

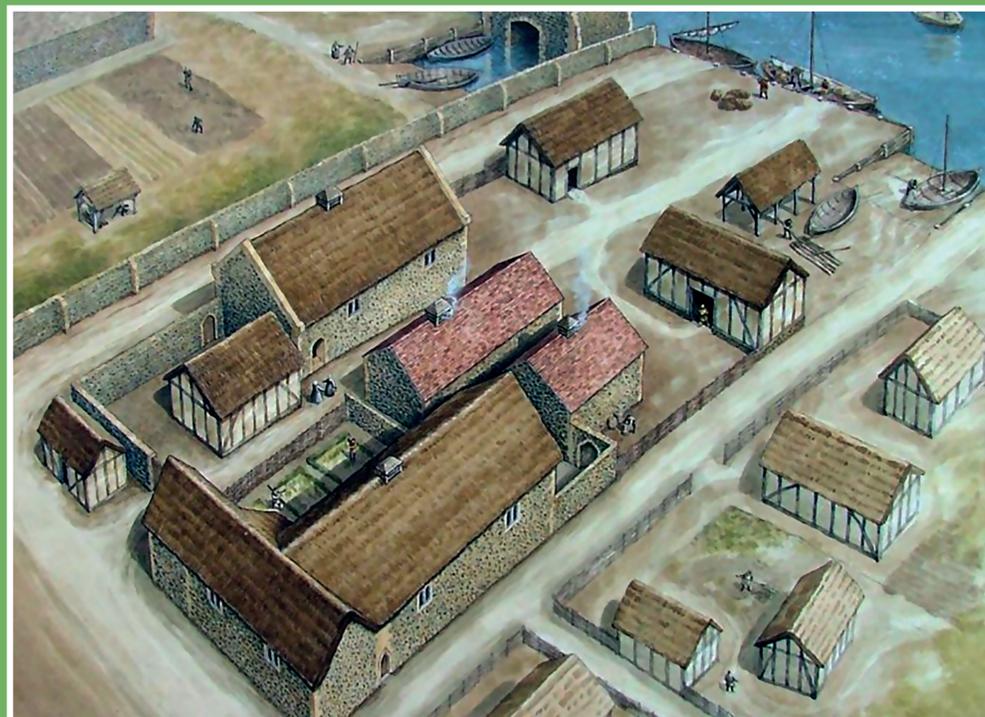
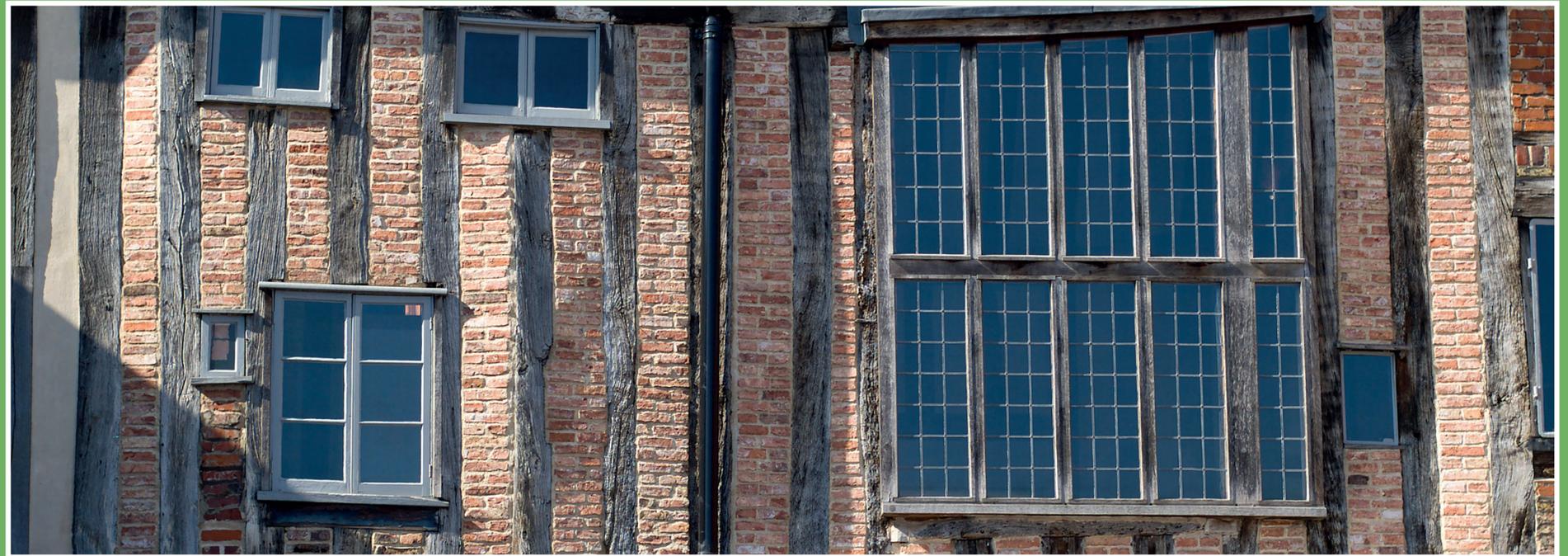
STEP INTO DRAGON HALL

