

DRAGON HALL: A DETAILED GUIDE



[Note: this document, dated 18.9.06 and originally named 'Essential Information for Stewards', was produced for volunteer Building Stewards after the completion of the HLF funded building project in 2006. Together with 'A Guide to Dragon Hall for Volunteers', it remains the most comprehensive guide to the site and buildings.]

The Saxon Site

The archaeological dig of 1997/98 revealed evidence of Saxon settlement on the site. This can still be seen in the post holes in cellar 2. However, there was evidence of settlement elsewhere on the site. The first sustained settlement dated from the late 10th/early 11th century. Scatterings of pottery from the 9th century were discovered but these were insufficient to indicate continual settlement.

The 10th/11th century settlers lived in small timber huts possibly thatched with heather or bracken. The huts would have been dark and smoky. Quantities of fish bones (both riverine and estuarine) were found but there is no evidence to suggest that the inhabitants of the site were involved in fishing. (As a matter of interest the diet of the Saxon settlers was varied. In addition to fish, cereals, cabbages, peas and beans, figs, apples, raspberries and damsons, cattle, sheep/goat and pigs were consumed). There was no evidence of a single occupation/industry – the inhabitants seem to have been involved in a range of activities – evidence of antler-working (perhaps making combs) was found and a small amount of iron slag. Interestingly the settlement appears to have focused on the road and not the river. This part of King Street (Conesford) was outside the Saxon defensive burh which ran along modern Mountergate and up Stepping Lane (by Howard House and Raven Yard). However, such was the importance of Conesford, which ran through the town past the market at Tombland, that settlements spread along Conesford beyond the burh.

14th century site

During the first half of the 14th century the site was divided. The northern half was owned by the Abbey of Woburn. Woburn held property here from 1280s until somewhere between 1314 and 1350. Their interest in the area was primarily to organise the supply of fish (remember Abbeys were businesses as much as religious institutions). The south gable of the modern north wing was the site of a large, storeyed flint and rubble house. Another structure lay where the modern lawn is – this may have been a fish-house, used to smoke fish brought from Yarmouth for consumption at Woburn Abbey. The Wessex Archaeology dig of 2005/06 revealed evidence of what may be another Woburn structure. Substantial foundations were discovered leading towards the river from the north-east corner of the Hall (by the new stair down to cellar 1). These

may well relate to a gatehouse belonging to Woburn which gave entry to their site (along what was to become St Ann's Lane).

The other (southern) part of the site was owned by John Page (clerk and "property developer") during the early 14th century. The modern reception block follows the line of John Page's open hall house. Page's open hall was twice as long as the modern reception building (the other part being a victim of 1930s slum demolition) and in addition there was probably a kitchen attached to the east gable. The two arches in the entrance way (screens passage) date from this time. One led into the service rooms (buttery and pantry - storing drink and food). The other door led down to a brick undercroft.

The later 14th century and the Great Arch

The site was unified in the mid-late 14th century, under the ownership of either the Midday or Clere families (Roger Midday was a merchant and city bailiff twice, William Clere owned properties in the Ormesby area and was MP for Norfolk). This would have been a major site with high quality buildings and quayside and we should not underestimate its importance just because we know that Toppes is going to completely re-develop the site.

The Middays or Cleres made changes to the site in the mid to late 14th century.

- **The open hall house** – it is possible that the open hall house was shortened and a garderobe constructed against the new east (river) gable – beyond it there may have been an open yard providing a firebreak for a detached kitchen.
- A **small timber building** constructed on King Street (on the street site just to the north of the Great Arch). This was probably a rented property (an illustration of the growth and activity of King Street).
- The **boundary wall**. The boundary wall probably dates from this time. If you look up from the glass gallery you can see that the boundary wall is on a different line to the Great Hall itself, indicating a different date of construction. The wall was a means of maintaining the privacy of the site after the timber building was constructed and after St Ann's Lane was recognised as a public right of way in the later 14th century.
- The dating of the **great arch** itself is uncertain. It was not part of the original spine wall. It may have been added by the Middays (who probably unified the site in the late 14th century) or Cleres (who owned the site by 1378) as an impressive, high status entrance into their compound. It may also have been added by Toppes after he had built his Great Hall and access to King Street was blocked. However, such an impressive double-chamfered brick arch seems to be a bit out of place, given that very basic workmanlike features are used elsewhere in the warehouse yard.

