

St Albans in 1914

This chapter describes the main characteristics of St Albans at the outbreak of war in 1914. It considers the growing population and changing employment structure of the city, the ways in which it was governed, the amenities to which its people had access and the cultural and religious life that they enjoyed. The people of St Albans made their living in diverse ways, and the standard of life to which they could aspire varied considerably. However, by 1914, after a century of growth and change, the city was flourishing economically and had a lively political and associational life. The range of local services and institutions that existed at the outbreak of war would have been unimaginable to the inhabitants of St Albans 100, or even 50, years earlier.

This book examines the local impact of a war fought between great powers on the world stage. Sometimes described as the first ‘total war’, involving whole populations and not just the fighting forces, the First World War brought the term ‘home front’ into popular parlance in Britain. Almost every area of life was affected in some way in communities up and down the country: the war created new challenges for individuals, families, businesses, churches, schools and institutions of local government ranging from the police and fire brigade to refuse collection and sewage disposal. Industry, agriculture and services were affected in numerous ways, from the loss of employees to the armed forces, to restrictions on the use of premises and materials, to the increased costs of employing their staff. People’s physical and mental health, religious convictions and patriotism were all tested, and the war had an impact on their diets, sleep patterns, personal finances, social activities and sex lives. At the end of the war a weakened population faced the influenza epidemic of 1918–20 as well as the tasks of reintegrating demobilised servicemen, restoring ‘normalcy’ in economic and social life and finding suitable ways to commemorate the sacrifices made during the war itself.¹ This book explores how one comparatively small community – the city of St Albans in Hertfordshire, 20 miles north of London – met the challenges of the war and its aftermath. It is a local study, but one that has potentially wider relevance. As another historian of the home front has noted, ‘there are no perfect microcosms’ when it comes to a local study,² and St Albans can make no particular claim to being typical. However, the city had a diverse economic structure: it was a market town with an agricultural hinterland, a large and growing manufacturing sector and a

¹ The term ‘normalcy’ was used by Warren Harding in his US presidential election campaign of 1920.

² S. Hallifax, ‘Citizens at war: the experience of the Great War in Essex, 1914–1918’, DPhil thesis (University of Oxford, 2010), p. 30.

middle-class commuter population. It became the temporary home of a large number of billeted soldiers; it was the seat of a military service tribunal whose proceedings offer intriguing insights into the economy and governance of the city; and its rich civil society left many records on which the historian can draw. It offers, therefore, an opportunity to examine in a local context the wide-ranging impact that the First World War had on a small area of England.

Population, industry and employment

By 1914 the population of St Albans had been expanding consistently for more than a century. There were just over 3,000 people in the city in 1801, exactly 7,000 in 1851 and 18,133 in 1911.³ St Albans was growing beyond its historic core and a series of boundary extensions, in 1835, 1879 and 1913, reflected this sprawl, each bringing new areas within the government of the city. The last was the most important, incorporating large areas of housing and industry into the city. In the early years of the twentieth century two significant areas of working-class housing had been constructed outside the city boundaries. These were Sandridge New Town, to the north of St Albans, adjacent to Bernards Heath,⁴ and Fleetville and the Camp to the east, where new industrial enterprises, including the Salvation Army Printing Works on Campfield Road, Smith's Printing Co. Ltd's works on Hatfield Road and Nicholson's Raincoat Co. Ltd on Sutton Road, offered employment opportunities (Figure 1.1). The result of the boundary extension was that the population of St Albans increased by more than a third so that there were an estimated 25,000 people living in the city in 1914.⁵ Urban growth, although it took many different forms, was a key aspect of the economic and social changes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and St Albans was not unusual among ancient towns and cities in this respect.

In one respect, though, St Albans and its surrounding areas were unusual: there was a preponderance of women in the population. This was a long-standing imbalance: at the time of the first census, in 1801, there had been just 74 males in the population per 100 females; in 1851 the figure was 84; and, by 1911, the last census before the war, it had fallen again to 81. Historically, this reflected the importance of straw plaiting and straw hat manufacture to the economy of the city and surrounding region; although straw plaiting had almost disappeared by the twentieth century, hat factories remained a feature of the urban landscape. By 1911

³ M. Freeman, *St Albans: a history* (Lancaster, 2008), p. 210. St Albans became a city in 1877.

⁴ Sandridge New Town comprised the streets east of Sandridge Road and north of Sandpit Lane, including Culver Road, Heath Road and Boundary Road.

⁵ Freeman, *St Albans*, p. 210; Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies (HALS), SBR/Interim Catalogue, Medical Officer of Health Report (MOHR), 1914.

domestic service was the largest employer of women and girls, with around 1,300 employed, but the hat makers employed around 650, about 100 of whom worked from home.⁶

Although no longer using local straw and plait, as they had done for much of the nineteenth century, the straw hat manufacturers constituted the largest group of employers in St Albans, with just over 900 employees in total. These factories produced thousands of hats a year, men's boaters in particular, with many going to export markets. This focus encouraged two manufacturers from nearby Luton to invest in the city in the immediate pre-war years, thereby significantly extending the capacity of the local trade. One of these was Vyse, Sons and Co. Ltd, who opened a three-storey factory in Ridgmont Road late in 1909. Steam-powered radiators and external fire escapes were sufficiently novel to merit attention in reports of the building's opening.⁷ They employed 100 workers and expected to recruit more. The other Luton business to move to the city was Dillingham & Sons, who redeveloped an existing factory in Beaconsfield Road, investing around £2,000 in the process.⁸ However, the most significant work was carried out by a St Albans firm, E. Day & Co. Over a period of 11 years they extended their premises off Marlborough Road on three occasions, culminating in 1913 with a new four-storey building complete with a gas compressor for lighting, a modern suite of offices and a 15-extension internal telephone system.⁹ Day's, the largest hat manufacturer in the city, employed over 300 workers in 1914.¹⁰ In addition, there were eight other locally based hat companies in St Albans, of which Horace Slade & Co. Ltd and Henry Partridge Smith were the next largest. Slade was a member of St Albans City Council and mayor at the outbreak of war in August 1914.

