

THE LOSS, RE-DISCOVERY and RESTORATION of DRAGON HALL: 1467 TO 2005



The story of Dragon Hall after Toppes' death in 1467 is a remarkable and interesting story in itself. And its re-discovery and restoration from the 1970s is an example of professionals and volunteer enthusiasts working together on a major restoration project over some thirty years to restore a neglected and rundown building which has become one of Norwich's architectural gems. The story starts with the stipulation in Toppes' will that 'Splytt's' - as it was known to him – should be sold. It then began its almost 500 years of life as a residential building. Its identity as today's 'Dragon Hall' only began in the mid- 1980's.

Sub-division

After Toppes' death the trading hall and the whole complex began to be subdivided into residential accommodation and in effect the trading hall was completely 'lost' and its short life as a commercial building was forgotten and was unrecorded. The great hall was subdivided with partitions; chimneys and fireplaces were installed; cellars were dug out; and attic floors were put in. The three great oriel or bay windows in the great hall were removed and a variety of sash and other windows was installed. On the ground floor on King Street and in the sub – divided hall above a number of individual dwellings were created and the existing pattern of doors and sash windows was created; thus it took on the identity, which its external appearance still has, of a series of sort of 'Tudor town cottages' – an identity which lasted for some 500 years. The 19th century census records show that there were some 70 people living in the main building with another 70 in tenements behind and in Old Barge Yard to the side. The main building, owned by brewers Young, Crawshay, Youngs, at some point became known as the 'Old Barge Building', after the pub at the south end. At some point in the 1930s or 40s it became semi-derelict. By the 1950s it comprised the pub, the rectory for St Julian's and St Peter Parmentergate churches and, at the north end, Swatman's butcher's shop.



Dragon Hall 1940s (?)

Re-discovery

Press cuttings in the 20th century show that there seems to have been some awareness that the building had been more than tenements or cottages, as there are a few references to a hall from 1939 onwards and some thought, wrongly, that it was a merchant's house. A 1950s advertisement for the Old Barge pub described it as a 'woolhall'. Later, again incorrectly, it was referred to in the Press as a 'cloth hall' and as 'an historic inn'. It was granted Grade 1 Listed status in 1954 and in the 1960s architectural historians identified the crown post roof and that the roof of the building was one entity, although Pevsner's architectural guide of 1962 doesn't mention the existence of a hall.



But the real 're-discovery' of the Hall only began with an exploration of the roof space in 1965 or 1966 by Dr Hassell Smith of UEA. This coincided with the work of the Norwich Survey at UEA and that of Arthur Whittingham and it was realised that it was in fact all one building, of major historical importance. By 1971 it was being described in the Press as 'architecturally unique'.

from Jarrold's' pub map 1955/56

Around this time the dragon carving was found in what was then still an attic and a group of enthusiasts, supporters and experts then began a complex 40 year process of repairs, fund – raising and restoration.



The dragon in the attic

Repair and restoration

In 1967 the building was sold to Watney Mann who had plans for it as a conference centre and later as a reception and staff training centre. In 1969 the Old Barge pub closed and in 1975 the Rectory was relocated to Stepping Lane. In 1979 the City bought the whole building from the brewery and began an extensive programme of repairs and restoration costing some £200,000. In 1980 the first trial archaeological excavation was carried out and in 1982 the Historic Buildings

and Monuments Commission gave permission for removal of the internal partitions, attic floors and chimney stacks and in 1983 the City Architects Department issued a two page report 'The Old Barge: Brief Provisional Notes towards a History'.



A chimney in the middle of the Hall

In 1985 came the setting up of The Old Barge Steering Committee under the chairmanship of Chris Barringer, the first organised involvement of a separate body to develop the Hall. (This evolved into the later Trust which managed the Hall until 2015). This Committee reported to the City Planning Committee with a proposal for a five year 'Dragon Hall Heritage Centre Project' to run from 1987 to 1993. In 1986 a part-time Project Officer was appointed to oversee the restoration programme.

