

## Day 3

### Thursday afternoon: St Alban's Cathedral

We arrived in St Alban's and were dropped off at the bottom of the road. We had free time which allowed us to have a look around the area and find our lunch. There were several areas around St Alban's that allowed for picnic lunches and also a good range of places to eat indoors.



There was an area behind/ to the side with memorials to the war.



The two benches were interesting designs but more unique was the Verdun Tree.



The tree was grown from a conker which came from one of the last trees left standing after the Battle of Verdun in WWI. The Germans attacked the fortress of Verdun in February 1916 in an attempt to destroy the French Army. The battle lasted for 303 days. In the July of that year the British launched the Battle of the Somme, one objective being to relieve pressure on the French by forcing Germany to move troops from Verdun. On 19th December the battle ended, the Germans had been pushed back to their original positions, but the losses were around 300,000 dead and 400,000 wounded. The French remember Verdun as the British remember the Somme with the battles symbolising the horrors of war. HMS Verdun brought the Unknown Warrior back from France in November 1920. The Verdun tree was planted in St Alban's in 1976 to mark the 60th anniversary of the battle, an appropriate choice as the starch from conkers is an essential component of cordite, and almost smokeless explosive.

We then all met inside the cathedral to get into two groups for our escorted tour.





Little is known of the early churches built over Alban's grave. The Shrine of St Alban was the reason for the Abbey's foundation and the town that grew up, and it is said that King Offa of Mercia founded a monastery here in 793. After the Norman invasion of 1066, William the Conqueror appointed Paul of Caen as the first Norman abbot and commissioned a new church. He started with the Tower, which still stands today. This Norman church was built from bricks and tiles, saved from the ruins of Roman Verulamium and was completed in 1115. The only English pope, Adrian IV, was born locally and granted special privileges to the Abbey, enhancing its reputation and power. In 1213 St Albans Abbey was the meeting place for a group of churchmen and nobles. Their discussions led to Magna Carta which was reluctantly sealed by the king at Runnymede in 1215. St Albans Abbey was closed in December 1539 and most of the buildings were destroyed. The shrines of St Alban and St Amphibalus were demolished and Alban's relics disappeared. In 1553, the people of St Albans bought the church for their own use. However, the upkeep was expensive and by 1832, the Abbey was in a sorry state. Wealthy Victorian benefactors paid for the building to be repaired. This included remodelling the West End, removing medieval features and replacing the statues in the High Altar Screen. In 1877 what had previously been a local parish church became a cathedral and the seat of the Bishop of St Albans.



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An early original door and some fascinating woodwork.

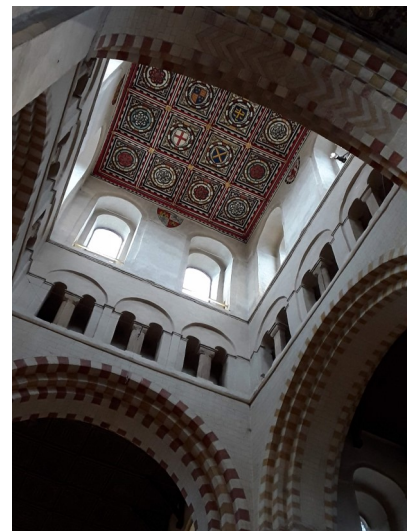




Much of the current layout and proportions of the structure date from the first Norman abbot, Paul of Caen (1077–1093). The tower was a particular triumph — it is the only 11th-century great crossing tower still standing in England. The monastic abbey was completed in 1089 but not consecrated until Holy Innocents' Day (28 December), 1115. In the current structure the original Norman arches survive principally under the central tower and on the north side of the nave. The arches in the rest of the building are Gothic, following medieval rebuilding and extensions, and Victorian era restoration.



There were some exquisite ceilings.



From 1872 to 1877 the restored floors were re-tiled in matching stone and copies of old tile designs. George Gilbert Scott was working on the nave roof, vaulting and west

bay when he died on 27 March 1878. His plans were partially completed by his son, John Oldrid Scott, but the remaining work fell into the hands of Edmund Beckett, 1st Baron Grimthorpe, whose efforts have attracted much controversy — Nikolaus Pevsner calling him a "pompous, righteous bully." However, he donated much of the immense sum of £130,000 the work cost so he wasn't all bad!





Late 20th-century work includes the restoration of Alban's shrine, with a new embroidered canopy.



The left hand photo is from a website showing what it did look like and the right hand photo is what it looks like now.