Although the economy of St Albans was going through a period of rapid diversification in the early twentieth century it was dependent at least in part on industries that reflected its long history as a centre for agricultural trade. Even within the city itself about 5 per cent of the workforce still derived a living from working on the land. There was a large nursery garden on Hatfield Road and two farms in the shadow of the abbey (Figure 1.2). Nine men worked the watercress beds on the chalk-based River Ver. Most of the land around St Albans was owned by the earl of Verulam and the Spencer family, and most local farmers were tenants before the First World War. Other long-established industries also provided employment. On the outskirts

⁶ These and other employment figures are taken from the 1911 census enumerators' books, but cover the area of the extended city of 1913.

⁷ 'New Factory at St Albans', *Herts Advertiser (HA)*, 25 December 1909.

⁸ 'Factory Extension', *HA*, 10 January 1914.

⁹ 'Business Development', *HA*, 18 January 1913.

¹⁰ St Albans Central Library, *Pictorial Record: St Albans* (London, 1915), p. 21.

of the city the flour mill at New Barnes had experienced recent substantial investment to bring it up to modern standards of production.¹¹ Although it is not clear if they were using locally grown barley, the two St Albans breweries sold their beer through more than 60 ‘tied’ public houses and off-licences in St Albans and surrounding towns and villages.¹² The Abbey silk mills, established in 1802, employed around 250 people and was one of several businesses, such as Wiles & Lewis, the tallow chandlers and suet makers on Bernards Heath, which could trace its origins in the city back over 100 years.¹³

In the previous 25 years newly established industries had brought much-needed diversification to the economy of St Albans. Printing companies were fast becoming one of the city’s staple trades, employing more than 600 workers, including 134 women. Firms such as F. Dangerfield Ltd and R. Taylor Ltd supplied their own niche markets. The former, having built extensive premises from scratch off Alma Road in the mid-1890s, used expensive presses to print large posters for the underground and bus companies that later became part of London Transport. Other printers, such as Smith’s Printing and the Salvation Army, had arrived in Fleetville. The local newspaper, the eight-page *Herts Advertiser*, established in 1855 and owned by local firm Gibbs & Bamforth, was flourishing: its print-run in 1916 was around 9,000 copies a week.¹⁴ It provided extensive coverage of day-to-day life in the city and the surrounding district and recorded the activities of the city council and other institutions of local government. Other industries prospered in St Albans too. For example, the large boot and shoe manufacturers John Freshwater & Co. Ltd and Edwin Lee & Sons employed around 400 workers between them. This figure included some 160 women. Brushes Ltd, based in Grosvenor Road, had more than 200 employees, and produced brushes such as the ‘Kra Yard Broom’, the ‘Gripwell Carpet Brush’ and the ‘King of Scrubs’.¹⁵ Ryder & Son Ltd, where around 70 ‘Ryder’s girls’ sorted seeds into packets in the Holywell Hill warehouse, was another prominent St Albans business and, along with Sander’s orchids, Mercer’s chronometers, Nicholson’s raincoats and Peake’s coats, it would be associated with the city for the next 30 years and more.

¹¹ ‘Earl of Verulam’s Mill, St Albans’, *Milling Journal*, 2 January 1915, pp. 38–40.

¹² Figures based on A. Whitaker, *Brewers in Hertfordshire: a historical gazetteer* (Hatfield, 2006), pp. 197, 199. The two breweries were Adey & White in Chequer Street and T.W. Kent & Son on Holywell Hill.

¹³ *Pictorial Record: St Albans*, p. 17.

¹⁴ ‘Adieu’, *HA*, 24 January 1947.

¹⁵ *Pictorial Record: St Albans*, pp. 1, 16; analysis of the number of employees in the 1911 census indicates a workforce of closer to 100.

Lobbying groups such as the St Albans and District Chamber of Commerce were becoming a feature of local trade, although the Chamber consisted mostly of retailers, with few if any industrial members.¹⁶ Instead each trade had its own alliance, such as the St Albans Hat Manufacturers' Association, the Home Counties branch of the Federation of Master Printers and the Hertfordshire Brewers Association, of which the firm of Adey & White was a member. Arrayed against them was the growing challenge of local trade unions. Nationally, a total of 41 million days was lost to strike action in 1912, more than in any year before the war. According to the Board of Trade there were 1,459 strikes in 1913 alone.¹⁷ In St Albans, however, while there was involvement in national actions such as railway strikes, there are few examples of local unrest at the time.

Analysis of the 1911 census shows that around one in eight men living in St Albans worked in construction, with the firm of Miskin's probably the city's largest employer, both in this sector and in general, with a workforce of around 350.¹⁸ With the significant growth in the local population in the Edwardian period there was plenty of business in the area for Miskin's and its competitors, as well as men working in professions such as architecture. There were at least five firms of solicitors in the city, no doubt handling conveyancing business derived from the pre-war building boom, but also benefiting from the presence of both quarter and petty session courts in the city. In all, about 15 per cent of the male population of the city was employed in professional and public service occupations; many of them commuted to work in London. In 1914 they were outnumbered by workers in the manufacturing sector – around a quarter of the working male population and a similar proportion of working women – and by female domestic servants. Among men in employment, nearly half worked in manufacturing, construction, transport or agriculture. St Albans was, in many respects, still a working-class city.

The standard of living enjoyed by the residents varied considerably. Not only were there wide variations in the pay and regularity of employment – even within individual occupations – but individual and family circumstances also differed considerably. Families with young children often experienced poverty, as did older people in the population: old-age pensions were available only from age 70, and were not universal. Workers in some trades were eligible for unemployment and health benefits following the introduction of national insurance in 1911,

¹⁶ HALS, Acc 3727, St Albans & District Chamber of Commerce Executive Committee Minute Book, 1908–17, 14 September 1914.