The creation of 'Dragon Hall', the Trust and fund - raising

In 1986 we find the first mention of the renaming of the Hall as 'Dragon Hall', following the discovery of the dragon carving in one of the spandrels. The renaming proved to be somewhat controversial, especially for former residents and supporters of the Old Barge pub who saw the renaming as tampering with their own history. Letters appeared in the local Press with such headlines as 'Dragon Sinks Old Barge', 'Hands Off the Old Barge!' and 'Family ties in Old Barge Club', referring to the pub's Sunday Angling Club: *'for the price of 5/- they would get a cooked breakfast, coach fare and a good Sunday morning out'*.

Hands off the Old Barge!

**Dragon
sinks
the Old
Barge**

WHAT'S in a name? The
"sugar" might say so!

Jan. 29th: How we
started the great job
debate.

WAR-TIME pub landlady Ivy Martin
has joined the growing campaign to
keep King Street's Old Barge tradi-
tion alive.

Plans are afoot to change the name of one
of the city's most famous landmarks to
Dragon Hall... because of a carved dragon
in one of the roof arches.

**the Old
Barge!**

I reckoned that was a dash idea, and I said
so in this column back in January. And it
seems that a good many of you agree with
me judging by your letters.

Now Ivy, 77, who as Ivy Woodhouse
helped run the pub from 1932-48 has
branded the rechristening of the Old Barge
"ridiculous." She added: "I don't see what
on earth they would gain by the new name."

Letter to the Press 1986

Also in 1986 the City Council agreed to the setting up of a Dragon Hall Trust to lease, develop and manage the Hall. The Press reported on a £360,000 project to convert the Hall into a 'heritage centre'. In 1987 the Trust merged with the Norfolk Heritage Trust and became the Norfolk and Norwich Heritage Trust, for much of its life chaired by Chris Barringer, which managed the Hall until 2015. In 1987 came the setting up of The Friends of Norfolk and Norwich

Heritage, known later as The Friends of Dragon Hall, and its first Newsletter in December 1987. The Friends, chaired by Jim Marriage, became pivotal in a major fund raising project, with an extensive programme of lectures, visits, events and talks. The Friends also provided the nucleus of a group of volunteers who stewarded events and acted as tour guides when the Hall was opened to the public on a regular basis. In 1988 more than 300 people attended the first AGM of The Friends, evidence of the enthusiasm generated by the 'Dragon Hall project' and it was reported that visitors and school pupils were coming to the Hall in great numbers, despite the cold and somewhat primitive conditions. At about this time also the first Director, Sarah Knights, was appointed.



Fund raisers with Snap and Mayor Harry Watson

Fund raising remained a major activity for the Trust and The Friends for many years, assisted by a visit by Prince Charles in 1998 and two other royals. Councillor Harry Watson had been a strong supporter of Dragon Hall and in the same year he chose Dragon Hall as his mayoral charity, raising the record sum of £22,00. In 1997/98 the Heritage Lottery Fund funded the major archaeological dig at the rear of the hall with a grant of £316,000; this grant also funded a major documentary research programme whose results were incorporated in the East Anglian Archaeology Report No.112 published in 2005.



Archaeological excavations 1997/98

The Heritage Lottery Fund Project and the advent of Writers' Centre

The final phase of this long running restoration and development came in 2003 when the Heritage Lottery fund granted £1.36 million, to be matched by £400,000 from the Trust, for a major restoration project carried out in 2005/06 which created Dragon Hall as it is today. The project was designed to make Dragon Hall viable as a venue for weddings, receptions, functions, performances, exhibitions etc. and included a new north wing with an Events Room, a lift, catering kitchen, storeroom and toilets. It also included the provision of a glass wall and roof for the ground floor rear of the hall to create a Glass Gallery, and a garden area at the rear. Displays, interpretation panels and a video film were provided together with audioguides for visitors. The project also funded the first full time Education Officer. The Hall remained open to the public and to groups for several days per week and hosted a large number of weddings and receptions, beer festivals, Christmas markets, exhibitions and drama productions as well as many school visits and family activities.



Completion of HLF project 200/06 with the new north wing

In 2015 the Trust handed over the lease to Writers Centre Norwich and the Trust was finally wound up in 2016.