

**Pageant Fever!
St Albans
Performs its
Past**

LARGE PRINT TEXT

Please leave this
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for other visitors to
use.

Introduction – next to West Keeper’s Gallery door

Pageant Fever! St Albans Performs Its Past

St Albans caught ‘pageant fever’ three times in the 1900s. In 1907, 1948 and 1953 the people of the city came together to perform episodes from its rich history. Hundreds acted in these historical pageants, all staged in Verulamium Park. Thousands more watched them. There were beautiful costumes, stirring music and teams of horses. There were kings and queens, abbots and monks and, of course, Saint Alban himself. In one scene there was even a fire-breathing dragon.

This exhibition tells the story of the St Albans pageants with objects, voices, pictures and film. It shows how the events were organised, how they brought history vividly to life and what they meant to the people of St Albans, then and now.

Here in the West Keeper’s Gallery, follow the story of the 1907 pageant and see photographs, costumes, props and souvenirs from it. In the East Keeper’s Gallery, explore the pageants of 1948 and 1953.

Between the two galleries discover more about the background to historical pageants and their enduring legacy today.

The boards to the left set the scene for the pageant of 1907.

This exhibition is a partnership between St Albans Museums and 'The Redress of the Past: Historical Pageants in Britain' project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. We are grateful to Peter Swinson and Ellie Reid for lending objects and recordings for the exhibition and for their advice.

Images:

St Albans Museums logo

Redress the Past logo

AHRC logo

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Three panels to the left of the door (left to right)

Board 1 Britain Catches 'Pageantitis'

Pageant fever first broke out in Sherborne, a small town in Dorset, in 1905. Theatrical impresario Louis Napoleon Parker led an eight-hundred-strong cast performing eleven scenes from local history. Spectators from near and far watched the seven performances from a temporary grandstand. The charismatic Parker became the most famous 'Pageant Master' of his generation.

In the years that followed, many other places followed Sherborne and staged their own historical spectacles. In 1907, St Albans was one of them. Here, the Pageant Master was Herbert Jarman from the Lyric Theatre in London.

The script was written by Charles Ashdown, a science teacher at St Albans School. Ashdown's wife Emily was 'chief mistress of the robes', in charge of providing costumes for the cast of 3,000. Both Ashdowns were accomplished historians. Emily wrote an important history of British costume, and Charles a study of arms and armour, as well as local guidebooks and histories.

Props for St Albans were made by Robert Groves, head of the St Albans School of Art on Victoria Street, and the music was composed by W. H. Bell, a professor at the Royal Academy of Music who lived in St Albans.

Images:

Louis Napoleon Parker 'inventing' the historical pageant.
From a private collection

Books by Emily and Charles Ashdown. *From the collection of Ellie Reid*

Board 2

St Albans and its Pageant

The pageant was staged in Verulamium Park, with a temporary grandstand like the one used at Sherborne. As most were held outdoors, their success often depended on good weather. St Albans was lucky in this respect!

The event was aimed at both locals and visitors. Special excursion trains were laid on for people coming to watch. There was newspaper coverage locally, nationally and even abroad – the American press took notice of St Albans, and some American tourists came to watch.

Spectators could buy mementos, some of which are on display in this exhibition. Postcards were especially popular as they were affordable to most pockets. There was also a souvenir programme, a 'book of words' containing the full script, mugs, vases, napkins, commemorative medals, and more.

The pageant sought to promote interest in the city's history (although, ironically enough, the local museum was unfortunately closed during the run of performances

because the staff were all involved in the pageant!). The press tried to whip up 'local patriotism', and leading citizens spoke of the pageant's 'educative influence'. Writing in the souvenir programme, the Dean of St Albans Cathedral wrote that the past, as brought to life in the pageant, should encourage local people to 'emulate in widely differing circumstances, the spirit of the achievements of their forefathers'.

Images

Queen Eleanor's funeral: a scene from the 1907 pageant. *Image courtesy of St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society.*

A souvenir postcard of the same scene. *Image courtesy of St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society.*

Board 3

The St Albans Pageant of 1907: Facts and Figures

Number of performers: 3,000

Grandstand capacity: 4,000

Choir: 200 people

Number of performances: 6

Dates and times: 15 to 20 July, at 3pm

Running time: about 2 hours 30 minutes

Total audience: 24,000 (estimated)

Income from ticket sales: £7,745 (about £915,000 today)

Pageant Master's fee: £380 (about £45,000 today)

Total profit: £669 (about £79,000 today)

Profits went to local hospitals and the Hertfordshire County Museum (now St Albans Museums).