¹⁷ BBC Radio 4, *1913: The Year Before* (2013), episode 6: 'Labour Relations and the Triple Alliance'.

¹⁸ *Pictorial Record: St Albans*, p. 13.

but these contributory schemes by no means covered the whole population, with women particularly vulnerable in cases of ill-health or loss of employment. [Table 1.1](#) shows what some of those in work were earning in St Albans in 1914, and [Table 1.2](#) summarises the cost of some typical items of expenditure. Although those in salaried employment, particularly men with small families or none, could enjoy a comfortable standard of living, others found themselves in precarious, poorly paid or seasonal employment, which made reliance on poor relief and charity a reality for many in St Albans. When the war started some food prices increased almost immediately, and in many cases on subsequent occasions as well.¹⁹

Government and politics

St Albans City Council governed the city. Its powers and responsibilities had been set out in the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 and increased on various subsequent occasions. Some powers, notably over education, were reserved to Hertfordshire County Council, which, along with other county councils, had been established in 1889. Poor relief was organised and distributed by the Poor Law Union, whose elections were held separately from those of the other local authorities. The city council, however, was responsible for roads, sewage and refuse disposal, the market, public health and some hospitals, various public buildings and amenities, street lighting, policing and the fire brigade ([Figure 1.3](#)). The business of the council was administered by a small body of paid officials, most notably Edward Percy (known as E.P.) Debenham, who had held the office of town clerk since 1909 and was responsible for most of the council's correspondence. The council was answerable both to its local electors – who voted annually – and to the Local Government Board, which was required to authorise any borrowing that was undertaken. Both the Board and the county council had had to approve the boundary change of 1913. The incorporation of the new areas precipitated some changes to the way in which the city was governed: because of the size of the population St Albans was required to form a local pension committee under the terms of the Old Age Pensions Act of 1908; this committee would consider all claims for pensions. Under the term of the legislation most people aged 70 and over were entitled to receive a pension, although in 1911 only around 300 people in St Albans were described in the census as being retired.²⁰ The structure of the council was also changed. St Albans was now divided into three wards for city council elections – east, north and south – each of which elected six councillors. The rural areas that remained outside

¹⁹ 'The Price of Food', *HA*, 8 August 1914.

²⁰ HALS, SBR/894A, City Council Minute Book (CMB), 27 January 1914.

the city boundaries were governed by St Albans Rural District Council, established in 1894, which had responsibilities corresponding to those of the city council.

Local government spending was increasing in the years before the First World War. In 1912–13 the city council spent £20,773 and in the following year £22,815, of which just over a quarter was met by income from rents, fines, cemetery fees, government grants and miscellaneous sources, and the rest from the rates. The politics of rating were fiercely contested in this period, and across the country ratepayers' associations organised resistance to increases in local government taxation.²¹ In St Albans in 1913 the Camp Ward Ratepayers' Association was prominent in the opposition to the boundary extension. Others also voiced their strong opposition, including Alfred Nicholson, managing director of the coat manufacturers, who explained that the low rates in St Albans Rural District were one of the reasons why his company chose to move there.²² Rates were paid on the rental value of property, and the total rateable of the city of St Albans before the extension was £106,596. The new areas were worth a total of £39,908 in rateable value, but, as housing and industry were expected to expand still further in these areas, this would increase over time, yielding a larger income for the council. Before the boundary extension the city was charging its inhabitants a rate of 4s in the pound, but because the county council and the poor law authorities also charged rates, of 3s 4½d and 1s 1½d respectively, the total rate burden within the municipal area was 8s 6d in the pound. In the neighbouring wards of St Albans Rural District the burden was significantly lower – 6s 1d in the Camp Ward and lower still in the rural areas of St Michael's, St Stephen's and Sandridge – and the services provided to inhabitants were correspondingly inferior. The extension of the boundary enabled the new housing areas to be connected to the mains sewage system of the city, although most of this work was delayed until after the war. To avoid an immediate increase in the rates, the Act of Parliament that extended the boundaries established a ten-year programme of rate assimilation, so that the new areas had a discount until 1924.²³

St Albans had a lively political life, with contested parliamentary and municipal elections involving a number of well-known characters, many of whom had come to prominence through business and other local activities. The period from 1910 to 1914 is often characterised as one of strife and upheaval, with trade unions and women's suffrage campaigners bringing radical

²¹ P.J. Waller, 'Altercation over civil society: the bitter cry of the Edwardian middle classes', in J. Harris (ed.), *Civil society in British history* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 115–34.

²² City of St Alban [sic], *City Extension 1913, Proceedings*: bound volume in St Albans Central Library, p. 312.

²³ Local Government Board's Provisional Order Confirmation (No. 12) Act, 3 & 4 Geo. V, 15 August 1913.

politics to streets and workplaces. The Labour party had been formed (as the Labour Representation Committee) in 1900, and had begun to play a role in both municipal and parliamentary politics. It stood two candidates in the local election of 1913 in St Albans, but did not meet with any success. The city council did, however, resolve in 1914 that all contracts for goods or services should require contractors to pay trade union rates and adhere to conditions agreed with unions.²⁴ This resolution was moved by councillor Frederick George Warwick, one of ten ‘Progressive’ councillors elected in the first election under the new boundaries in 1913.²⁵ Local government in this period was dominated by battles between ‘Progressives’ on the one hand – mostly Liberals – and ‘Moderates’, who were mostly Conservative. In St Albans the Progressives were strong in the north and east wards, whereas Moderates dominated in the south. The best-known Progressive, elected in the north ward, was the former mayor Samuel Ryder, the seed merchant and later founder of golf’s Ryder Cup.²⁶ In terms of parliamentary politics, St Albans almost always voted Conservative: at the outbreak of war the MP was Sir Hildred Carlile, a textile manufacturer and philanthropist who defeated three different Liberal opponents in the elections of 1906, January 1910 and December 1910, with an increased majority in both 1910 polls.

