



Remains of the abbey cloister can be seen on the south wall of the abbey church. Along with the rest of the abbey buildings – with the exception of the church itself, the gatehouse and the stables – the cloister was demolished following the dissolution in 1539.

PHOTOGRAPH: CARNEGIE

astronomical clock which he was building in the abbey church, which many monks disliked because of the money and time that Richard spent on it.⁵⁹ Eventually, in 1333, the pope himself ordered a thorough investigation into the affairs at the abbey, and Richard and his successor Michael de Mentmore (1336–49) were able to restore some control. During the difficult abbacies of the early fourteenth century, the monks also found themselves in bitter conflict with their neighbours in both countryside and town.

While the abbey was gaining in size, and in economic and cultural strength, the fortunes of the post-conquest town are rather harder to trace. The fortunes of the small urban settlement were clearly bound up with those of the abbey: the increasing numbers of pilgrims to the shrines of SS Alban and Amphibalus must have brought money to St Albans.⁶⁰ The reasons for the planned layout of the town by the Saxon abbots included the provision of local services to visitors, the supply of goods to the monks, and the economic improvement of the immediate vicinity of the abbey. It has recently been suggested that the original Saxon town, or at least its market, was actually located within the precinct of the abbey itself: Rosalind Niblett and Isobel Thompson, in their survey of St Albans archaeology, have shown that there is no evidence of any settlement around the current market place before the twelfth century.⁶¹ Niblett and Thompson suggest that the urban settlement recorded in Domesday Book was centred on the abbey orchard, south of the church, and may have been moved northwards during or after the extensive rebuilding work of Paul de Caen. The markets of two other monastic towns, Peterborough and Bury St Edmunds, are known to have been relocated by their landlords in the twelfth century,⁶² and this may also have been the case at St Albans. Other historians, such as T. R. Slater, have suggested an earlier, pre-conquest layout of the main

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This image of St Alban dates from the early fifteenth century, and appeared in an edition of the very popular *Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, a thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives. Alban is pictured in a cloak: this is likely to represent the cloak that, in many accounts of his martyrdom, he exchanged with St Amphibalus. The invention of St Amphibalus was the result of a mistranslation of the Latin word for 'cloak' by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

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Box 1: The martyrdom of St Alban

ST ALBAN is believed to have been the first Christian martyr, or the 'protomartyr', in Britain. The traditional account of the martyrdom gives the location as the hill outside the Roman city of Verulamium, which could coincide with the site of the present abbey church. The first known written reference to Alban refers to AD 429, when St Germanus, bishop of Auxerre, accompanied by bishop Lupus of Troyes, visited Britain in an attempt to suppress the heresy of Pelagianism – named after a British monk, Pelagius, who spread the doctrine of free will and denied the transmission of original sin. Having defeated the heresy, according to Germanus's biographer Constantius of Lyons, writing in the third quarter

of the fifth century, 'the priests went to the tomb of the blessed martyr Alban to give thanks through him to God'; St Germanus also took some of the relics of St Alban.¹ Constantius gave no details of the circumstances of the martyrdom: the first account comes from the sixth-century historian Gildas, who dated it to the persecution of Christians under 'the tyrant Diocletian' (AD 284–305). During this time, 'the churches throughout the whole world were overthrown, all the copies of the Holy Scripture which could be found burned in the streets, and the chosen

¹ Quoted in Martin Biddle, 'Alban, d. c.303', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

pastors of God's flock butchered, together with their innocent sheep'.¹ In Britain, the first of these was 'Alban of Verulam', who

for charity's sake saved another confessor who was pursued by his persecutors, and was on the point of being seized, by hiding him in his house, and then by changing clothes with him, imitating in this the example of Christ, who laid down his life for his sheep, and exposing himself in the other's clothes to be pursued in his stead.²

According to Gildas, between his confession and death, Alban

was honoured with the performance of wonderful miracles ... the martyr, with a thousand others, opened a path across the noble river Thames, whose waters stood abrupt like precipices on either side; and seeing this, the first of his executors [*sic*] was stricken with awe, and from a wolf became a lamb; so that he thirsted for martyrdom, and boldly underwent that for which he thirsted.³