Historical characters included:

- Julius Caesar, who invaded Britain in 54 BC.
- Cassivellaunus, the chief of the Catuvellauni, a war-like tribe who inhabited modern-day Hertfordshire. His forces were overcome by Caesar's.
- Queen Boudicca, rebel queen of the Iceni who defied the might of Rome, and destroyed Verulamium (St Albans) in 60/61 AD.
- Saint Alban, Christian martyr in Roman Britain.
- Offa, King of the Mercians in the 700s, reputed founder of St Albans Abbey.
- Edward I, Richard II, and Henry VI, Kings of England.
- Elizabeth I, Queen of England. 'Good Queen Bess' was a great favourite, not least because of the splendour of Elizabethan costumes.
- John Ball, a leader of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.
- Sir Nicholas Bacon (1510–79), Royal official and builder of Gorhambury House.
- Francis Bacon (1561–1626), the famous philosopher, and his mother, the formidable Lady Anne Bacon (1528–1610), a noted scholar and the second wife of Sir Nicholas Bacon.

Image:

Pageant-master Herbert Jarman in the director's chair at the 1907 pageant. *Image courtesy of St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society.*

Label next to tall case

Dress worn by Violet Worssam, daughter of the mayor of St Albans H. J. Worssam, during the 1907 pageant. Although Violet did not appear in the pageant herself, her older sisters performed, and a costume was also made for her. It is one of the few pageant costumes from the period that survive in public collections. Many performers bought their own costumes at the end of the pageant.

St Albans Museums' collection.

Label next to framed poster

Poster advertising the pageant of 1907, including ticket prices. Seats ranged from 3s 6d (£21 today) to 21s (£124 today).

St Albans Museums' collection.

Labels in the large glass case

From left to right

First case with mannequin

Costume and jewellery worn by one of Boudica's "wild women" warriors in the 1907 pageant, with the wooden dagger that she carried. The picture on the wall to the right shows one of the "wild women", and the scrapbook below is open at the page relating to the Boudica episode. Here, Mabel Edwards is depicted as one of the "wild women".

Objects in St Albans Museums' collection. Image reproduced from one in St Albans Museums' collection.

On the back of the case

Paper napkins produced as official souvenirs of the 1907 pageant. The napkin to the left shows details of the episodes in the pageant, and the one to the right provides information about the venue and the history of St Albans.

From the collection of Ellie Reid.

In the central case

Books by Emily and Charles Ashdown. Emily was "chief mistress of the robes" for the 1907 pageant, and an internationally renowned expert on the history of costume. Her husband Charles – a science teacher and noted local antiquarian, with a particular interest in arms and armour – wrote the script at St Albans, and later produced the Hertford pageant of 1914. Emily was also

in charge of the costumes at the Pevensey pageant in Sussex in 1908.

From the collection of Ellie Reid.

Souvenir programme from the 1907 pageant, including illustrations by John G. Withycombe and descriptions of the episodes by Rev. J. Vincent Bullard. Open at episode 3, which depicted the martyrdom of St Alban on 22 June 303 AD.

St Albans Museums' collection.

Book of words for the 1907 pageant, by Charles H. Ashdown. Open at the grand finale.

St Albans Museums' collection.

Pageant musical score by W. H. Bell, a professor at the Royal Academy of Music and resident of St Albans. Almost all the music used in the pageant consisted of original compositions by Bell.

St Albans Museums' collection.

In the right hand case

Herts Advertiser pageant supplement, 1907. This was priced at 4d. and featured full details of the performers in each episode, as well as photographs of the pageant. Open at the list of performers for the early episodes, with photograph of the "Pageant Master" Herbert Jarman and episode 1 of the pageant.

St Albans Museums' collection.

Scrapbook kept for a young child known only as “PGB, aged 2”. This contains a range of 1907 pageant memorabilia, including – shown here – a poster of the key “officials” involved. On the left-hand side there is a hand-written poem or song about “Pageant House”. This was a disused hat factory on Victoria Street in which many of the costumes and props were made and stored, and from where tickets for the pageant were sold. The press cutting celebrates the success of the pageant.
St Albans Museums’ collection.

Souvenir programme for the 1907 pageant, priced at 1s (almost £6 today).
St Albans Museums’ collection.

Two souvenir postcards depicting characters from the 1907 pageant. Boudica is on the left, and a Roman soldier on the right. These were in a scrapbook created by May Tyrwhitt-Drake, whose handwritten notes appear beneath the postcards.
St Albans Museums’ collection.

Flyer advertising a planned pageant in 1908. During 1906 there were considerable disagreements in St Albans over when to stage the pageant, and a group of local residents lobbied strongly for 1908, even printing flyers like this one. In the event the city council and other prominent supporters of the pageant decided on 1907.
St Albans Museums’ collection.