Welcome to Dragon Hall, once a medieval merchant's trading complex, built around 1427, and now the home to the National Centre for Writing.

This building and the surrounding area of King St, next to the River Wensum, was once the heart of trading activity for Norwich. As you explore the corridors and rooms of the site, we invite you to step back in time and imagine a space once filled with small-scale craft industry and the keeping of livestock; which later served as social housing, public houses, shops, and now a Literature House. 600 years of stories.

Pre 1400s

Dragon Hall was built in the 15th century by a wealthy merchant called Robert Toppes. However, archaeological work carried out in the nineties revealed evidence of Saxon dwellings built around 1000 AD underneath the building's structure. We also know that in the late 13th century, the Abbey of Woburn in Bedfordshire had a fish processing operation with various outbuildings here.



SCAN HERE TO
DOWNLOAD
THE STORY OF
DRAGON HALL



TOP: Dragon Hall, home to
the National Centre for Writing

BOTTOM LEFT: Artist's
impression of c.1350 site

IMAGE © PLB LTD



Standing with your back to the entrance door, you are now looking at a late 13th century wall from the Abbey of Woburn. This wall, including the archways that can be seen in the two connecting rooms off our welcome area, represents the original boundary of the building.

DRAGON HALL

The Dragon Hall entrance and two adjoining rooms are examples of how over the centuries Dragon Hall has been subdivided at ground, first and second floor levels, with cellars dug out for domestic and commercial use.

By the mid-19th century the whole site appears to have contained twelve dwellings. In the 1890s the building had three storeys and by 1935 the site included one public house and fifteen dwellings. By 1952 and up to 1979 this room was in use as Swatman's Butcher's Shop.

'Swatman's had the old scrubbed wooden counter, sawdust on the floor, and Mrs. Swatman, who was a very demure tiny little lady, used to sit in a little wood and glass office structure at the end; he would give you the meat with the price written on and you would go to her to pay.'

— Linda Jones, King Street Community Voices



TOP: Swatman's Butcher's Shop in the 1950s or 60s

LEFT: Bomb damage at Dragon Hall, 10 July 1942



The wooden beams above you have Roman numerals scored into them. This was probably to aid assembly of the structure; think of a building kit for assembling modern day furniture!

USES OVER TIME

Although the ground floor of Dragon Hall is substantially 15th century, constructed of flint, rubble and brick, this room is more characteristic of a 17th century interior.

The fireplace and cupboard in the corner both date from this period, as well as what is thought to be a bread warming oven.

The fireplace is the only survivor of five former fireplaces, all later in date than the Hall itself.



TOP: Frontage of Dragon Hall with cows, 1925

IMAGE: © NORFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL

MIDDLE LEFT: Witches' Mark

MIDDLE RIGHT: Frontage on King Street, 1930s

IMAGE: © NORFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL

BOTTOM: Witches' mark



The wooden beam fireplace surround has several burns and marks that are thought to be ritual protection or 'witches' marks'. The lollipop-shaped mark was designed to ward off evil spirits whilst the burns protected against fire demons.