By the time the Venerable Bede wrote his history of the English church in AD 731, more details had been added to the story; it appears that Bede (and maybe also Gildas) was drawing on an account, or 'passion' of St Alban that may have been written by Germanus himself.⁴ Bede certainly knew an account written by the early seventh-century bishop of Poitiers, Venantius Fortunatus. In Bede's story of the martyrdom, also dated to the time of Diocletian, Alban was a 'pagan', in the city of Verulamium, who 'gave

entertainment' to a Christian priest who was fleeing persecution.⁵ Alban 'began to imitate the example of faith and piety which was set before him, and ... cast off the darkness of idolatry, and became a Christian in all sincerity of heart'. When the priest's place of concealment was discovered, soldiers were sent to Alban's house, whereupon Alban 'immediately presented himself to the soldiers, instead of his guest and master, in the habit or long coat which he wore, and was led bound before the judge'. Alban told the judge that he was now a Christian, and refused to offer sacrifices to the pagan gods when ordered to do so. He was then tortured in an attempt to make him recant, which he would not; and his execution was therefore ordered. 'Being led to execution, he came to a river, which, with a most rapid course, ran between the wall of the town and the arena where he was to be executed' – Gildas had identified this as the Thames, but if the location of the martyrdom was Verulamium, it must have been the Ver, which runs between the Roman city and the hill on which the abbey church stands. The bridge over the river was blocked by a 'multitude' of men and women, 'who were doubtless assembled by Divine instinct':

St Alban, therefore, urged by an ardent and devout wish to arrive quickly at martyrdom, drew near to the stream, and on lifting up his eyes to heaven, the channel was immediately dried up, and he perceived that the water had departed and made way for him to pass. Among the rest, the executioner, who was to have put him to death, observed this, and moved by Divine inspiration hastened to meet him at the place of execution, and casting down the sword which he had carried ready drawn, fell at his feet, praying that he might rather suffer with the martyr, whom

⁵ The account below is drawn from Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (London: J.M. Dent, 1910), book I, chapter 7.

he was ordered to execute or, if possible, instead of him.¹

Alban and the 'multitude' then ascended the hill on the other side of the river, a distance, according to Bede, of some 500 paces; at the top, Alban prayed for God to send him water, and a spring duly appeared. When Alban – together with the executioner who had refused to perform his duties – was beheaded, 'he who gave the wicked stroke, was not permitted to rejoice over the deceased; for his eyes dropped upon the ground together with the blessed martyr's head'. Having witnessed the miracles of St Alban, the judge who had condemned him ordered the persecution of Christians to be ended. More than four centuries later, according to Bede, at the site of the martyrdom 'there ceases not to this day the cure of sick persons, and the frequent working of wonders'.

The dating of Alban's martyrdom has been disputed by scholars, some arguing that the early third century was the most likely date, during the time of the emperor Severus (AD 193–211), and others in the mid-third century.² As Niblett explains, 'at present there is no consensus as to the date of Alban's martyrdom, other than that it must have occurred sometime in the third or fourth centuries'.³ Martin Biddle, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, gives the date as c.303.⁴ It appears that a cemetery church existed in the late Roman period, and that this may have marked either the site of Alban's martyrdom, or the place of his burial, or both; this stood on the later site of the Saxon abbey. It is known, as mentioned above, that St Germanus visited the tomb of St Alban in 429: according to Constantius, Germanus

tore up a lump of earth from the actual spot where the martyr's blood had flowed.

¹ Ibid.

² Biddle, 'Alban, d. c.303'.

³ Niblett, *Verulamium*, p. 138.

⁴ Biddle, 'Alban, d. c.303'.