Panel attached to the end of the large case

The Eight Episodes in the Pageant

Like most pageants at this time, St Albans concentrated on the distant past. There were no scenes set later than the 1500s, with scriptwriter Charles Ashdown focusing on the Roman and medieval periods.

In writing his script, Ashdown used documented historical records. But he also drew on largely mythical accounts, such as the story of the foundation of St Albans Abbey by King Offa, traditionally dated to the year 793. In places, he used literary sources, such as William Cowper's poem 'Boudicea: An Ode' (1782) – in this case perhaps because Cowper had himself been a resident of St Albans.

Episode I. Julius Caesar and Cassivellaunus, 54BC

Episode II. Boudicea, 61AD

Episode III. Martyrdom of St Alban, 303

Episode IV. Offa founding the monastery of St Albans, 793

Episode V. The Eleanor Procession, 1290

Episode VI. The Peasants' revolt, 1381

Episode VII. The Second Battle of St Albans, 1461

Episode VIII. Queen Elizabeth at Gorhambury, 1572

In the last episode, Elizabeth I was shown visiting the Bacon family at Gorhambury House, an occasion marked with traditional folk arts including morris dancing.

The spectacle ended with an 'Ode to Verulam and St Albans' by W. H. Bell, and the national anthem.

Images

Postcard from the 1907 pageant, showing folk dancing in episode 8. *Image courtesy of St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society.*

Panel opposite – to the left of the AC unit

Around the City in ‘Pageant Week’

The city was transformed during the week of the pageant. Even those who did not actually attend the pageant could get into the spirit. One young resident, Elsie Toms, who much later became the city’s mayor, remembered:

“the performers dressed at home and walked or drove to the pageant ground, and one laughed to see a Roman soldier strolling along smoking a pipe, and a Briton in skins riding a bicycle. ... It all added to the fun, and it brought trade to the shops and warmed the hearts of the shopkeepers. The ordinary citizen began to comprehend that there was something special about his city and something worth preserving.”

Pageants brought people and communities together in a carnival-like way, but they could also cause friction. In St Albans, some worried that the audience members descending on Verulamium Park might damage the Roman walls, and so a large fence was built to protect the remains. The organisers also paid for extra policing to deal with the crowds. Moreover, there were complaints about the provision of alcoholic drinks at the performances as some saw this as inappropriate given the pageant’s educational aims.

Images

The temporary grandstand built for the 1907 pageant.

*Image courtesy of St Albans and Hertfordshire
Architectural and Archaeological Society.*

The Lord Mayor of London arriving at St Albans City
station on the way to watch the pageant.

Image in St Albans Museums' collection.

In the low case

Above: Souvenir china order form from the 1907 St Albans pageant.

Above right: Souvenir vase and mug from the 1907 St Albans pageant.

Right: Official pageant postcards order form, St Albans 1907.

From the collection of Ellie Reid.

Left: Order form for St Albans pageant souvenir medal, 1907.

From the collection of Ellie Reid.

Below: Brochure for the 1907 St Albans pageant, including brief details of the episodes and illustrations of some of the costumes.

St Albans Museums' collection.

Label for the framed poster above the case

Poster advertising the pageant of 1907, designed by Robert E. Groves, head of the St Albans School of Art.
St Albans Museums' collection.

Five panels in the corridor between galleries with more detail on history of pageants

Board 1

Historical Pageants: Edwardian Beginnings, 1905–14

The St Albans pageant was one of many held across Britain before the First World War. After staging the spectacle at Sherborne in 1905, Louis Napoleon Parker put on pageants at Warwick (1906), Bury St Edmunds (1907), Dover (1908), Colchester and York (both 1909). Many other Pageant Masters followed in his footsteps, including the flamboyant Frank Lascelles, who staged remarkable shows in Britain and overseas.

Whilst smaller places like St Albans were the ‘pageant hotspots’ of the early 1900s, larger towns and cities were not immune to the craze. There was a Pageant of London, produced by Lascelles in the Crystal Palace, as part of the Festival of Empire in 1911. There was also a pageant at the Scottish National Exhibition in Edinburgh in 1908, and a National Pageant of Wales at Sophia Gardens, Cardiff, in 1909.

In 1907 alone, there were at least eight major pageants in addition to the one in St Albans – including in Oxford, Romsey, Liverpool, Thirsk and the Isle of Wight.

As early as 1908, it was possible to speak of the ‘pageant season’, and fashionable ladies and gentlemen

would ask each other, 'do you padge?'. Pageant fever had well and truly taken hold.