Look closer at the lime plasterwork and you will see small areas of original stonework which were revealed during a period of restoration between the 1970s and 2006.



THE RECTORY

This room (and the previous room) used to be a rectory linked to St Julian's Church between 1935 and 1975.

The most renowned occupant was Father Seear who lived in the building from 1935 when it had neither heating or hot water. Nevertheless, he described himself as having access to everything he needed: 'beef, Bibles and beer'; a reference to Swatman's Butcher's Shop on the northern end, and the Old Barge Inn at the southern end.



The small archway in the boundary wall indicates how the original wall would have once appeared, providing access to the buildings below.

Notice the cross motif in the stained glass of the door to King Street, installed when this room was part of Father Seear's Rectory.



TOP: Dragon Hall frontage in 1931

IMAGE: © GEORGE PLUNKETT

MIDDLE: Part of ground floor of King St frontage, previously St Julian's Vicarage, 1981

IMAGE: © ENGLISH HERITAGE

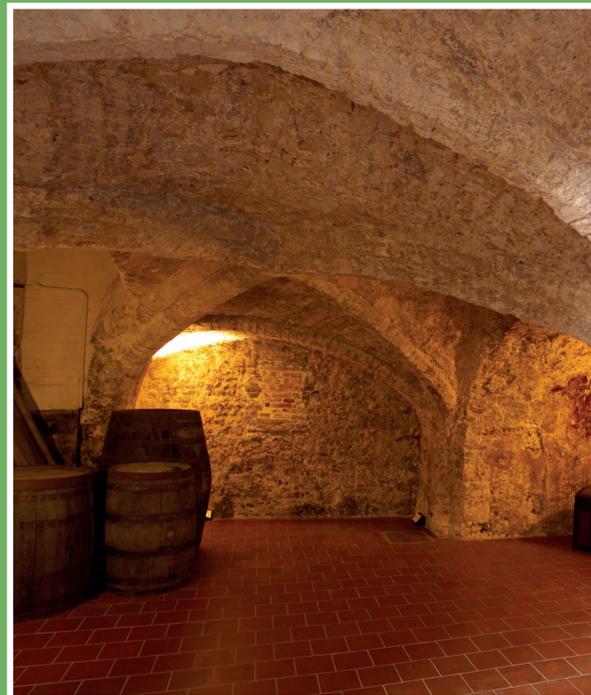
LEFT: Cross motif window detail

THE GALLERY

In 1289 there is a record of a land transfer from the Abbey of Woburn to a Norwich clerk called John Page.

Page built an L-shaped domestic 'hall house' in 1330 on the southern part of the site (now the NCW reception) with an undercroft and an entrance on the south side from Old Barge Yard, which we now call the Foyle Gallery.

The site's location by the river proved to be prosperous for both the Abbey and John Page. This would also account for why the site was so appealing to Robert Toppes when he was looking for a location to create his trading hall.



The driveway in the garden is in the same position as the original track which Robert Toppes used to take his goods to and from the River Wensum. The yard area, in Toppes' time, would have also contained storehouses, a crane and a staithe for the unloading of boats.

