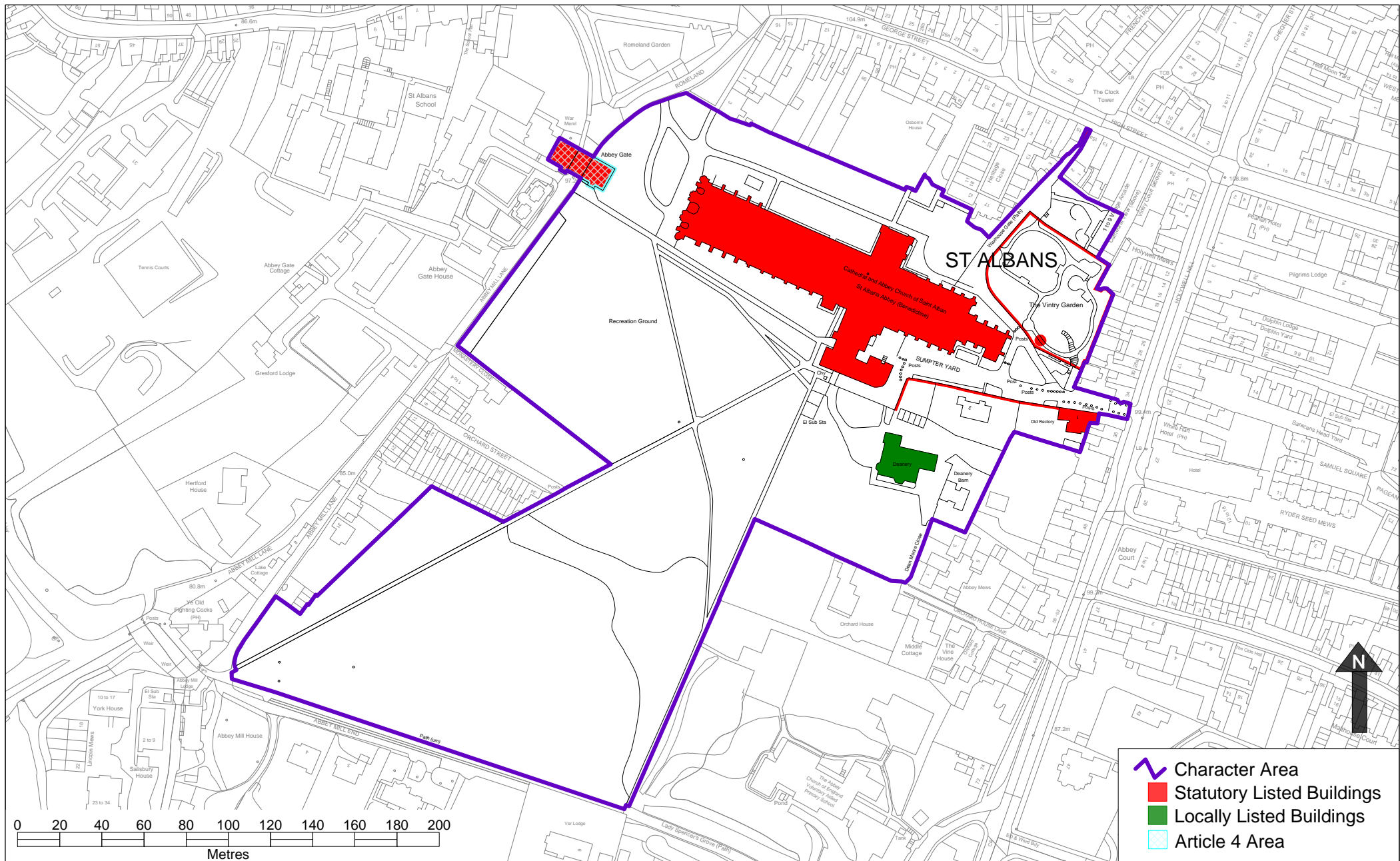


# ***Character Area 2a***

## ***The Abbey and Precincts***





## AREA 2A: THE ABBEY AND PRECINTS

## Area 2a: The Abbey and Precincts

*Sumpter Yard, The Abbey Precinct, Waxhouse Gate*

### Article 4 Direction – covers the Abbey Gateway

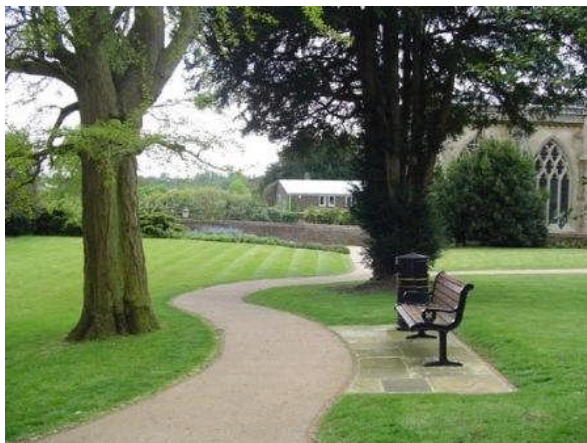
#### Scheduled Monuments

The Abbey Gateway, monument number 35

The Cathedral and Abbey Church of Saint Alban and grounds, including the Vintry Garden (and wall) and Abbey Orchard, monument number 96