Images

Programme for the Bury St Edmunds pageant of 1907. *David Clarke Collection, King's College London.*

The Sherborne pageant of 1905. *Image reproduced with permission of the Dorset History Centre ref.62259/6*

Board 2

The Inter-war Years (1918–1939)

Pageantry saw some changes after the First World War. More attention was paid to recent history, with some scenes from the war itself even being depicted in performances. But for the most part, the model established by Parker and Lascelles retained its appeal.

In some ways, the inter-war years marked the heyday of historical pageants. Large industrial cities including Manchester, Stoke and Newcastle got in on the act, and many small villages also told their own history through pageants. Small towns kept the tradition going too, although St Albans did not stage a pageant in this period.

Schools, churches and other organisations also held pageants as a means of celebrating their own histories and anniversaries. The Co-operative movement performed large-scale spectacles, and political parties from the Conservatives to the Communists did the

same. There were pageants of nursing, Women's Institute pageants, and even a Pageant of Parliament, staged at the Albert Hall in 1934.

Pageants even appeared in fiction. Virginia Woolf told the story of a village pageant in her novel 'Between the Acts', and Richmal Crompton's 'Just William' also performed in one. Crime novels also featured pageants, as in 'Murder at the Pageant' by V. L. Whitechurch and 'The Man without a Face' by Clifton Robbins.

Images

Cover of Murder at the Pageant by V.L. Whitechurch.
From the collection of Mark Freeman.

Souvenir programme for the Manchester pageant of 1938. *From the collection of Ellie Reid.*

Board 3

After the Second World War

The St Albans pageant of 1948 was one of the first large-scale post-war pageants. It was followed by another in Nottingham in 1949, produced by Lawrence du Garde Peach. An important figure, Peach introduced special effects and sensational storylines, influenced by radio, cinema and television.

Two national events in these years encouraged towns and cities to stage pageants: the 1951 Festival of Britain and the Coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953. The 'Redress of the Past' project research at historicalpageants.ac.uk

records a total of 61 pageants produced in the Festival year and a further 37 in 1953.

St Albans' event was one of many Coronation pageants, whilst nearby Hitchin staged a Festival pageant, where Cyril Swinson was also Pageant Master. At the same time, the revival of mystery plays – most importantly in York – showed the popularity of outdoor historical drama at the time.

Historical pageants went into decline from the mid-1950s, although there were still some significant ones from time to time. In Hertfordshire, Berkhamsted held a pageant in 1966, and Hertford in 1973. Mini-revivals of pageantry have occurred since – for example at the time of the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 and the millennium celebrations of 2000, as well as the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta in 2014–15.

In 2016, the long-running Radio 4 series 'The Archers' featured a village pageant – organised by the local busybody Lynda Snell.

Images

Programme for the Nottingham pageant, 1949.

Reproduced with permission of Inspire Nottingham Archives.

A scene from the York mystery plays, 2014. *Photograph by Roger W. Haworth (GNU free documentation licence).*

Board 4

St Albans After the Pageants

The last St Albans pageant was held in 1968. Produced by Arthur Swinson, the pageant was part of the St Albans Festival, which celebrated the opening of the City Hall (now the Alban Arena). It was a small-scale affair, staged in the new City Hall itself. Swinson's production consisted of eight episodes ranging in date from the twelfth to the late nineteenth century. Most of the 200 performers came from local schools, with some from the Verulam Youth Theatre.

There were other showpiece civic events in the 1950s, including visits by Queen Elizabeth II in 1952 and 1957, and a spectacular celebration in 1961 of the 400th anniversary of the birth of Francis Bacon.

The centenary of the Diocese of St Albans – and of St Albans's city status – was celebrated with a series of events labelled as FestAlban in 1977; which coincided with the Silver Jubilee. At the heart of the festival was the carnival procession, a yearly event that became especially popular during the 1980s.

Today, there is a lively programme of annual events celebrating the city. Some of these have distinct echoes of the pageants – in particular, the puppet re-enactments of the martyrdom of Saint Alban on the day of the annual Alban Pilgrimage in June.

Images

The FestAlban programme, 1977. *From the collection of Mark Freeman.*

Giant puppets in the Alban pilgrimage. 2016.
Photograph by Mark Freeman.

Board 5

Historical Pageants Today

Historical pageants have mostly disappeared, but some traces remain. The small town of Axbridge in Somerset first staged a pageant in 1967 and has done so again every ten years since 1970. The next one is scheduled for August 2020.

A different example is found in the north-east of England, near Bishop Auckland. Since 2016, an outdoor show called 'Kynren' has been performed on Fridays and Saturdays throughout the summer, in front of an 8,000-seater grandstand.