Infrastructure and amenities

By far the largest item of city council expenditure, amounting to almost a quarter of the total, was the maintenance of roads. Spending under this heading was £5,390 in 1913–14, with a further £1,981 being spent on lighting. In the pre-war years a large proportion of the minuted council business related to road repairs, which were mostly routine but occasionally – such as the widening of Hatfield Road in front of the Marlborough almshouses at the northern end of the city centre – more significant.²⁷ Road repairs were required in the areas taken into the city after the boundary extension: in early 1914, for example, repairs were needed in Cambridge Road, Royston Road and College Road in the Camp.²⁸ Spending on roads increased with the growth of private motor transport and the increasing number of buses that travelled to and in St Albans. The town clerk regularly wrote to bus companies demanding payment for damage

²⁴ HALS, SBR/894A, CMB, 18 March 1914.

²⁵ ‘Death of Mr F.G. Warwick’, *HA*, 30 July 1937.

²⁶ P. Fry, *Samuel Ryder: the man behind the Ryder Cup* (Weymouth, 2000).

²⁷ See, for example, HALS, SBR/894A, CMB, 9 November 1912: report of city surveyor.

²⁸ HALS, SBR/894A, CMB, 27 January 1914.

done by buses to street lamps and other council property.²⁹ Buses ran between the city centre and Fleetville from 1909, and the London General Omnibus Company Ltd operated a service to Golders Green from 1912.³⁰

St Albans's large commuter population was served by frequent services to London on the Midland Railway, whose services had first run in 1868. The main entrance to the station was on Ridgmont Road. More than 200,000 journeys were made on this line from St Albans in 1913, a figure that had almost doubled in 20 years.³¹ The railway made possible the growth of the commuter population and the development of middle-class housing. A guide to the city published in 1903 boasted: 'as a residential suburb for London, [St Albans] has claims which cannot be conceded to ordinary suburban London ... its rural surroundings and splendid train service make it an ideal place of residence for the city man'.³² The railway created employment not only for train drivers and station staff but also for a range of others, many of whom themselves travelled to work by train: there were 446 railway workers living in St Albans in 1911. Two other railway lines carried both passengers and freight: the London and North Western line, running from the Abbey station to Watford, and the Great Northern line, which also ran from the Abbey station, in this case to Hatfield via the London Road station, which was near the place where the Midland Railway bridge crosses London Road. Railways in this period were privately owned and operated, but they created work for the council because the stations themselves generated more traffic within St Albans. In 1911 the Midland Railway Company agreed to pay a regular sum to the council for repairs to the station forecourt, but by 1915 it was clear that the council was spending more than it was receiving from the company (Figure 1.4).³³

Residents and visitors to the city on Saturdays could take advantage of a variety of stalls on offer in the general market (Figure 1.5).³⁴ Exactly half the stalls carried perishable food items. Greengrocers, butchers and fishmongers made up the majority of these, but two stalls in August 1914 sold ice cream. Equally perishable were the flowers and plants for sale on three stalls: it

²⁹ See, for example, HALS, SBR/1901, Town Clerk Out Letters Book (TCOL), E.P. Debenham to secretary of Herts Motors Ltd, 5 August 1914, E.P. Debenham to secretary, London General Omnibus Company Ltd, 14 September 1914.

³⁰ Freeman, *St Albans*, p. 272; E. Toms, *The story of St Albans* (St Albans, 1962), p. 180; T. Billings, *84 bus to St Albans: an illustrated local history* (St Albans, 2003), p. 2.

³¹ G. Goslin, *St Albans to Bedford, including the Hemel Hempstead branch* (Midhurst, 2003), p. ix.

³² Quoted in Freeman, *St Albans*, p. 231.

³³ HALS, SBR/1901, TCOL, E.P. Debenham to general manager, Midland Railway Company, 24 March 1915.

³⁴ All references to the market are from HALS, SBR/1666, Market Toll Account Book, 1912–22.

made commercial sense for Watson's Nursery of Hatfield Road to take a stall and bring their goods direct to market, but clearly there was a demand within the city, as one stall was taken by a Dunstable company, William Seamons & Sons. Others who valued the opportunities on offer in St Albans included butchers from Watford, greengrocers from Ampthill and fishmongers from Luton. There were three drapers, as well as dealers in books, clothes, crockery, furniture and ironmongery. Those wishing to repair their bikes could purchase cycle fittings from Mrs Wilks of Watford's stall and a day at the market could be rounded off with a photograph taken by a Mr Howe, probably an itinerant traveller who took a stall when he was in the area. It cost 1s to reserve a space at the market, and the weekly rental of stalls cost anything from 1s 6d to 10s. In August 1914 there were 56 stallholders, 35 of whom were residents of St Albans and thus entitled to a 25 per cent discount.

A 20-strong brigade of firemen protected the city against fire.³⁵ A new fire station had been established on Victoria Street in 1899, with stabling for three horses – there was no motor engine in the city until 1919, although the council had considered buying one before the war. The council had a separate fire brigade committee, and the service occasioned high expenditure in some years: £322 was spent in 1912–13, for example. The brigade dealt with a number of major fires in the years before the war, including one at Wiles & Lewis on Bernards Heath in 1911. There was some dissatisfaction in 1914 following delays in attending fires, a situation that was worsened by the depletion of the brigade during the war, as firemen rushed to enlist. Before the war there was particular unhappiness in Fleetville and the Camp, which were difficult for the St Albans engine to reach. There was a volunteer brigade in Fleetville, certainly in existence from 1912 and perhaps earlier, as well as a separate volunteer brigade serving the Salvation Army Printing Works on Campfield Road. Spokesmen for Fleetville at the time of the municipal boundary extension in 1913 had expressed concern about the possible amalgamation of the local brigade with the one in St Albans. Ernest Townson, a director of Smith's Printing (and later a councillor), was asked at the inquiry, 'Have you found the [St Albans] fire engine of any advantage to your ward?' He replied acidly: 'There is a legend that it came down here once.'³⁶ In 1914 the Fleetville brigade was incorporated into the city brigade, although the Salvation Army works brigade remained separate.