Toppes' changes

Toppes made major changes to the site. He destroyed the Woburn fish house and constructed a building with chimney on a slightly different line to give easier access from the river. He also destroyed the timber house on King Street and took the roofs off the open hall house and its service rooms. He then used pre-existing walls to rest his Great Hall on. To get extra width he supported the east (river) side of the Great Hall with an arcade.

Toppes created more than just a Great Hall. He developed a trading complex with a very clear division of space. This was a purely mercantile site. There are no domestic elements to Toppes' site – very unusual for a private development of this time. In addition the distinction between the warehouse and the display areas of the site is striking and unusual for this period.

Examples of division between showroom and warehouse areas.

- Toppes added a new bay to the undercroft. This was inferior quality compared to John Page's 14th century undercroft (the difference between a home and a working building?). He blocked the old entrance to the undercroft from the screens passage and contrived a new entrance to the undercroft (where it is today). This meant that guests to the hall were not disturbed by activity in the undercroft.
- The edge of the brick patio in the garden today is roughly the position of a short screening wall which Toppes built outside a door from the old Open Hall. This stopped visitors being seen from or viewing the courtyard as they visited the garderobe which lay behind the open hall.
- There is a clear contrast between the east side (river) of the building and the west (King Street). The first floor of the river side was meant to impress from a distance but the decoration and detail is poor up close. Stand by the door from reception to the glass gallery and look up. The wall plate in the glass gallery has a very basic chamfer on it. The shape and construction of the braces which hold up the wall plate is inconsistent and basic. By contrast the screens passage is full of decoration, the wall plate is highly decorated and the two arch braces are decorated and have space for carvings in the spandrels.

How do we know about a lot of this? From the 1997/8 archaeological excavation on the site by Norfolk Archaeological Unit and further excavation in 2004/05 by Wessex Archaeology - both part of the HLF funded development.

Toppes' tour

Visiting merchants were taken through a carefully organised tour which began as soon as they came down King Street.

Front Façade

Visitors were meant to be impressed by the knapped flint ground floor, the three first floor oriel windows, oak studs and stone corbels on the north and south gables. As they turned into Old Barge Yard (as it is today) they saw the 15th century stone door surround framing the 14th century ogee arch from the earlier hall house.

They were taken into the Screens Passage (met by a doorman or chief servant?). The screen we see today dates from the 16th (we do not know if Toppes' hall had a screen). There were three arches to their left. Two were 14th century ogee arches which had belonged to John Page's hall house. One of these (which had gone down to the undercroft) was blocked, the other led up a flight of stairs into part of today's Old Barge Room which may have served as a buttery. The other, larger arch, was a 15th century arch put in by Toppes.

Visitors were taken into the reception area (in the same place as the modern reception but open to the roof and extending further down towards the river). Here they are wined and dined (served from detached kitchen to the east and perhaps from a buttery in today's Old Barge Room). The room was high status, there were carvings in two spandrels which supported the decorated wall plate (above today's screens passage). In addition the oak studs in this part of the Great Hall were turned around so that the dressed side faced into this room rather than into the Great Hall.

If visitors needed to use the garderobe they left the open hall by a door in the north wall of the reception room (near the entrance to the garden today). Rather than look directly into the warehouse yard they were screened by a wall which created a passage to lead them in privacy to the garderobe.

Whilst they were in the reception area merchants are offered a clear view through the 15th century arch in the west wall (beyond the screens passage) to the foot of the stairs (the next point in their tour).

When all was ready upstairs (signalled by a sign from the squint in the south part of the Great Hall?) merchants were taken through the 15th century arch and up the stairs – the Great Hall being gradually revealed as they did so.

The Great Hall was divided into two sections. The north, where we suggest that goods were displayed for sale and the south, which may have been used for entertaining wealthy clients or to “seal the deal”.

The Great Hall

The hall is 88' long, 22' wide and over 25' tall.

The walls are formed by high quality oak close-studding interspersed by 8 sets of decorated **wall posts**. The wall posts support **tie beams** which cross the hall. Each tie beam supports a **crown post** which in turn supported a **collar purlin** (which ran the full length of the building). The collar purlin supported **collars** which connected rafter pairs.

The seven bays formed by the eight crown post trusses are not equally spaced. Starting at the north gable end, the bay patterning can be described as A B B A C B C, with each letter corresponding with a certain width. We do not know if this is important or not.

An **arch brace** extends from each wall post to the tie beam. The spaces between wall post, tie beam and arch brace (called a **spandrel**) were used for decorative posts. Every spandrel apart from the two by the fireplace in the south hall held carvings. We know that at least two of these were of dragons and assume that the rest were.