TOP LEFT: Undercroft

TOP RIGHT: View from the river today

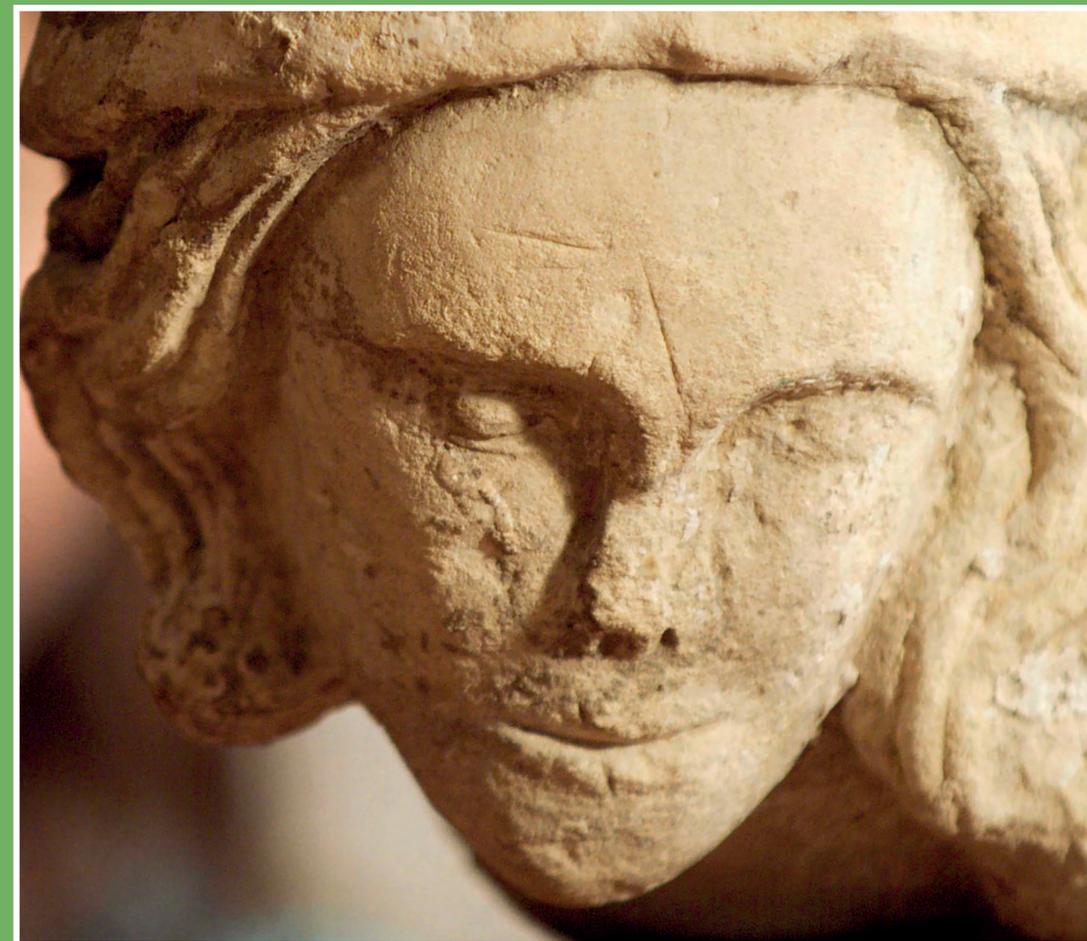
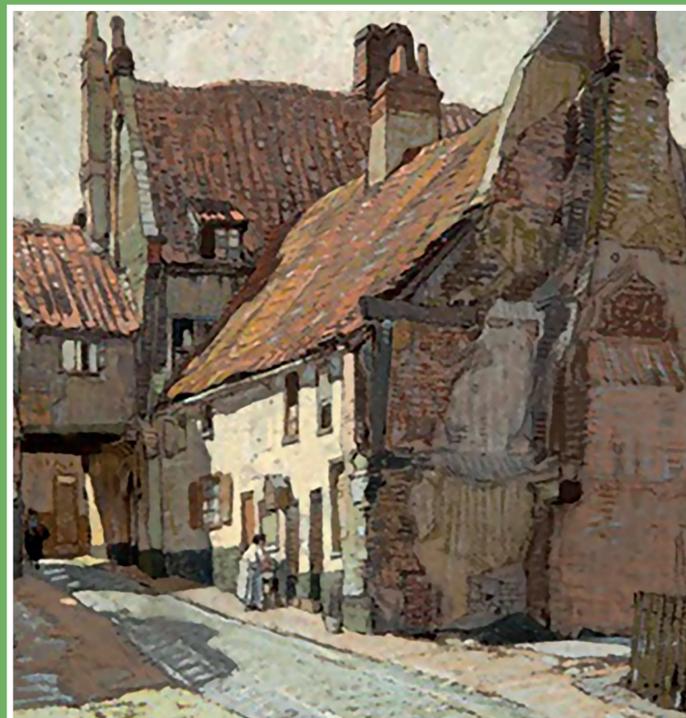
BOTTOM LEFT: Artist's impression of the view from the river, circa 1450

IMAGE: © PLB LTD

THE GREAT ARCH

You are facing the boundary wall and a large brick arch, called The Great Arch, which once provided access to King Street.