*The cathedral (right) and Abbey Gateway (left), which is now part of St Albans School and the only remaining part of the monastery buildings. Both are grade I listed and scheduled monuments.*



*Vintry Garden (wall grade II listed, scheduled as part of Cathedral grounds).*

#### Listed Buildings

The Abbey Gateway (Grade I)

The Cathedral and Abbey Church of Saint Alban (Grade I)

The Vintry Garden wall (Grade II)

Old Rectory (Grade II)

Well and adjacent posts in Vintry Garden (lost)

#### Locally Listed Buildings

The Deanery



*The Old Rectory from Sumpter Yard (listed grade II). Image courtesy of John Bethell.*



*The Deanery (locally listed) from the Abbey Orchard.*

## Area 2a: The Abbey and Precincts

### Character Summary

This character area is central to the very identity of St Albans, not only due to the historical connection, but also in the many views of the Abbey, particularly the Norman tower, seen from across the city. Whilst the Abbey is a landmark and dominates the area and is a focus for community interaction, the peaceful and reflective area in the centre of

the town, formed by the abbey precinct, is also a key characteristic. This character area is transitional between a building dominated and landscape dominant environment; it marks the end of the commercial district of the town whilst gently linking this function with the park beyond.



*The Abbey is visible across the city and marks the transition between the commercial centre and the more rural aspect of Verulamium park. Image courtesy of John Bethell.*



*Transition area*



*The Norman tower can be seen from many areas in the city.*

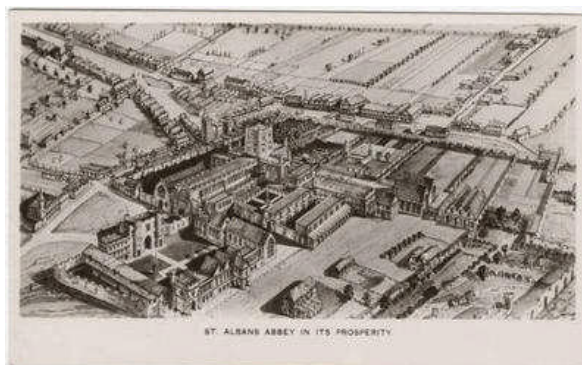
## Area 2a: The Abbey and Precincts

### History

St Albans takes its name from the first British Christian martyr who was killed in circa AD 209 on a hill to the east of Verulamium. A Benedictine order monastery was established in AD 793 by King Offa on the site of Alban's martyrdom and for centuries was the premier Benedictine monastery of the medieval period. In 1077 Paul of Caen began building an Abbey on the site, recycling bricks from Verulamium and previous Saxon Churches. Monastic life ended in 1539 during the dissolution of St Albans Abbey and all but the Abbey church and gatehouse was destroyed. The Abbey survived because, following the Reformation, the church was bought by the Townsfolk (Mayor and burgesses) and thus became a Parish church.

Although it is unsurprising, it is a shame that little of the monastery survives, which was once a large complex of buildings, which spread south approximately to the line of Orchard Street (Character Area 2b). The Gateway, now part of St Albans School, is the only structure remaining that relates to this period, though there is of course hidden archaeology. It has historically been used as a prison and as a printing press and now forms the entry through into Abbey Mill Lane, referred to in Character Area 2b. Both a Scheduled Ancient Monument and Listed Building, it is a flint and brick structure, the equivalent of a three storey building. From the east its height is particularly obvious as it is at a higher level than the school building behind and therefore the building roof line steps down; from the Abbey, to the Gateway, to the school buildings.

Today the church, which was designated a cathedral in 1877, is often locally referred to as the Abbey. It dominates the area, particularly the southern aspects of the city, but the Norman tower of the Abbey can be seen from various points around the city, an asset which should be respected at all costs. The building has been altered and repaired many times during its long and complex history and these visible remains of various periods of architecture result in a building which is historically and architecturally fascinating and unique, deserving of its Grade I listing and designation as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The most controversial and radical alterations were undertaken by Lord Grimthorpe after 1878; in particular the west end was gothicised in this period and now forms a prominent façade and one of the classic views of the Abbey, which faces the Abbey School site, covered in Area 2c.



