

Picturesque St Albans

by Claire Victoria Thornton Collections Manager St Albans Museum Service

“ The pictorial features of our quaint City are gradually but surely disappearing...”

These were the words of Charles Ashdown and Frederick Kitton in 1893, local residents angered by the destruction of the older buildings which provided St Albans with its special character.

Picturesque St Albans, a new exhibition at the Museum of St Albans, focuses on the art produced by the vibrant community of artists living in St Albans City and District just over 100 years ago and very broadly speaking the Edwardian period. Many of the artists had moved to the thriving market town as it was the perfect picturesque country base from which they could commute into London. For others, it was simply where they had friends or family.

Frederick Kitton, famous Dickens biographer, is amongst the artists on show. He moved to St Albans to focus on his writing about Dickens and became heavily involved with civic activities campaigning for the preservation of various old buildings including the Moot Hall, curating the archives at the City Museum (now the Museum of St Albans) and illustrating various publications including the Hertfordshire Advertiser. Many examples of his artwork can be found on display in the Museum of St Albans including Dickens related material from the Dickens House Museum.

Two of Kitton's personal friends, Edwin Holmes Winter and Henry George Moon also have work displayed. Henry George Moon formed the Moo-Kitt sketching club with Frederick Kitton. He is most well known for the artwork he produced for F. Sanders great publication on Orchids the 'Reichenbachia'. Moon eventually married Sanders daughter and together they worked at the farm in Camp Road. Examples of plates for the 'Reichenbachia' will be on display as well as the original artwork he produced for 'The Garden', the Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society and various oil paintings.

At the same time that Moon was becoming acquainted with the Sander family, Frederick Kitton was embarking on a series of walking tours. Some were related to Dickens and his travels but one rather unusual one was with his friend Edwin Cornelius Holmes Winter. Together they toured the country dressed as itinerant musicians and it was this trip that introduced Winter to St Albans. He produced a series of etchings entitled 'The last of Old St Albans' showing many of the old buildings which Kitton was campaigning to save. Some of these were knocked down such as the Woodman's Cottage at the bottom of Albert Street. A selection of these will be available to view at the museum and also at the St Albans library.

Other contemporaries of Kitton include Phipson, Griggs, Dunning and the Hines, all of whom feature in the exhibition. Dunning was another friend of Kitton and was also part of the Moo-Kitt sketching club. However it is Dunning's friend Henry Mitton Wilson who is perhaps better known. He was interested in French impressionism and was part of a movement of artists concerned about the change in the nature of the countryside resulting from depopulation. Mitton Wilson's oil paintings feature country lanes, gypsies and fields alongside the predictable views of St Albans such as the Clock Tower. The museum has been steadily acquiring his work but has been lucky enough to secure some loans from private individuals to show the range of his work.

No exhibition on art from this period is complete without the work of Harpenden artist Frank Salisbury and this exhibition features some of his less well known pictures including the Ryder family children and of local builder and mayor Eyra Dunham. There are several other artists featured, all of the artwork depicting local scenes. The museum has taken the opportunity to put the art into its historical context. The Edwardian period was a time of great change for the city with an enormous amount of building activity and an impressive number of civic events. On display will be objects relating to the pageant which was held in 1907, architectural plans, the suffragette movement and daily life during this period. This is the first time many of these objects have been displayed to the public.

As the exhibition is being held over Christmas, the museum's Christmas tree decorated in Edwardian style will form the centrepiece of the exhibition. It will be the focus of some of the associated children's activities. Worksheets and other activities will also be available to work on in the gallery.

Picturesque St Albans opens 22nd November at the Museum of St Albans, 9 A Hatfield Road, St Albans. Further artwork done by the artists will be on display at St Albans City Library, The Maltings, St Albans.