Policing was overseen by the council's Watch Committee and took the form of a separate police force that operated within the municipal boundaries, outside which the county police

³⁵ Much of the information in the paragraph below comes from A. McWhirr, *St Albans city fire brigade* (Leicester, 2007), pp. 21–32.

³⁶ City of St Alban, *City Extension 1913*, p. 303.

force was responsible. There were 35 policemen in St Albans, operating from a police station on Victoria Street, which had been built in 1893–4 at a cost of £2,100; these premises included a head constable's office, charge room and four cells.³⁷ The force received some central government funding, although this was not enough to cover the high cost of the service, which included uniforms and pensions in addition to salaries.³⁸ Crime rates were not high. In 1914 the head constable's reports show that 71 indictable offences (including burglary and larceny) were reported to police, and 252 people were proceeded against for non-indictable offences, of which 56 were cases of drunkenness.³⁹

During the nineteenth century St Albans, like many other towns and cities, acquired a range of civic amenities, including water and gas supplies and sewage facilities. The water works on Sandridge Road were opened in 1865 and there were public baths at Cottonmill Lane from 1887. The water was supplied by St Albans Water Company. Sewage pipes were laid in Victoria Street in 1882 and the Park Street sewage works opened in the following year. The issue of sewage presented significant challenges for the city council and was one of the most pressing matters during the negotiations over the extension of the boundaries in 1913. Although the areas within the pre-1913 boundary benefited from mains sewage, the new houses in Sandridge New Town and Fleetville were less well provided for. The council was worried that the poor sewage arrangements, especially in Sandridge New Town, might result in the contamination of the St Albans water supply.⁴⁰ The council had agreed to fund sewage improvements in these new urban areas in return for bringing them within the city boundary and subjecting them to the higher rates charged there. For example, early in 1914 Albion Road and Cavendish Road, close to the Midland Railway station, were connected to mains sewage for the first time.⁴¹ The war delayed the extension of the sewage system,⁴² but council spending on sewage increased significantly during the war. The accounts separate the sums spent on flushing and maintaining sewers and on the 'sewage farm' itself, but the total amount increased from £1,495 in 1912–13 to £1,702 in 1913–14, and then to £2,825 in 1918–19. Significant borrowing had been undertaken to pay for sewage improvements, and by 1913–14 the council

³⁷ T. Cox, 'Herts police in the Great War', Herts at War project lecture, 9 April 2015, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation; *Kelly's Directory of St Albans, Harpenden and Hatfield for 1914–15* (London, 1914), p. 15.

³⁸ The city council financial records contain detailed information on income and costs related to policing.

³⁹ HALS, SBR/894A, CMB, Head Constable's reports.

⁴⁰ *City of St Alban: City Extension 1913*.

⁴¹ HALS, SBR/894A, CMB, 27 January 1914.

⁴² M. Neighbour, *St Albans' own East End, volume I: outsiders* (Hoddesdon, 2012), pp. 259–60.

was spending £3,662 on servicing its debt. Before the war, and in the first two years of the war itself, domestic refuse collection was outsourced to John Cable Ltd.⁴³ According to figures in the council minute books, the total cost of this was £959 in 1912–13 and £1,042 in 1913–14. From 1908 the refuse itself was taken to the waste destructor at the electricity works on Campfield Road.⁴⁴

These works were owned by the North Metropolitan Electric Power Supply Co., which had taken on the statutory undertaking to provide electricity to the city in 1907. Power generation had commenced in 1908 with the destructor at the heart of the process, burning the city's refuse to produce steam to supply the electricity.⁴⁵ Two diesel engines had been installed by 1914 to supplement the destructor's limited capacity.⁴⁶ By 1909 the company had 135 local consumers on the books, and this number was to increase to 619 by 1919.⁴⁷ By 1914 supply contracts had been signed with various businesses in the Fleetville and Camp areas, the most recent being with the St Albans Rubber Co. in June 1913.⁴⁸ The firm of Giffen Bros had their electrical showrooms in Chequer Street, displaying 'electric candlesticks' and an 'electric laundry iron', among many new devices. Giffen Bros were the contractors for installing supplies to various businesses, including the Rubber Co., and to residential premises such as Batchwood Hall and the White House in St Peter's Street.⁴⁹ Another new utility was also developing in the area: nearly all the businesses advertising in the 1915 *Pictorial Record* had telephone numbers.⁵⁰ There were signs of investment in the more mature utilities, too. The St Albans Water Co. had recently improved capacity with investments in a new reservoir and pumping main, probably to cater for expected growth in consumption as the city grew.⁵¹ So too at the St Albans Gas Co., although there the most recent development was the rebuilding of worn gas mains.⁵²

⁴³ Cable had originally held the contract for those parts of St Albans Rural District that were brought into the city in 1913. In 1911 Harry Finch Reynolds had signed a five-year contract to collect the city's refuse, but was not doing so by 1914.

⁴⁴ N.C. Friswell, *Northmet: a history of the North Metropolitan Electric Power Supply Company* (Horsham, 2000), pp. 42, 119.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43. The author conjectures that this was the earliest use of such a destructor in the country.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴⁸ HALS, PUE 3/3, North Metropolitan Co. Board Minutes, 1910–17, 27 June 1913.

⁴⁹ *Pictorial Record: St Albans*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, *passim*. Based on documents in the St Albans City Archive (e.g. HALS, SBR/2867) it appears that the National Telephone Co. had been developing telephone services in the city from the early 1890s onwards.

⁵¹ 'St Albans Water Supply', *HA*, 27 March 1915.