*A postcard showing the monastery buildings prior to 1539. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.*



*West front of the cathedral after restoration by Lord Grimthorpe. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums*



*West front of the cathedral prior to restoration by Lord Grimthorpe. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.*

## Area 2a: The Abbey and Precincts

### History contd.

Grimthorpe's associations with the Abbey continued when in 1878 he designed a rectory, now the Deanery. This is a grand, two storey, brick building, with a large, hipped roof accommodating attic rooms, denoted by dormer windows on the south side. The main façade is dominated by a double storey bay to one side of a grand, arched entrance; this façade faces onto the Abbey Orchard, although it is well screened. The building is accessed from Sumpter Yard near to the Cedar of Lebanon tree planted by the Countess Spencer in 1803. This area, known as the Deanery Garden, contains many trees and forms a small enclave. It contains two buildings alongside the Deanery, one of which is used as an office, whilst the other is a converted barn in residential use. To the east towards Holywell Hill is a 1960s house of bland design and therefore unfortunately only partially hidden from Sumpter Yard by a wall. Located behind buildings on Holywell Hill is the late C18 Rectory, also a two storey, red brick building. It has a large, hipped roof containing an attic storey, denoted by a centrally placed dormer window over the ornate front door with pediment and fanlight. The building is orientated parallel to the line of the wall which encloses the Deanery Garden and for this reason the Rectory is most visible from Sumpter Yard and the Vintry Gardens, although its attractively detailed flank is visible from Holywell Hill set back behind a small garden. This fine building is a focal point from entry into Sumpter Yard from Waxhouse Gate. Furthermore, it relates well to its setting close to the Abbey, and to Holywell Hill, as it is typical of many of the red



*Looking up Waxhouse Gate towards the city centre. Image courtesy of John Bethell.*

brick buildings along this road which were re-fronted in the C18.

More recent history is represented by the addition of the chapter house to the south transept of the Abbey. Designed by William Whitfield and completed in 1982, it houses the cathedral's administrative and commercial elements such as the library, refectory and shop. Situated on the site of the monk's chapter house, it uses roman-sized bricks and seeks to hark back to the origins of the abbey in its form. It is quite successful in this aim and is now an accepted part of the Abbey. Also dating from this period is the education centre, located to the north against the wall of the churchyard, this is a red brick, two storey building, which relates to the Abbey with the use of towers and, because of its positioning, its presence is diminutive within the area.



*The east end of the Abbey from Sumpter Yard.*



*The chapter house from the west.*

## Area 2a: The Abbey and Precincts

### Public Realm

The setting of the Abbey is integral to its character, and one cannot be appreciated without the other. Although the Abbey site is surrounded by a commercial area to the north and east, it lies on lower land than the busy city centre and manages to retain its tranquillity. The whole site is a focus for worship, pilgrimage and tourism, and its proximity to the centre means it is also well used by those who live and work in St Albans. This is particularly true of the enclosed Vintry Garden to the north west of the Abbey, which has a secluded and peaceful ambience and is often used at lunchtimes for relaxation and recreation in the summer months. Historically this area contained vines and the grapes were used by the monastery to make wine for the monks. This historical function is represented today by the enclosed nature of the area, with a listed high brick wall, which contains a number of small-scale gateways, and some recently planted vines, a gift from the twin town of Worms.

This area is accessed from the north through Waxhouse Gate, originally the site where candles were bought (and possibly made) for the Abbey complex. This is a busy and important pedestrian thoroughfare between the city centre and park, however this adds to the vitality of the area, befitting for the function of the building, rather than detracting from the peace of the

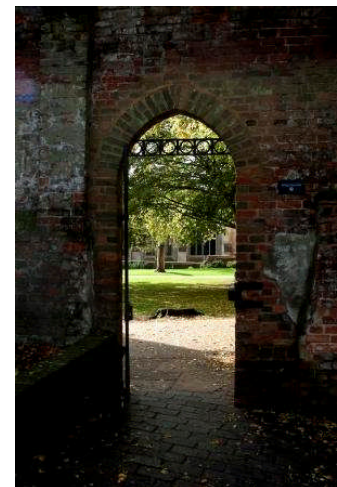
Abbey. This was not always a circulation route; from 1553 the pathway was north to south between the Lady Chapel and the main Abbey, with the cut off chapel being used as a school until 1871, at which point it was reconnected to the Abbey and the path diverted around the north west corner of the Lady Chapel which took away part of the Vintry Garden. Waxhouse Gate runs downhill towards the Abbey and contains some commercial premises either side of the path's edge. Adjacent to the Vintry Garden is the Village Arcade, a modern but Regency style building comprising flats above a small arcade of shops which links through to the High Street, but looks like a single residential building set behind a small garden. Heritage Close, located on the west side, opposite the Arcade, is also set back from Waxhouse Gate; it is a large residential and retail square development dating from 1972-5, designed by Fitzroy Robinson and Partners. This brick building, which replaced a Victorian department store (Fisks then Blundells), is according to Pevsner 'broken up by projecting cross-walls which give a vertical emphasis, quite a satisfactory design if one is prepared to accept so large a chunk of the C20 in this position'. This development is viewed from Waxhouse Gate, where the development is read with views of the Abbey Tower behind, as well as the High Street (Character Area 4a).