In 2015 seven new painted stone statues by Rory Young were installed in the medieval niches in the nave screen. This was a rare occurrence as the last painted figures placed in a church screen were put there before the Reformation and the English civil war.

The shrine of St Amphibalus was restored between 2019 and 2021, funded by a grant and the contribution of over a thousand donors. Due to be unveiled in 2020, work was delayed due to the Covid pandemic, and a new figure wearing a face mask was added to commemorate this.



The Wallingford Screen c 1480 has Victorian replacement statues as the originals were destroyed during the Dissolution. St Alban and St Amphibalus stand on either side of the altar.



The story of Alban is a remarkable one. It not only takes us back to the beginning of the Christian faith in Britain and to a time when religious freedom was forbidden, but it is also an astonishing account of standing up for what you believe in. Alban lived in the early third century in the Roman city of Verulamium, just down the hill from where the Cathedral stands today. One day he gave shelter to a stranger fleeing from persecution. This stranger was a Christian priest, now known as Amphibalus. While sheltering the priest, Alban was inspired by how important faith was to the priest and asked to be taught more about Christianity. It was not long until the Roman authorities caught up with Amphibalus. However, Alban's new-found faith would not allow him to let the authorities arrest the priest. Instead, Alban exchanged clothes with Amphibalus and was arrested, allowing the priest to escape. Alban refused to renounce his beliefs and the magistrate ordered that he should receive the punishment intended for the escaped priest. Upon this ruling, Alban was led out of Verulamium and up the hillside where he was beheaded. Alban is honoured as Britain's first saint.

We concluded our visit with Compline in the Chapel next to the shrines of the two saints...and we sang.

### **Day 4, Friday Morning**

### **Church of St James, Stanstead Abbots, Hertfordshire**

This building has no electricity, heating or running water but it had a very interesting story to tell. It is looked after by the Churches Conservation Trust. It is still consecrated but is only occasionally used, often for special services, and it is still the parish burial ground.

The church features the 'Hertfordshire spike' or spire on the tower which was built in the 15th century

The entrance porch is open timbers also dating from the 15th century.



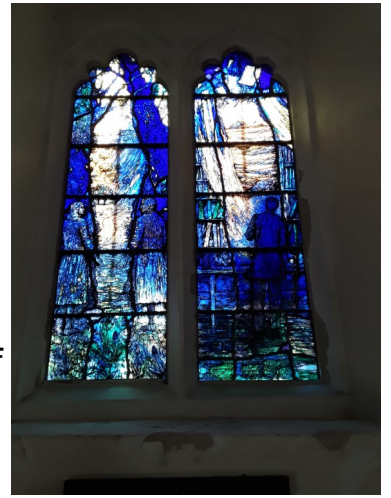
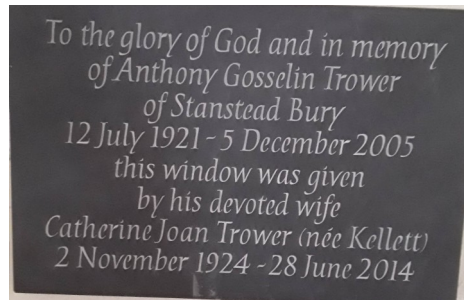
The North Chapel, where we had our service was added in the 16th century.

Instead of 'improving' the church the Victorians chose to build a new church in the village and left this building in an 'original' state so most of the interior is largely untouched 18th century detail including high box pews, a three decker pulpit and a kingpost roof.

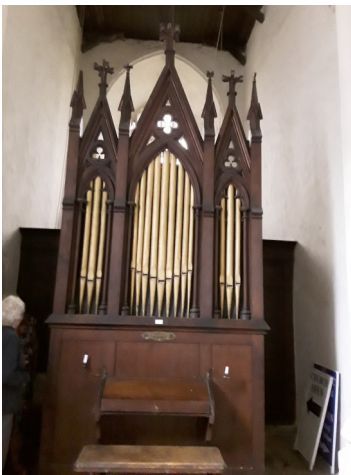




We had Anne and Jonathan as our guides. Jonathan told us of his long family association with the church. His father and grandfather had both been baptised in the font and so had his children and grandchildren.



The modern stained glass window had been presented by his mother in memory of her husband.



The manual organ was built in 1864.

There were so many original features and memorials it was difficult to know which to include.



Our Communion service was led by the Reverend Doctor Sarah Forest. We all boarded the bus and set off home. Another pilgrimage completed.

**Don't forget to book for 2023 at Launde Abbey!**