Another echo of pageants was seen in the opening ceremony for the London 2012 Olympics. Created by Danny Boyle and Frank Cottrell Boyce, this acclaimed extravaganza was in some ways very different to the pageants featured in this exhibition. But in other ways, it shared similarities and brought together a large cast of volunteers to perform a series of scenes from the past in order to celebrate national pride.

The legacy of pageants lives on in how we perform our past today. History is brought to life by film and

television, at spectacular events like the Olympics, and in museums and galleries like this one.

Discover more about the history of pageants on the 'Redress of the Past' website: historicalpageants.ac.uk

Images

A scene from the Axbridge pageant of 2010. *Photograph by Ian Mason, reproduced with the permission of the Axbridge Pageant Association.*

The Olympic opening ceremony, London, 2012. *Photograph by Matt Lancashire, Flickr: Creative Commons Licence: Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0).*

Outside the East Keeper's Gallery to the left of the door

Pageant Fever! St Albans Performs Its Past

St Albans caught 'pageant fever' three times in the 1900s. In 1907, 1948 and 1953 the people of the city came together to perform episodes from its rich history. Hundreds acted in these historical pageants, all staged in Verulamium Park. Thousands more watched them. There were beautiful costumes, stirring music and teams of horses. There were kings and queens, abbots and monks – and, of course, Saint Alban himself. In one pageant there was even a fire-breathing dragon.

This exhibition tells the story of the St Albans pageants with objects, voices, pictures and film. It shows how the pageants were organised, how they brought history vividly to life and what they meant to the people of St Albans, then and now.

Here in the East Keeper's Gallery, follow the story of the 1948 and 1953 pageants and see some of the scripts, artwork and even film footage that survive. In the West Keeper's Gallery we explore the 1907 pageant.

Between the two galleries, discover more about the background to historical pageants in twentieth-century Britain – and their enduring legacy today.

The boards to the right set the scene for the 1948 and 1953 pageants.

This exhibition is a partnership between St Albans Museums and 'The Redress of the Past: Historical Pageants in Britain' project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. We are grateful to Peter Swinson and Ellie Reid for lending objects and recordings and for their advice.

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Outside East Keeper's Gallery to the right of the door from left to right

Board1

An Austerity Pageant: 1948

The St Albans Millenary Pageant of 1948 was one of the first large-scale historical pageants staged after the Second World War. It celebrated the 1000th anniversary of the founding of St Albans by Abbot Ulsinus – 948 was the date usually given for this, although the actual year is unknown. The same year was also thought to be the founding date of St Albans School and the churches of St Peter's, St Michael's and St Stephen's.

Preparations were heavily affected by post-war austerity. Originally, the city council aimed to cast 2,000 performers, but this was reduced to 1,000. Costumes and props were difficult to make due to rationing. The city could not afford to pay a professional 'Pageant Master'. Instead, they called on Cyril Swinson, a publisher and author who co-founded the Company of Ten, a St Albans amateur dramatics group. In this way, almost by accident, Swinson launched a new career as one of the most prolific post-war Pageant Masters.

There were 11 episodes, starting with Saint Alban himself and ending in the nineteenth century. For many, though, the highlight was not the performance itself but a visit from Queen Elizabeth – wife of George VI and the Queen Mother of the time.

Images

Costume-making for the 1948 pageant. *Image courtesy of Peter Swinson.*

The arrival of Queen Elizabeth at the 1948 pageant. *Image courtesy of Peter Swinson.*

Board 2

A Coronation Pageant: 1953

Along with many other places, St Albans staged a historical pageant to mark the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. Cyril Swinson was again Pageant Master, and this time was able to call on a cast of 1,600 to perform ten episodes featuring historical Queens and their associations with St Albans.

The pageant opened with Boudicca's revolt against Roman rule and her destruction of the town of Verulamium. Other scenes included Henry VIII's courtship of Anne Boleyn at Sopwell Nunnery in 1532 and a visit by Elizabeth I to the Bacon family at Gorhambury in 1577.

Just as in 1948, the 1953 pageant showcased St Albans – both to potential investors and residents, and to its own citizens. Local businesses advertised in the souvenir publications, and the event looked to the future as well as the past. As the city surveyor wrote in the 1953 programme, 'the future St Albans will be a

pleasant place ... presenting a picture of an English city growing and changing through the centuries’.

Whilst these post-war pageants retained a serious, educational purpose, they were also fun. In 1953 there was a large green dragon, which appeared in a scene about ‘St George and the Dragon’, performed during episode V. According to the local press, this was the ‘comic highlight’ of the pageant.