⁵² HALS, PUG 13/1/5, St Albans Gas Co. Minute Book, 1907–14, report for half-year ending 30 June 1913.

A number of other amenities, some provided and maintained by the council and some by private initiative, were available to the residents of St Albans. The council maintained the cemetery on Hatfield Road, opened in 1882, which was a source of income as well as an expense for the council, as were the public baths. The council was responsible for the upkeep of Clarence Park, which had been gifted to the city in 1894 by Sir John Blundell Maple.⁵³ Public buildings included the Corn Exchange, built in 1857, and the medieval clock tower, which had been extensively restored in 1865. A public library was first established in the 1880s, paid for by a penny rate, and this was replaced in 1911 by a new library, paid for by the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. Close to the Midland Railway station a prison was built in 1867, in which both men and women were accommodated and executions sometimes carried out. More happily, the city's museum – known as the county museum at this time – was opened in 1898, and was one of a number of tourist attractions that brought thousands of visitors to St Albans every year.⁵⁴

Health and education

Public health was overseen by Dr Henry E. May, the medical officer of health for both St Albans (from 1912) and the surrounding rural district (from 1911). May was responsible for the production of annual reports detailing vital statistics – birth, death and infant mortality rates – and information about infectious diseases and other public health matters, including inspections of houses, factories and workshops. May advised the council and schools about infection control, ensured that individuals with infectious diseases were isolated either in hospitals or at home, investigated the source of diseases, prosecuted parents for failing to notify the authorities of an infectious disease and closed schools when there was a serious outbreak of infection.

For the historian, May's annual reports provide an overview of conditions in St Albans at this period and of the impact of the war. In the years 1910–13 the number of births in the city annually ranged from 336 to 352, increasing to 521 in 1914 when the population was increased by the boundary extension. The birth rate in 1914 was 20.8 per 1,000 people, somewhat lower than the national rate (England and Wales) of 23.8. The death rate was also lower: 277 people died in 1914, or 11.1 per 1,000, compared with 14.0 for England and Wales as a whole.⁵⁵ Birth

⁵³ See Freeman, *St Albans*, pp. 239, 244.

⁵⁴ B. Moody, 'The museum of St Albans: a history', copy of lecture given to SAHAAS in 1999 (available in SAHAAS library).

⁵⁵ HALS, SBR/interim, MOHR, 1914.

and death rates largely reflected the age structure of the population, and infant mortality rates – deaths under one year of age per 1,000 live births – were considered a better measure of public health. St Albans fared well in this respect, with a consistently lower rate before the war than the country as a whole, although one still startlingly high from a modern perspective. In 1914 the rate was 52, compared with 105 for the whole of England and Wales. In most years between 100 and 200 cases of infectious diseases were notified to the medical officer: in 1914, for example, there were 179, including 88 cases of scarlet fever. Also in 1914 there was a diphtheria outbreak which led May to inspect the houses in St Michael's: he announced himself 'perfectly satisfied that these cases did not arise through any insanitary conditions either with regard to the outside premises or the drains or sewers'.⁵⁶

Health care was provided by three main hospitals. The St Albans Union Infirmary was part of the workhouse on Union Lane (now Normandy Road), and was administered by the poor law authorities. The Sisters Hospital was close to this and specialised in treating infectious diseases: it had been given to the city by Blundell Maple in 1893, the year before his gift of Clarence Park, and a diphtheria block was added in 1911. The Sisters Hospital was managed by a joint committee appointed by the city council, the rural district council and Harpenden urban district council, and patients from these areas were admitted free of charge. The third main hospital was the St Albans and Mid Herts Hospital and Dispensary on the corner of Verulam Road and Church Crescent, built in 1888 at a cost of £4,000 and enlarged in 1899 and 1912. By this time it accommodated 40 beds and the average number of in-patients was 300 a year, with outpatients numbering 1,100. This hospital relied heavily on annual subscriptions and one-off donations from the public, with more than £1,000 being received in 1914.⁵⁷ The war would put significant strain on these sources of funds. On top of his role as medical officer of health, May was honorary medical officer at this hospital and medical superintendent at the Sisters Hospital. Fourteen other physicians and surgeons were listed in the city in *Kelly's Directory* for 1914–15. Close to St Albans was the Hertfordshire County Asylum at Hill End, which was established in 1899 and extended in 1908; by 1913 it could accommodate 820 patients.⁵⁸

Like health care, education was a mixture of rate-financed, voluntary-aided and private provision. Elementary education was compulsory, with a school-leaving age of 13, but very

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ HALS, SBR/3572, St Albans and Mid Herts Hospital and Dispensary, Management Committee annual statements, 1914–19, 1914; *Kelly's Directory of St Albans, Harpenden and Hatfield for 1913–14* (London, 1913), 1913, p. 17.

⁵⁸ *Kelly's Directory ... 1913–14*, p. 17.

few children received any secondary education, with even fewer attending a university.⁵⁹ Since 1902 the local education authority had been the county council, although in St Albans the responsibility for county council schools had been devolved to a local sub-committee, of which the town clerk was the secretary. There were ten county council schools in the city, including Alma Road, for girls and infants, built in 1882 and enlarged in 1890, and Hatfield Road, for boys, built in 1881 and enlarged twice before the war. New schools served the population of Sandridge New Town, Fleetville and the Camp. The local authority also oversaw the secular curriculum of the existing voluntary-aided church schools, and provided some funding. Including both council and voluntary-aided schools, there were 3,929 children on elementary school rolls in St Albans in 1914.⁶⁰ Opportunities to obtain a secondary education were far more limited, being available only at the two leading fee-paying schools in the city at that time. For girls, there was St Albans High School for Girls, which had moved to Townsend Avenue in 1908 and had 157 girls in attendance in 1914.⁶¹ Boys could attend St Albans Grammar School,⁶² a medieval foundation which had been moved from the abbey itself to the old gatehouse in 1870, and which had also undergone significant expansion in the late Victorian and Edwardian period. A new building adjoining the gatehouse was constructed in 1907 at a cost of £10,000, and in 1912 a new ‘head master’s boarding house’ was built, costing £5,000. The headmaster Edgar Montague Jones, appointed in 1902, oversaw this expansion, which enabled the school to accommodate 245 pupils in 1914.⁶³ The school’s cadet force, which was attached to the junior division of the Officer Training Corps, numbered 102. In addition to these establishments there was also a School of Art & Craft on Victoria Street, a technical school which taught carpentry, joinery and other manual skills, as well as commercial subjects, mostly to elementary school-leavers attending day and evening classes.