The Hall was intended to impress, sometimes at the expense of quality. However, we should not over-emphasise this. The fact that the rafters contained sapwood was a perfectly standard construction. Indeed, the lower side of the collar braces (technically called **soulace**) were dressed although they were some 20' high in the roof.

The roof was carefully designed. Wall posts, wall plates and tie beams were carved to give an impression of lightness to substantial beams. The decorative carving leads the eye to the tie beams, past the dragons, up the crown post and then to the collars, rafters and collar braces (called soulace) above.

Nonetheless, there were some shoddy joints. For instance, where the tie-beam meets the wall plate the tie-beam rests on the wall plate, there is no half-lap dovetail as would often be employed.

Oriel windows: These were on the west side (street side) of bays 2, 4 and 7. Evidence can be seen in bays 2 and 4. The windows jutted out into the street so there are no peg holes in the wall plates (the timber that runs the full length of the hall below the rafters) where the oriel windows were. In addition the studs either side of the windows were pegged into the wall plate by two rather than a single peg. On the front façade the position of these two oriels is seen by breaks in the moulding of the wall plate. The timbers of bay 7 have been replaced.

The Dragon Carving: We are not certain why Toppes chose dragons, but as a common Norwich motif it clearly identified him with the elite of a city which was doing well (see the section on the roundels for more information about the Guild of St. George).

Dividing the Hall

A cycle of division and change began after Robert Toppes died.

The site was no longer used as a trading hall. The Great Hall itself may have been used as a gentry house until 1570. However, this does not mean that the whole site was put to the same use. In 1488/9 Thomas Seckford, a Suffolk gentleman, shared landgable tax payment with one Thomas Alicock, a fuller. Seckford may have lived in the hall and Alicock may have used the east part of the site for his business.

At some point during this time the building of the Bennett's gallery on the south gable of the Great Hall shows that at least part of the Great Hall was linked to the south. The earliest documentary reference to a link is 1570 but the structure clearly predates this.

By 1619 the Great Hall seems to have had ceilings as a deed of that date mentions “the great panelled ceiling” and “the little panelled ceiling”. The “Great Hall” and “Little hall” are also mentioned – presumably the modern reception (with its screens passage) and an open room beyond.

There followed centuries of division and sub-division as partitions were erected and altered.

By 1854 and up to 1897 at least the Great Hall was divided into 6 properties.

In 1952 the Great Hall was divided into 3 properties:

Nos. 113-115 Swatman’s Butchers

Nos. 117-119 Rectory of Julian and St. Peter

Nos 121-123 Old Barge Inn

20th century changes

By the end of the 19th century the area behind Dragon Hall was filled with a maze of housing. This was both the result of gradual 16th/17th century development and later speculative low quality housing. Old Barge Yard was inhabited by brewery workers, tradesmen, even a cow keeper who pastured cows across the river. The only survival of this period is St. Ann’s cottage – to left of the garden gate. All the other buildings were demolished in 1937 during municipal “slum” clearance. Norwich City Council built modern council housing to north of the city and demolished a lot of older housing (including many fine buildings). Bombing during World War II did further damage to the building stock – the rail station and Boulton and Paul’s were prime targets. St Julian’s Church was destroyed in 1942.

“Discovery”

Dragon Hall was not discovered as such. It was known to be an old building – fairly obvious if you look at the lines of roof and jetty. Pevsner’s Norwich volume lists 115-123 as a fifteenth century “merchant’s house”. More interestingly, a Youngs, Crawshay and Youngs Pub map of Norwich from the late 1950s called the Old Barge, King Street “Historic 15th Century Woolhall of Norwich - A National Beauty”. So almost 20 years before the Norwich Survey arrived on the doorstep it was understood that Dragon Hall was an important building. Nonetheless, the site did not receive due recognition – the heritage industry was in its infancy at the time and the site was still divided between pub, rectory and butchers’. The climate was very different in the 1970s. Concerns over the loss of our “heritage” had grown and in Norwich the Norwich Survey was formed (with a large input from UEA) to survey the stock of historic buildings in the city. They recognised and publicised the importance of the building. A building which had been largely ignored in the 1950s was now seen as a hidden treasure. Watney Mann’s brewery owned the building. In 1979 they sold it to Norwich City Council who

undertook a restoration programme between 1980 and 1985. In 1986 The Norfolk and Norwich Heritage Trust was formed to look after the building.