Images

Advertisement for the 1953 pageant. *Image in St Albans Museums’ collection.*

The pageant dragon of 1953. The dragon can also be seen in the film on display in this exhibition. *Image courtesy of Peter Swinson.*

Board 3

Pageants and Civic Pride

Civic pride was a major reason for staging a pageant. This was especially clear from the choice of scenes in 1948. Here, the episode entitled ‘Ulsinus Has a Plan’ showed the establishment of the town by the abbot, and featured monks carrying models of St Peter’s, St Michael’s and St Stephen’s churches.

The last scene was set in 1877, when St Albans became a city. In this scene, the mayor and councillors played their own predecessors.

For Pageant Master Cyril Swinson and many others, the post-war period was an unsettling one for a city like St Albans, which was undergoing rapid expansion. Historical pageants, it was hoped, could promote an interest in local history and urban conservation, and stimulate civic pride.

The 1948 pageant was widely thought to be a success. Because of post-war paper rationing, it was not well-reported locally, but, according to one recollection, it ‘captured the imagination of the press and public the world over, especially as it was one of the first touches of glamour and frivolity after the grim war years’. The pageant made a substantial profit. By contrast, though, the following 1953 event lost money, and St Albans never staged a large-scale pageant again.

Images

‘Ulsinus Has a Plan’: scene 3 of the 1948 pageant.
Image courtesy of Peter Swinson.

‘St Albans is a City’: scene 9 of the 1948 pageant.
Image in St Albans Museums’ collection.

Inside the gallery to the left of the door

Family affairs: the Swinsons and the St Albans Pageants

Cyril Swinson (1911–63) was a leading figure in post-war historical pageants. A publisher and author, who wrote under the pseudonym Hugh Fisher, Swinson was an excellent choice both to write the scripts and to produce the 1948 and 1953 pageants as ‘Pageant Master’.

Cyril’s wife Brenda was also a key contributor to these pageants, playing the role of Boudicca in 1953, while Cyril’s younger brother Arthur (1915–70) was ‘Marshal of the Arena’ in 1948. Arthur was an author and scriptwriter for radio and television and later wrote several episodes of ‘Dr Finlay’s Casebook’.

The Swinsons were proud residents of their home city, working hard to promote it. Cyril was a founder member of the St Albans Civic Society. His pride in St Albans is also clear from the words of the ‘pageant hymn’, which he wrote. The hymn was performed in 1948 and 1953, and you can hear it in this exhibition.

Cyril also produced pageants at Wisbech (1949), Hitchin and Rochester (both 1951), King’s Lynn (1954), and Jersey in the Channel Islands (1955). Arthur did not return to pageantry until 1968, when he produced a small indoor pageant in connection with the St Albans Festival – staged in the new City Hall.

IMAGES

Brenda Swinson as Boudica in the 1953 pageant. *Image courtesy of Peter Swinson.*

Cyril Swinson with some of the pageant performers in 1948. *Image courtesy of Peter Swinson.*

Poster above television screen

Poster advertising the 1953 pageant, "A Masque of the Queens". The pageant started at 8pm, to ensure that the lighting was seen to best effect on some of the longest days of the year. Ticket prices ranged from 3s 6d (less than £5 today) to 21s (£29 today).

St Albans Museums' collection.

Label for television screen. This film has no sound.

Colour film footage of the pageants of 1948 and 1953.
[two films, each lasting 30 minutes, playing on a loop]

Each episode is introduced with the relevant page in the souvenir programme. The filming probably took place during the dress rehearsals rather than the actual performances. The films were in the possession of "Pageant Master" Cyril Swinson and have been restored and lent by his son Peter.

Used with the permission of Peter Swinson.

You can see the whole of these two pageant films, with commentary from Peter Swinson and some music from the pageants of 1948 and 1953, at a special event on Wednesday 22 January 2020.

Book your tickets here:

<https://www.stalbansmuseums.org.uk/whats-on/pageant-films>

Label for the listening post next to the television screen

- 1. Actors reminiscing about the parts they played in the 1948 and 1953 pageants.** Recorded by Peter Swinson, 15 October 2003. [3:03]
- 2. Memories of re-enacting the martyrdom of St Alban in 1948 the second battle of St Albans in 1953, including the use of knitted chain mail.** Recorded by Peter Swinson, 15 October 2003. [3:21]
- 3. Discussion about the atmosphere in St Albans during the pageants, the crowds, and the price of tickets.** Recorded by Peter Swinson, 15 October 2003. [1:03]
- 4. Memories of pageant costumes and props in an age of rationing – and of riding horses in the pageants.** Recorded by Peter Swinson, 15 October 2003. [3:54]

Labels for large case

On the back of the case

Oil painting by Maurice Blockley of episode 5, the visit of Queen Elizabeth I to Gorhambury House (in 1572). Blockley described this scene: 'With pretty and light music playing, a body of yeomen entered the arena, [and] they were joined by country folk and townspeople who had come to greet the Queen ... Then many visitors arrived, including the Mayor, the Town Clerk, the Senior Alderman and many other prominent men of the town. Sir Nicholas Bacon accompanied by Lady Anne, and their two sons arrived to greet the Queen.' The actors playing the Bacon family can be seen in the picture to the right of the seated Elizabeth.