Religion and culture

⁵⁹ Unless otherwise stated, the data in this paragraph comes from *Kelly’s Directory ... 1914–15*, pp. 49–52.

⁶⁰ HALS, HCC 21/9, Hertfordshire County Council Education Committee Minute Book, 1914–15. Date of report?

⁶¹ ‘St Albans High School’, *HA*, 21 November 1914.

⁶² The name of the school was a bone of contention between the headmaster and the governors at this time. During and after the war the headmaster discouraged the use of the word ‘grammar’, preferring the modern name of St Albans School: N. Watson, *Born not for ourselves: the story of St Albans School* (St Albans, 2014), p. 100.

⁶³ St Albans School Archive, E. Montague Jones to chairman of governors, 25 July 1914.

The religious life of St Albans – and in particular Protestant nonconformity – was strong, although church and chapel attendance had declined since the mid-nineteenth century. The expansion of the city and the construction of new housing estates resulted in new parish boundaries and new churches in addition to the long-established places of worship such as St Peter's and St Michael's and, of course, the abbey church, which had become a cathedral when the diocese of St Albans was created in 1877. By 1914 there was, in addition to the cathedral, space for around 3,000 worshippers in Anglican churches in St Albans, although no figures on actual attendance are available.⁶⁴ The newest churches were St Paul's in Hatfield Road, built in 1910 with 750 'sittings', and St Saviour's on Sandpit Lane, built in 1902 with 800. The foundation for St Saviour's parish hall was laid before the First World War and the building was opened on 5 November 1914.⁶⁵ Nonconformist churches were thriving. Marlborough Road Methodist church, built in 1898 at a cost of £7,000, had space for 950 worshippers: there had been a significant Methodist revival in St Albans in the late nineteenth century. The Methodist Sunday School continued to flourish, with over 1,000 members in the St Albans Methodist Circuit in 1908.⁶⁶ The Salvation Army Citadel and Young People's Hall on Victoria Street had around 20 meetings of various kinds each week.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, there was space for 450 at the Baptist church on Dagnall Street.⁶⁸ The Tabernacle, another Baptist church on Victoria Street, had 400 'sittings', two Sunday services and some midweek activity, and the Baptists also had a church on Verulam Road, with space for 200 but membership of just 44.⁶⁹ Baptist activities included missionary work in Sopwell Lane and the villages around the city.⁷⁰ Other religious groups included the Society of Friends (Quakers), whose meeting house was on Lattimore Road, and the Brethren in the gospel hall on the same street; both these denominations would come to prominence through their opposition to the war and support for conscientious objectors.⁷¹ The Quakers led the St Albans adult school on Stanhope Road, which was one of 14 institutions connected to churches that operated in the city, including the Citadel. There was also a strong Congregationalist presence at Spicer Street Independent Chapel and Trinity

⁶⁴ Calculated from *Kelly's Directory ... 1914–15*, pp. 11–14.

⁶⁵ W.H. Morley, *More such days, 1910–1952, being a continuation of the story of the church and parish of St Saviour, St Albans* (n.p., 1952), p. 15.

⁶⁶ E.J. Gardner, *Marlborough Road, 1898–1998* (St Albans, 1998), p. 37.

⁶⁷ *Kelly's Directory ... 1914–15*, pp. 48–9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14; *Baptists Handbook 1915*: Dr Williams's Library, London.

⁶⁹ *Kelly's Directory ... 1914–15*, pp. 14, 47; *Baptists Handbook 1915*.

⁷⁰ D. Turner, *With cheerful zeal: a history of the Dagnall Street baptist church* (London, 1999), p. 100.

⁷¹ On the Society of Friends see C. Crellin, *Where God had a people: Quakers in St Albans over three hundred years* (St Albans, 1999), pp. 53–4.

Church on Victoria Street, with which Samuel Ryder was associated. The Roman Catholic population was served by the church in Beaconsfield Road, with an average attendance at mass of 275 in 1908; SS Alban and Stephen School was opened in 1911.⁷²

Popular recreation for men, particularly working-class men, still centred on the pub, although less so than in the Victorian period. In 1871 there was one pub for every 35 or so men in the city.⁷³ Later in the 1870s consumption hit its peak, with per capita beer sales reaching 40 gallons a year.⁷⁴ By 1914 this had dropped to just 29 gallons as social changes such as improvements in education and mass consumerism changed attitudes to public drinking. There were 50 proceedings for drunkenness in St Albans in 1914, resulting in 44 convictions, representing a decrease since the late Victorian period.⁷⁵ Some drinkers changed venue: during the late Edwardian period off-licences saw a rise in business and there were around 1,400 members of clubs with their own bars, such as the city's Liberal Club and the St Albans Tennis & Croquet Club.⁷⁶ Even with the growth of the city beyond its medieval heart, the small but noisy local temperance lobby prevented the licensing of any pubs in the new working-class areas in Fleetville and around what is now Normandy Road. With these pressures bearing down on them even the publicans realised there were too many pubs in the city centre. The 1904 Licensing Act concentrated minds by introducing the so-called 'redundancy programme' to reduce the number of pubs throughout England and Wales. The act allowed payments in compensation to owners and tenants when a pub's licence was extinguished for reasons other than misconduct. Somewhat ironically, bearing in mind the 7,000 or so soldiers billeted in St Albans at the time, matters came to a head on 31 December 1914 when 11 pubs, including four in Fishpool Street, were shut under the programme either owing to insanitary conditions or because they were simply adjudged 'unnecessary', or both.⁷⁷ A notice the following day in the window of one of these redundant pubs noted: 'No more beer to be sold here for ever and ever, Amen.'⁷⁸

⁷² J. Corbett, *Celebration: the story of a parish: SS Alban and Stephen, 1840–1990* (St Albans, 1990), p. 28.

