that it is the sonorous voice of "Gabriel" which proclaims the hour from the Clock Tower. That the Bell was used in early days for ringing the Curfew is conclusively proved by a lease (dated 1490) to John Newberry and others, who covenanted to ring the Curfew Bell between eight and nine o'clock in the evening and at four o'clock in the morning, the latter hour being the time when apprentices commenced their daily labours! In a paper on "Campanology," read before the St. Albans Archæological Society by Dr. Ridgway Lloyd in 1870, it is stated that what is called the "Curfew" is in reality the "Evening Angelus," and the Angelus bell was usually dedicated either to the Blessed Virgin Mary or to St. Gabriel. Few of those who hear a bell rung morning and evening in many old churches know that they are listening to the Angelus, the custom having thus prevailed in many instances almost uninterruptedly for upwards of 400 years. The "Evening Angelus," or Curfew Bell is still rung at Hitchin and Baldock, in Herts, and the pleasing custom prevails in Norwich, Exeter, and many other places in England. The Clock Tower Curfew was rung nightly at eight o'clock until May, 1863, when a petition, signed by 26 residents in the vicinity was sent to the Corporation asking that it should be discontinued, as they regarded it as a nuisance, and an order was given to that effect. An attempt was subsequently made to revive the practice of ringing the Curfew Bell every evening, as a summons to the tradesmen of the town to close their shops for the day, but, objections being raised by persons living near the Tower, this desire to renew a picturesque English custom, which dates from Norman times, was not realized.

* "St. Albans, Historical and Picturesque," 1893.

A similar effort recently made in Buckingham proved more successful, where now, as of old,

“The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day.”

Except when the hours are proclaimed, “Gabriel’s” deep, musical note is seldom heard. On two memorable occasions, in January 1901, the old Curfew Bell “gave voice to the sadness of the people,” first, when the death of our late Queen, Victoria, was announced to her sorrow-stricken people, and again as the funeral *cortège* passed through London, when British subjects in every part of the civilised world gave expression to their grief at the loss of a beloved monarch.

* * * * *

In the brief discussion which followed the reading of my paper, Mr. W. Page, F.S.A., said there was some evidence of the existence at St. Albans, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, of the system of the Commune such as had existed in London, and had been so ably treated of by Dr. Stubbs (late Bishop of Oxford) and Mr. J. Horace Round, and which prevailed also in French towns. The belfry (he observed) was that which the members of the French Commune looked to as the symbol and pledge of their independence, so that it is perhaps fair to assume that the Clock Tower in St. Albans, which he believed to be practically unique, was a relic of the Commune which existed there.