*The cathedral seen from the entrance to Waxhouse Gate.*



*The Village Arcade seen from Waxhouse Gate.*



*The entrance to the Vintry Gardens from Waxhouse Gate*

## Area 2a: The Abbey and Precincts

### Public Realm contd.

Sumpter Yard is the main vehicular access to the Abbey from Holywell Hill; 'sumpter' refers to the delivery of provisions to the Abbey. Until 1987 it was a vehicular highway used by the public, and full of cars, but it was closed as a public highway (apart from footpath access), partly landscaped and surfaced in traditional materials of blue brick, York Stone and stone setts. The area now serves as a limited car park for the Abbey, enhancing pedestrian access and clearing emergency access to the Abbey - an imperative in the wake of the tragic fire at York Minster. The churchyard located to the north of the Abbey is similar to the Vintry Garden in that it has a quiet and reflective ambience, appropriate for a graveyard; it is now a closed churchyard used only exceptionally for burials and is therefore maintained by the Council. A wall to the north screens the churchyard from the commercial area of Heritage Close and the huge scale of the cathedral encloses the south side, reinforcing its tranquillity. Further westwards into the churchyard, towards the Abbey Gateway, views open up towards the north, and roofs of the houses and shops on George Street (Character Area 4a) can be seen and eventually the backs of the houses on Romeland (Character Area 2c).

The Abbey Orchard, south of the Abbey, historically the site of the cloisters and other monastic buildings, remains an area associated with the Abbey and is crossed by well used footpaths. The setting of the Abbey within the Abbey Orchard is important to the building's identity, as shown by the designation of the whole area (including the Vintry Garden) as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The openness of the Abbey Orchard contrasts with the more enclosed areas to the north of the Abbey, as described above. Its position to the south west of the town means that it reaches towards Verulamium Park and it therefore provides the visitor some appropriate middle ground between city centre and park: the landscaping around this open space aids this association as it serves as a screen from the parkland beyond, whilst still retaining the wonderful views southwards across the valley. It also adds to the character of the area because it means that the Abbey can be both a key element of the town and the community, thus maintaining its vitality, whilst also retaining its unique identity by being part set in a landscape, which allows true appreciation of its majestic scale and architecture.



*Sumpter Yard*



*The Abbey seen from the Abbey Orchard, a large open space to the south-west.*

## Area 2a: The Abbey and Precincts

### Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

#### Positive

- ✓ Views of the Abbey from outside this character area afforded by the openness of this area, particularly to the south, and by the dominant height of the Norman Tower.
- ✓ Historic Assets - Scheduled Ancient Monuments, listed and locally listed buildings.
- ✓ Strong sense of history, and setting for the historical monuments.
- ✓ The publicly accessible green spaces of the Abbey Orchard, Sumpter Yard and Vintry Garden, as well as large trees such as the Cedar of Lebanon.
- ✓ The park and other green spaces, including private spaces and their trees, such as the Deanery gardens which aid the setting of the buildings.
- ✓ Enclosure of some areas which creates a peaceful reflective atmosphere.
- ✓ Proximity of the area to the town, enabling its use and maintaining vitality.
- ✓ General good maintenance of the area.



*The Abbey is the focus of this area with long-range views afforded by the open space of the Orchard. Image courtesy of John Bethell.*

## Area 2a: The Abbey and Precincts

### Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

#### Negative

- ✖ Small area of parking in Sumpter Yard near to the Lady Chapel as, however necessary, it does detract from the Abbey, despite the few large trees that survive.
- ✖ Sections of flint and brick wall to the north of the Abbey churchyard and south of Orchard Street are in a state of disrepair and are in need of reinstatement.
- ✖ Limited use of the space for public art and interpretation.
- ✖ Disrepair of some of the street furniture, most notably in the Abbey Orchard.
- ✖ Parking around the Deanery.
- ✖ Loss of trees from the Abbey Orchard, although any new planting would need to consider the archaeological implications.



*Parking in Sumpter Yard detracts from the setting of the cathedral.*



*Loss of trees in the Abbey Orchard is a negative aspect.*

#### Scope for change

- The status of the majority of this area as Scheduled Ancient Monument does limit the scope for ground works and development.
- Paths across the Abbey Orchard and the street furniture would benefit from upgrading and rationalisation.
- Potential to improve and maintain railings and signage in the area, as well as public art and interpretation.
- Modern development within this area and outside needs to be carefully considered in order to protect the positive assets of the area, for example views of the Norman tower.