This desecration was justified, since the stain of the blood could still be seen. This was a great sign shown clearly to all men, of how the martyr's blood had reddened the earth as his persecutor grew pale.⁵

There is, as Biddle and others have shown, a strong argument that a continuous or almost continuous Christian presence existed on or near the site of Alban's burial, and that the origins of the Saxon monastery of St Albans lay in this community.⁶

During the medieval period, encouraged by the monks of St Albans abbey, the story of St Alban was embellished, the site promoted as a place of pilgrimage, and the relics of the saint 'invented' and dispersed. Owing to a mistranslation by Geoffrey of Monmouth, the historian and bishop of St Asaph, writing in the twelfth century, the priest whom Alban sheltered was given the name Amphibalus, and a cult was soon established around him by the monks of St Albans, who 'discovered' his relics at Redbourn in the twelfth century.⁷ Matthew Paris, the most influential of the chroniclers of the medieval abbey of St Albans (see box 1), wrote an account of Alban and Amphibalus, and depicted both saints carrying a distinctive coptic cross; he also discovered, or acquired, a cross of the same shape to add to the relics at St Albans.⁸ According to Paris, the relics of St Alban, or at least some of them, were stolen during a Danish raid in the ninth or tenth century, and removed to Odense. Two monks from St Albans then claimed to have stolen the relics back from Odense; the relics were then sent by abbot Aelfric to Ely for protection. Later, the monks of Ely sent some

⁵ Quoted in Niblett, *Verulamium*, p. 138.

⁶ Biddle, 'Alban and the Anglo-Saxon Church'; see below, pp. 000–00.

⁷ See below, pp. 000–00; Geoffrey of Monmouth, *British History*, book V, chapter 5, in Giles, *Six Old English Chronicles*.

⁸ Birthe Kjolbye-Biddle, 'The Alban Cross', in Henig, *Alban and St Albans*, 85–110.



other bones back to St Albans, and kept the relics; however, the abbot of St Albans then declared that the relics originally sent to Ely had not been genuine. Eventually, Pope Adrian IV – Nicholas Breakspear, who as a local man was likely to be supportive of the claims of the abbey of St Albans – ruled that the relics at St Albans were the genuine ones. As one commentator has remarked, ‘as the bones in question were unlikely to have been those of [St Alban] in the first place, probably neither St Albans nor Ely nor Odense ever had the gruesome relics that each laid passionate claim to’.¹ Some more relics of the protomartyr, perhaps taken by St Germanus in 429, apparently found their way to the church of St Pantaleon in Cologne.² In June 2002 a group from St Pantaleon presented a shoulder bone from

¹ Brian J. Bailey, *Portrait of Hertfordshire* (London: Robert Hale, 1978), pp. 83–4.

² Biddle, ‘Alban, d. c.303’.

ABOVE

The thirteenth-century monk of St Albans, Matthew Paris, described and illustrated the martyrdom of St Alban in the mid-thirteenth century. This illustration shows Alban being beheaded with a sword, at which point the executioner’s eyes fell out. Alban died holding his distinctive cross, which was then taken, dripping with blood, by another Christian. Another picture in Paris’s chronicle shows St Amphibalus dying with the cross in his hand.

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among the relics held there to the cathedral at St Albans; this bone was then placed in the shrine of St Alban, which had recently been restored. On this occasion the dean of St Albans explained: ‘Whether this relic is one of the bones of St Alban can never be known, but there is a distinct possibility that it is.’³

³ *St Albans and Harpenden Review*, 3 July 2002, p. 5.

streets,⁶³ but there is little archaeological evidence of settlement beyond the abbey precinct before the twelfth century.

By the mid-twelfth century, the centre of gravity of the urban settlement had moved to the triangular market place and Chequer Street. The first houses and shops, including those on Chequer Street, were timber-framed, and used Roman tiles from the ruins of Verulamium.⁶⁴ Several buildings had

A modern reconstruction, in St Albans cathedral, of the astronomical clock constructed by abbot Richard de Wallingford in the fourteenth century. The clock struck the hours and showed the positions of the stars that could be seen from St Albans. The time spent by abbot Richard on the clock was a source of concern to many of the monks in the abbey.

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