The building was in a poor state of repair. The first floor had slipped about 2 foot in the south-east corner and many roof timbers had to be replaced from here. However, in total only about 20% of the timbers in the roof were replaced. There was a heated debate about what to do about partitions and chimneys which divided the hall. In the end it was decided (partly on grounds of the poor state of repair of the chimneys) to remove these elements and open up the hall.

Note: The dragon was not plastered over. It was hidden above the attic floor (which just covered the bottom of the carving with plaster).

Modern Dragon Hall development

In 2005/06 came a £1.8m development: £1.4 million grant by Heritage Lottery Fund, plus £400k raised by the Trust. The development aimed to increase accessibility, provide new, modern interpretation and develop a flexible space able to generate money from events as well as visitors. Architects were Lucas Hickman Smith, and builders Bluestone and display consultants PLB (from Malton Nth Yorks) all worked very well together. High specification was used throughout – glass gallery and shadowed glass, oak (southern French) etc.

Access was improved by the glass gallery (previously access to the display rooms was via the cellars) and the lift. Interpretation changed from giving all visitors individual guided tours to independent tours with audio guides, interpretation panels, leaflets and stewards etc. New facilities include events room, catering kitchen and flooring in the Great Hall to allow celebrations, weddings, entertainments etc.

Development of riverside area

Dragon Hall is part of a much wider development of the area. Across the river the leisure/clubbing Riverside area of the city has been developed over the past 10 years. The area surrounding Dragon Hall is being developed. The Hopkins homes have provided pastiche organic development on the other side of King Street and the area around us is awaiting development (Wilson Bowden). It is likely to provide a combination of housing (multi-storeyed), cafés etc. There will be a piazza style affair at the bottom of the site and from here a footbridge leads over to Riverside.

St. George's Guild Roundels

Dragon Hall has been connected to the Guild of St. George through the dragon carving. Of course we do not know why dragons were placed here (we know there were more than one dragon in the roof – we have the remains of a second carving). The dragon may have been Toppes making a definite connection with the Guild or just identifying himself with a common Norwich symbol.

The guild roundels have been housed in Dragon Hall for some 20 years.

The guild celebrated 23rd April, St. George's Day, with a procession attended by Guild dignitaries and, at various times, including St. George, a Snap dragon and St. Margaret.

After conflict amongst the city elite the importance of the Guild increased. In 1452 Justice William Yelverton (former city recorder or legal adviser) linked the Guild to the City Government through an agreement known as "Yelverton's Mediation". The Mayor automatically became the Alderman (chief figure) of the Guild of St. George for the year after he served as mayor, all aldermen became members of the guild and common councillors were allowed to join if they wished. In fact Robert Toppes became the first Alderman of the Guild under the new arrangements. Yelverton hoped to use the Guild to promote unity within the city. It may have worked; divisions seem to have receded after this date.

After the Reformation Guilds were viewed with mistrust. In 1585 the St. George's Day parade was combined with the mayor-making procession on the Tuesday before midsummer's eve (23rd June). The Company of St. George organised the mayor-making from 1585–1731. The St. George's Company was abolished in 1731. Guild Days continued until 1835 but in a far more modest way. Most pageantry finally disappeared with the 1835 Municipal Corporation reform Act, though snap continued to appear until 1850. Costessey and Pockthorpe started their own mock-mayoral processions in the 18th century and the tradition was carried on in these celebrations until the start of the 20th century. Today, of course, the mayor's procession is once again a major annual event.

Model of Dragon Hall and its environs

Friary: Augustine (Austin) friars occupied the site north of Dragon Hall from 1289-1538. Imagine a large central church facing east-west (like Blackfriars and St. Andrew's hall in Norwich) On this side (south) and the north there were cloisters (covered spaces for walking with different parts of the friary off them). One in St. Anne's lane on the waterside may have had a chapel over the top of it.

Friars lived in communities but they were much more active than monks. Their preaching and charity struck a chord in many towns and cities. The Austin friars had a steady stream of visitors and people desiring to be buried there.

Sir Thomas Erpingham who fought with Henry V at Agincourt paid for stained glass window in east window of the friary church which commemorated all the knights who died without issue (children) in Norfolk since the coronation of Edward III. Erpingham was a major figure in resolving 15th century disputes in city politics.

Marshland: Two hundred years ago the landscape across the river was completely different. Marshland used for grazing for cattle and horses stretched from the river across to the hillside at Thorpe. The only bridge across the Wensum on this side of the city was Bishop's Bridge near the Cathedral.