When Robert Toppes bought the site in around 1430, his trading hall was built at first floor level above the hall house and boundary wall which were incorporated into his new trading hall complex. The ground floor was used as his warehouse.



TOP LEFT: 'Old Barge Yard, Norwich, 1928' by Leonard Russell Squirrell

TOP RIGHT: Carved label stop on the Ogee Arch

BOTTOM RIGHT: Rear of Dragon Hall in 1981, before the Foyle Gallery was built



Peer at the structural brick supports and you will see some of the original brick wall and the wooden pins in them, along with hints of coloured paint peeking through. What do you think this paint might have been used for?

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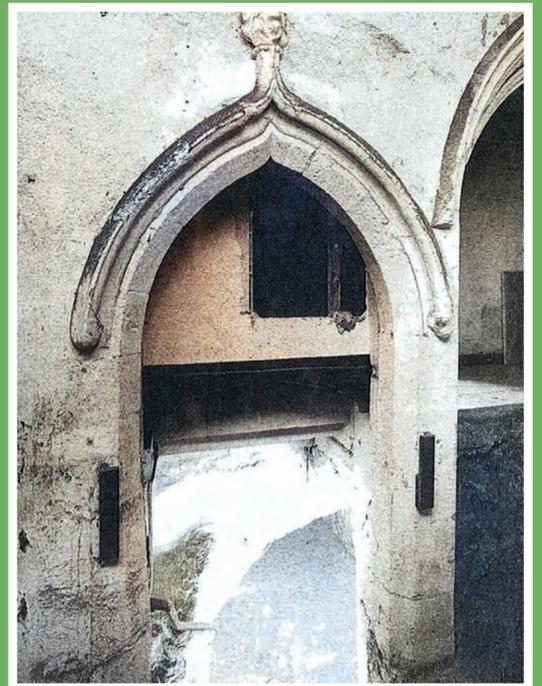
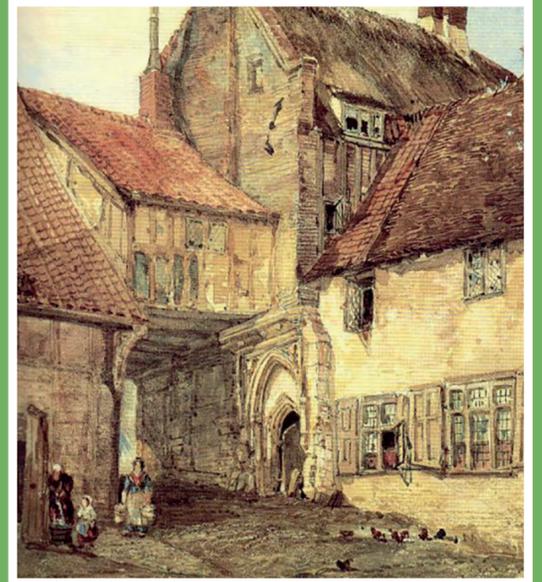
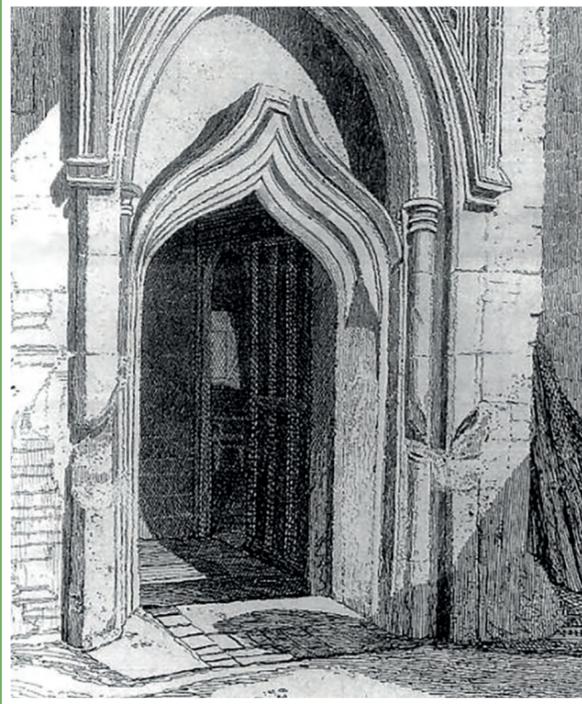
SCREEN'S PASSAGE