⁷³ The figure is based on the 1871 census return for the borough and the 86 public houses recorded in the head constable's annual licensing report: see 'Borough Petty Sessions' *HA*, 26 August 1871.

⁷⁴ R.G. Wilson, 'The changing taste for beer in Victorian Britain', in R.G. Wilson and T.R. Gourvish (eds), *The dynamics of international brewing since 1800* (London, 1998), p. 94.

⁷⁵ 'Licensing Session', *HA*, 6 February 1915.

⁷⁶ Figures extrapolated from HALS, PS21/4/1, St Albans City Petty Sessions, Register of Clubs.

⁷⁷ For a detailed discussion of the redundancy programme in St Albans see J. Mein, *The rise and fall of the pub in Victorian St Albans* (St Albans, 2011) (available in SAHAAS library).

⁷⁸ 'Eleven Licensed Houses Closed', *HA*, 9 January 1915.

Alternative sources of recreation included the theatre and, increasingly, the cinema. The County Hall Theatre in St Peter's Street had a regular programme featuring touring companies from other theatres, and was also hired out for amateur productions. The first cinema in St Albans was the Poly Picture Palace, at 166 London Road, which was opened in 1908 (as the Alpha) by the pioneering film producer Arthur Melbourne-Cooper. This was followed in 1912 by the opening of the St Albans Cinema on Chequer Street. Both showed a wide range of films and were popular with the public, being open six days a week and changing the programme every three days.⁷⁹ Before the outbreak of war St Albans Cinema showed *The Three Musketeers*, *The Man of Destiny* and a military drama called *The Boomerang*, among many other features.⁸⁰ Cinemas would become an increasingly important part of popular recreation during the interwar period, but they were emerging before the war, and in St Albans a little earlier than in most other places. Local cinemas charged between 3d and 1s for admission in January 1914, while in the same month seats for the pantomime at the County Hall Theatre ranged from 6d to 2s 6d, with children half price.⁸¹ There were also various new opportunities for outdoor recreation. Clarence Park became the new home of St Albans Cricket Club after it was given to the city in 1894, and the club was re-formed in 1898. Large crowds watched matches in the Edwardian period. St Albans City Football Club was founded in 1908, and also made its home in Clarence Park.⁸² Verulam Golf Club was established in 1905, the first scout troop in St Albans dates from 1908 and the first girl guide company from 1916.⁸³ Both scouts and guides would play a role in wartime St Albans.

By 1914 St Albans was a small but flourishing city with a growing industrial base and a lively political and associational life. In the latter respect, in particular, it typified the culture of voluntarism and middle-class social leadership that characterised urban communities in the early twentieth century; one historian has seen the Edwardian years as 'the apogee of British small-town life'.⁸⁴ The intertwining of politics, religion and voluntary service is seen in the varied careers of many of the leading citizens of St Albans. Samuel Ryder, with his involvement in business, the city council and Trinity Church, is one example. *Kelly's*

⁷⁹ A. Eykes with K. Stone, *Cinemas of Hertfordshire* (Hatfield, 2002 [1st edn 1985]), pp. ix, 91–4.

⁸⁰ Advertisements, *HA*, 20 June 1914, 4 July 1914.

⁸¹ Advertisements, *HA*, 12 January 1914. The cinema prices were for the Poly Picture Palace in St Albans.

⁸² Freeman, *St Albans*, pp. 248–9; R.G. Simons, *Cricket in Hertfordshire* (Hertford[?], 1996), pp. 56–7.

⁸³ F.L. Brittain, *Milestones of 100 years of Hertfordshire scouting* (n.p., 2008), p. 12. HALS, DP93C/29/2, St Paul's Parish Magazine, October 1917, celebrating the first anniversary of formation.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Freeman, *St Albans*, p. 245.

Directory, on the eve of the war, contained a long list of associations, including choral societies, the Church of England Temperance Society, the chamber of agriculture, the Hertfordshire Natural History Society, ‘lodges’ of the Oddfellows friendly society, the Primrose League (a social and political organisation supporting the Conservative party), the YWCA (though not YMCA) and a range of sporting, political and cultural organisations.⁸⁵ Some found an outlet for their energies in the St Albans Literary Institute or the St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural & Archaeological Society, and both residents and tourists visited the County Museum on Hatfield Road.⁸⁶ A burgeoning civic conservation movement involved a number of prominent figures in the city and there was a strong sense of local identity and civic pride. This had been demonstrated to spectacular effect in the historical pageant of 1907, which had involved a cast of 3,000 citizens in re-enacting eight episodes from the history of St Albans, watched over several performances by many thousands of spectators, some of whom had travelled on special trains from London and elsewhere.⁸⁷ This event, and others, showcased the public face of the city and the culture of public and voluntary service that underpinned its governance. As the rest of this book will show, the war would test this culture to its limits.

⁸⁵ *Kelly's Directory ... 1914–15*, pp. 53–7.

⁸⁶ B. Moody, *The light of other days: a short history of the St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural & Archaeological Society 1845 to 1995* (St Albans, 1995), p. 2; Freeman, *St Albans*, pp. 245, 252.

⁸⁷ M. Freeman, “‘Splendid display, pompous spectacle’: historical pageants in twentieth-century Britain”, *Social History*, 38 (2013), pp. 423–55.