St Albans Museums collection.

Silk scarf featuring illustrations representing some of the queens depicted in the 1953 pageant. Clockwise from top left: Queen Anne (episode 9), Margaret of Anjou (episode 6), Boudica (episode 1) and Phillipa (episode 4). One such scarf was presented to each performer who played one of the queens in the pageant. This one was given to Brenda Swinson (Boudica).

From the collection of Peter Swinson.

On the base of the case

Souvenir catalogue for an exhibition of paintings by Maurice Blockley, who produced more than 30 paintings of the pageant. Blockley was a lecturer, art teacher and lithographer, who gave classes in Marshalswick. Two of his paintings can be seen in this exhibition.

St Albans Museums collection.

Three copies of the souvenir programme for the 1948 pageant, which also contained the full script. This was priced at 2s 6d (about £4.50 today). The programme carried advertisements for many local businesses, along with well-known products ranging from Martell Cognac to Oxo to the *Daily Mail*. One of the copies is open at the scene depicted in the Blockley painting above, the other at episode 8, featuring a rowdy and corrupt election scene from 1722.

St Albans Museums' collection.

The pageant hymn from 1948, which was also used in 1953. Words by Cyril Swinson; music by Lewis Covey-Crump. You can listen to a modern recording of the hymn at one of the listening posts in this gallery.

St Albans Museums' collection.

Selection of photographs of scenes from the 1948 pageant.

St Albans Museums' collection.

Scrapbook from the 1948 pageant. This includes photographs, but mainly a large selection of newspaper cuttings, showing how the pageant gained widespread local, national and even international press coverage. *St Albans Museums' collection (donated by Mrs Marjorie Grant).*

Advance publicity flyer for the 1948 pageant, containing details of the episodes. *St Albans Museums' collection.*

Formal address of thanks to Cyril Swinson from St Albans City Council following the 1948 pageant, signed by mayor W. R. Hiskett and town clerk W. B. Murgatroyd. The volume also contains high-quality photographs of St Albans Cathedral and other historic buildings in the city, as well as scenes from the pageant itself. *From the collection of Peter Swinson.*

Three copies of the souvenir programme for the 1953 pageant, which – like its counterpart five years earlier – cost 2s 6d and also contained the full script and a range of advertisements. One of the copies has been signed at the relevant episodes by some members of the cast. This is open at episode 6, which depicted the second Battle of St Albans. Many of these signatories were members of the Company of Ten theatre group,

including Terence Newell, the producer of the episode. Newell's son Mike later became famous as a film and TV director and producer.

St Albans Museums' collection, and the collection of Mark Freeman.

Advance publicity flyer for the 1953 pageant.

St Albans Museums' collection.

Dragon in Danger, a children's novel by Rosemary Manning first published in 1959. This was set in the town of "St Aubyns", and told the story of a dragon performing in a pageant. It is clearly influenced by Swinson's 1953 pageant and its episode that featured a dragon.

From the collection of Mark Freeman.

Labels for the listening post next to the AC unit.

- 5. Memories of riding a penny-farthing bicycle in the final scene of the 1948 pageant. The penny-farthing was lent by George Mossman, whose nationally significant collection of horse-drawn vehicles is now on display in Luton.**

Recorded by Peter Swinson, 15 October 2003. [2:32]

- 6. Extract from episode I of the 1953 pageant, “Queen Boudicea: The Battle Against the Romans”**

Script by Cyril Swinson

Boudicea/Boudicca: Martha Vandrei, author of “Queen Boudica and Historical Culture in Britain: An Image of Truth” (Oxford, 2018)

Stage directions: Paul Readman

[1:32]

- 7. Remembering the pageant hymn, and the letter of thanks sent from Buckingham Palace to the organisers of the 1948 pageant.**

Recorded by Peter Swinson, 15 October 2003. [1:41]

- 8. St Albans Pageant Hymn**

Written for the St Albans millenary pageant, 1948, and also used in the Coronation pageant of 1953.