This was the original Ogee arch entrance to the building, commissioned by John Page when he owned the property in the early 1300s.

The oak door with stone surround is still used today for weddings and events and is the oldest part of Dragon Hall.

The black painted screens are the original ones installed by Page. The room to your left, now the reception for National Centre for Writing, is part of his domestic 'hall house'.

Make sure to walk around the exterior of the site onto Old Barge Yard before leaving, so you can view the exterior of the Ogee arch entrance.



Here you can see the remains of two further archways along the stone and brick wall. The one nearest the oak door once led down to the undercroft and the second was the original doorway that led to the Buttery, which is now the Old Barge Room.

TOP LEFT: 'c.1330 original Hall House entrance' by John Crome, 1817

TOP RIGHT: 'View from Old Barge Yard' by Thomas Lound, circa 1850

MIDDLE LEFT: Detail of original doorway

MIDDLE RIGHT: Possible original entrance to the 14th century hall house undercroft, 1950s

PHOTO: © STEVE COLE – HALLAM ASHLEY

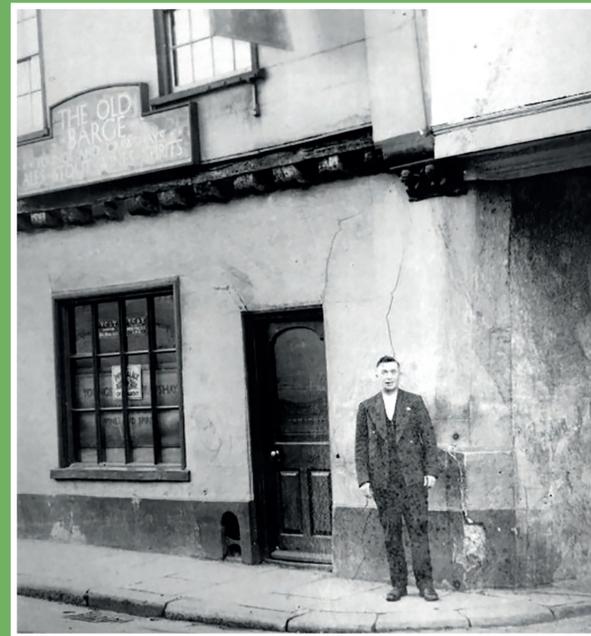
BOTTOM: Gargoyle above the oak door

THE OLD BARGE ROOM

The Old Barge Room is thought to have been a service room or buttery for John Page's hall house in the 14th century, possibly linking to the undercroft underneath.

A buttery was a large cellar room where food and drink were stored for the provisioning of house guests and visitors.

It seems fitting that by the mid-18th century this space became an Inn; first the Three Merry Wherrymen and then later The Old Barge Inn. Today, it is once again used as a bar for events and weddings.



TOP LEFT: Billy Wodehouse, licensee of The Old Barge Inn, 1933-44

TOP RIGHT: Back bar of the Old Barge Inn

INSET: 1955-56 advert for The Old Barge Inn

BOTTOM LEFT: Newspaper clipping 1986

PHOTO: © EASTERN EVENING NEWS

BOTTOM RIGHT: Old Barge Room service area 1981

PHOTO: © ENGLISH HERITAGE



Hands off the Old Barge!

Dragon sinks the Old Barge

WHAT'S in a name? The "ought" regard the "er"!

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

WAR-TIME pub landlady Ivy Martin has joined the growing campaign to keep King Street's Old Barge tradition 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 on one of the roof arches.