The first Carrow Bridge (a toll bridge) was built in 1810. It was replaced in 1923 by the bridge you see today. Thorpe Station was opened in 1844. Boulton and Paul moved

across the river in 1916 from Rose Lane when they went into aircraft production during World War I. In 1935 the Canaries moved to Carrow Road from the Nest.

125-127 King Street - the property immediately to the south

Identified by the distinctive herringbone brick infill on the first floor. In its last incarnation was Bennett's Electrical. The ground floor was completely gutted by Bennett's. The first floor has been dated to the early 16th century. The fact that the first floor extends across Old Barge Yard shows that it was related to the Dragon Hall complex at that time.

The archway that you see in the gable in the south hall is not part of the 16th century first floor. Today it leads to a 17th century lean-to which we use as our fire escape, and it is clear that there was no structure here when 125-127 was built in the 16th century. So what is the arch for? It may have led to an earlier way across Old Barge Yard which was later replaced by the Bennett's block or perhaps more likely to an external stair which led down to King Street.

The original purpose of the 'Bennett's block' is unclear. It was a long thin structure with a good quality oak close studding and well-lit by almost continuous window overlooking King Street. Was it a weaving workshop? Dated at the start of the 16th century may make it a bit early for a purpose-built weaving loft. Looms at this date did not require the additional height of an attic, and population pressure was not so great as to require use of attic. There are no comparable examples. Was it an inn? The long thin block could be divided into separate units and this would account for the lack of heating. A gallery? Could it have been built as a gallery to connect the Great Hall with buildings to the south?

The owners of this site were wealthy people.

Thomas Wetherby, a rival of Robert Toppes in the mid-15th century held land here. By 1474 the Boleyn family owned this land. In 1488/9 it was owned by Sir William Boleyn of Blickling, grandfather of the famous Ann. He died in 1505.

Building Materials

Dragon Hall uses a range of building materials. The "typical" Norwich house from the later 15th century to the 17th century comprised a flint rubble ground floor with a timber framed first floor. In addition many buildings also had brick undercrofts. Dragon Hall is an early example of this type, most buildings of the time not having first floors and so not requiring a timber-framed first floor.

Brickwork: There is little evidence for a native brick-making industry before the late 15th century and we must assume that much of the brick used in Dragon Hall was imported (Flemings and Germans were active in brick-making for particular supra-vernacular projects in the east before this time, but their activity seems to have been outweighed by imports). This must have been the case with the 14th century undercroft. One has only to look at the magnificent early brick buildings in the Low Countries (Bruges) to

realise that a sophisticated brick-making industry existed there. It may have been easier to import than to develop a home-grown industry.

Brick was not a cheap building material. Not only was it imported but it was also hand-made. Nonetheless by the early 15th century it was not being used for high status details – stone was reserved for this purpose. Indeed in Toppes' Dragon Hall most of the brick details in arches etc. were relegated to lower status/ working parts of the building.

Brick infill. Brick cannot have been the original infill between the oak studs in the Great Hall. As the studs shrunk the brick panels would have fallen out. More likely is that a wattle frame was sprung between the studs. This would have been able to flex as the building shifted and the oak dried. However, there can be no doubting that the gap between the studs is one brick width. Was it always intended that brick would eventually replace wattle and daub panels or was this intended to give the impression of brickwork?

Flint. Flint was a ubiquitous building material in Norwich. It could be extracted from the ground all over Norwich (it was easily available from the Ber Street scarp just up the hill from Dragon Hall). Flint is the main elements of the rubble walls throughout Dragon Hall and it was commonly used as a cheap and strong building material. However, knapped flint gave a more impressive and expensive effect. Toppes used knapped flint in the King Street ground floor of Dragon Hall. It was not the highest quality and would not compare with the knapped flint in the Guildhall or Bridewell Museum, but it was nonetheless an effective way of making a statement. Galletting was another way of crafting flint. Small slivers of flint were pressed into mortar between larger flint blocks to give a pleasing textured effect.

Wood. People understood wood and would have known how much the Great Hall cost to build. It was constructed out of oak which was cut in the winter of 1427/28. Since buildings were constructed when the wood was still green (unseasoned) this means that the Great Hall was constructed soon after. We assume that the wood was taken from a carefully managed local wood. It would have been worked on site in the wood and then brought to Dragon Hall for final construction. People read wood like we read cars and would have known that most of the wood in the hall came from trees which were 2' – 2½' diameter (80-100 years old).

REFERENCES

* Andy Shelley (ed.): *Dragon Hall, King Street, Norwich: Excavation and Survey of a Late Medieval Merchant's Trading Complex* (East Anglian Archaeology Report No.112, 2005)