Words: Cyril Swinson,

Music: Lewis Covey-Crump

Piano: Stella Moore, Andrea Monk

Warbling: Amanda Boyd

Recording: Daniel Shaw, Dave Grier [1:30]

Panel opposite, to the right of the AC unit

St Albans Pageant 1948: facts and figures

Number of performers: 1,000

Total audience: not known

Choir: 200 people

Number of performances: 6

Dates and times: 21 to 26 June at 7pm, with a Saturday matinee at 3pm

Number of episodes: 11

Income from ticket sales: £12,717 (£454,000 today)

Spending on costumes: £1,679 (£60,000 today)

Total profit: £3,382 (£117,000 today)

Music was performed by members of the St Albans Orchestral Society, St Albans Youth Orchestra, St Albans Bach Choir, St Albans Musical Society, church choirs from St Albans and Luton, and students from the Royal College of Music.

Historical characters in the pageant included:

- Saint Alban, Christian martyr in Roman Britain.
- Ulsinus (or Wulsin), an Anglo-Saxon abbot of St Albans and supposed founder of the town and market.
- Offa, King of the Mercians in the 700s, reputed founder of St Albans Abbey.

- Matthew Paris, monk of St Albans in the 1200s and renowned chronicler.
- Nicholas Breakspear, as Adrian IV, the first and only English Pope to date. He was born in or near St Albans.
- Henry VI and Charles I, Kings of England.
- Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, the youngest son of Henry IV, was protector of England when Henry VI was a child. 'Good Duke Humphrey' gave generously to St Albans Abbey and was buried there in 1447.
- Sir Nicholas Bacon (1510–79), Royal official and builder of Gorhambury House.
- Sir Francis Bacon, Viscount St Alban (1561–1626), the famous philosopher
- Elizabeth I, Queen of England.
- Oliver Cromwell, regicide and Lord Protector.
- Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough (1660–1744), a powerful politician and courtier and had a home in St Albans.

Image

Spectators at the 1948 pageant. *Image courtesy of Peter Swinson.*

Painting above case

Oil painting by Maurice Blockley of the epilogue of the 1948 pageant. This shows the whole cast gathering at the end of the pageant, around the replica Eleanor Cross that was built for the occasion.

St Albans Museums' collection.

Objects in low case

Far left: Badges produced for the 1948 and 1953 pageants.

Left: Notes for marshals produced by Leslie Hider, 'chief marshal of the assembly area' for the 1953 pageant. The Boy Scouts of St Albans provided logistical support for the pageant in 1953.

Bottom left: Notes for the producers of each episode by "Pageant Master" Cyril Swinson, following the dress rehearsal for the 1953 pageant.

Below: Directions for stage managers at the 1953 pageant (including specific instructions about the dragon!).

Right: Advance publicity flyer for the 1948 pageant.

Bottom right: Letter from T. C. Harvey (private secretary to HM The Queen) to Captain J. M. Donaldson (chairman of the pageant executive committee), following the then Queen's visit to the 1948 pageant.

St Albans Museums' collection.

Panel to the right of the gallery door

St Albans Pageant 1953: facts and figures

Title: 'The Masque of the Queens'

Number of performers: 1,600

Grandstand capacity: 3,853

Total audience: 18,989

Number of performances: 7

Dates and times: 22 to 27 June, at 8pm, with a Saturday matinee at 3pm

Number of episodes: 10

Running time: 2 hours

Income from ticket sales: £6,832 (£187,000 today)

Spending on costumes and props: £1,550 (£42,500 today)

Total loss: £1,203 (£33,000 today)

Music was performed by members of St Albans Bach Choir, St Albans Choral Society, St Albans Orchestral Society, St Albans City Band and the Watford School of Music.

Queens depicted in the pageant were:

- Boudicca, rebel queen of the Iceni who defied Roman rule and destroyed Verulamium (St Albans) in 60/61 CE.
- Matilda, first consort of Henry I. A pious Christian, she was present at the consecration of the St Albans Abbey church in 1116.
- Eleanor of Castile, consort of Edward I.
- Philippa of Hainault, consort of Edward III.

- Catherine of Valois, consort of Henry V and mother of Henry VI, she visited St Albans in 1421.
- Margaret of Anjou, consort of Henry VI.
- Anne Boleyn, ill-fated second wife of Henry VIII. The pageant showed her courting her future husband at Sopwell Nunnery in 1532.
- Elizabeth I, Queen of England.
- Queen Anne, shown visiting her close confidante Sarah Churchill in St Albans in 1692.

Image

Pageant credits for 1953 in the local press. *Image courtesy of Peter Swinson.*