I reckoned that was a daft 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 1933-48 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."

And one of her arguments to keep the Old Barge memory alive is to prevent transatlantic confusion!

She explained: "During the war a lot of the customers were American Service men, and when they return they'll want to find their old haunts. Changing the name will not help and I think they'd resent it."

"They'd see it as a part of old England that had gone!"

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"Ivy's daughter, Elsie Stockley, of Goldwell Road, goes even further. For she reckons that the Old Barge sign should be returned to what she calls its rightful place forthwith.

Elsie, who remembered the days when the pub's smoke room also housed the family's Morrison shelter, is none too happy at suggestions that the people proposing the name change are not city folk.

Ivy, who now lives in Blackpool, is keeping a close watch on events. "I just hope it's not too late for the Dragon Hall idea to be thrown out," she said. "The Old Barge is a popular name for what was a very, very popular pub."

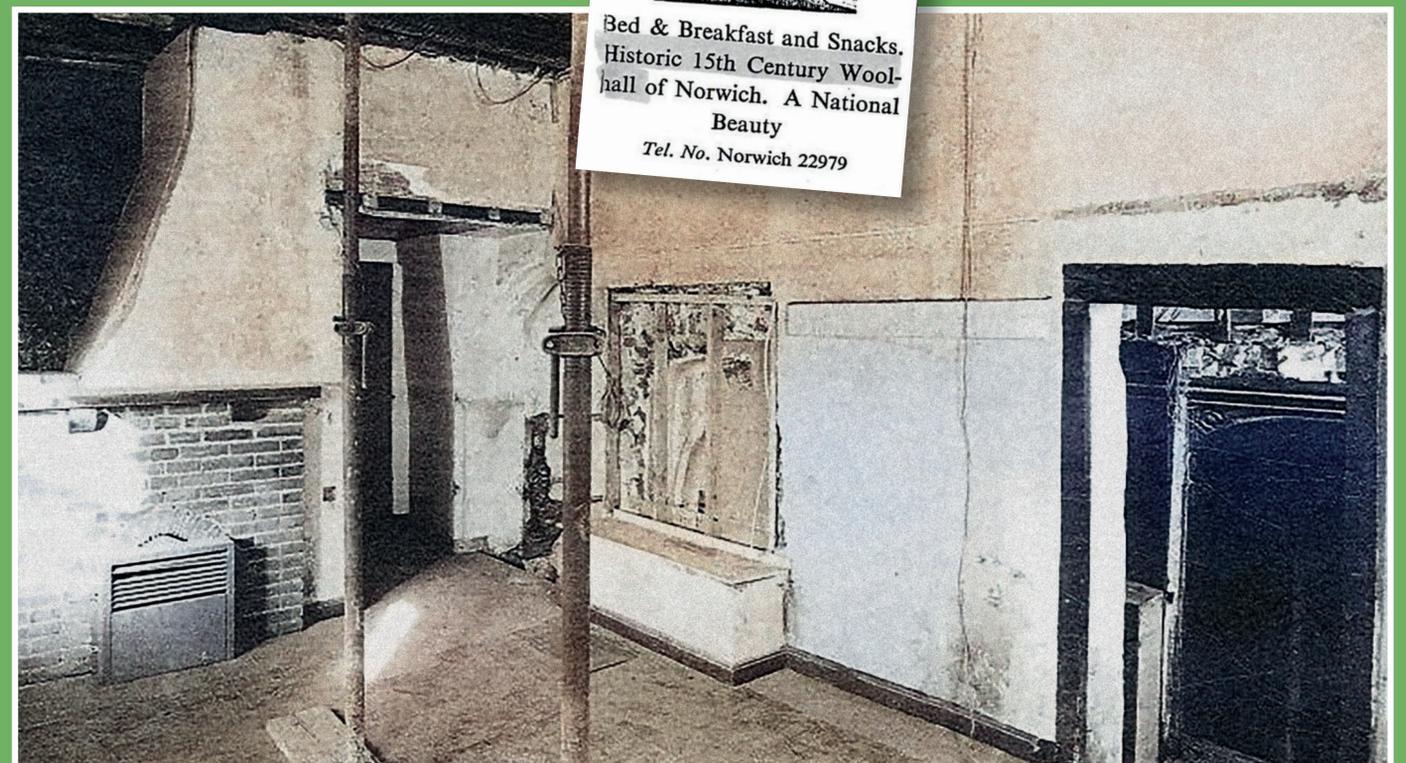
Old Barge flashback: Ivy Martin, then Woodhouse, with some of her wartime regulars.



On the beams above you can see further Roman numerical markings that indicate how the timber structure was constructed. The timber is thought to come from local

Norfolk trees, and would have been made and slotted together off-site to ensure they fitted properly when reassembled.

The door frame displayed to the left of the Old Barge door was part of one of the partition walls in the Great Hall, possibly from the 16th century.



THE GREAT HALL

The Great Hall was built by Robert Toppes, a prominent local merchant, for displaying, storing and selling goods from Norfolk and imports brought in from Europe.

He wanted to create a space that would impress his customers, enhance the prestige of his merchandise, and persuade people to buy from him.

The hall is 26 metres long and has a fine crown post roof constructed with 500 oak timbers. It appears the timbers are all from oak trees felled in spring 1427, and the roof was no doubt constructed soon after, initially off-site, then later being reassembled in-situ.



Can you spot our last remaining dragon? There may originally have been 14 others in the spandrels of the roof, but this is the only one that has survived.

On this wall you can see remains of wallpaper from when the hall was used as a domestic dwelling.



TOP LEFT: Traces of wallpaper in the Great Hall

TOP RIGHT: The last remaining dragon of Dragon Hall

FAR LEFT: Merchant's mark for Robert Toppes

BOTTOM LEFT: Artist's impression of the trading hall circa 1450

IMAGE © PLB LTD

ROBERT TOPPES

We do not know Robert Toppes' origins or exactly when he was born but he became a very successful entrepreneur after he acquired the Dragon Hall site in the 1420s. His wealth allowed him to rise through the civic ranks and he was an important figure in Norwich. He became the City Treasurer at the age of 27, the Sheriff three years later and was elected mayor four times and burgess MP for Norwich four times. By 1450 he was one of the richest men in Norwich.

Toppes prepared carefully for the afterlife, paying for a great stained-glass window in Norwich's largest parish church, St. Peter Mancroft. When he died in 1467, his will stated that Dragon Hall should be sold to pay for priests to pray for his eternal soul.



There are many marks inscribed on the walls of the Great Hall. It is thought that at least some of these are 19th-century witches' marks, made near fireplaces,

windows and doors to protect the inhabitants from witches or evil spirits. Can you spot them?

Only three original 15th century windows remain in the Great Hall, including the two high windows in the north gable end. Other openings and frames were put in later as the hall was converted to domestic use.

TOP LEFT: St Peter Mancroft, East window

PHOTO: © JULES & JENNY

TOP RIGHT: Two high windows in the north gable of the Great Hall

BOTTOM LEFT: Dragon Hall front window detail

THE GREAT HALL

Dragon Hall was a trading hall for only 40 years. After Robert Toppes' death in 1467 it was divided into residential accommodation.

These dwellings became smaller and over-crowded over the years as more tenants moved into the hall, the rear of the site and Old Barge Yard.

We know almost nothing of Dragon Hall's residents until the first census in 1841, at which point, many families called the 'Old Barge Building' (as it was then known) home. By the 19th century, some 150 people were living on the site.



TOP LEFT: Central chimney in the Great Hall

TOP RIGHT: Old Barge Yard, 1937

IMAGE © GEORGE PLUNKETT

BOTTOM LEFT: Roof beams in Great Hall

BOTTOM RIGHT: 19th century tenements on the Dragon Hall site

IMAGE © PLB LTD



Small circular incisions were made in the timber of the building to take core samples, used to date the wood through tree ring counting. Can you find them?

This small window allows a view of the original 'hall house' building created by John Page in the 1300s. It is now a staff room for the National Centre for Writing.