

1. Welcome to Dragon Hall

Hello and welcome to Dragon Hall, the home of the National Centre for Writing: a unique medieval trading hall and the site of one thousand years of stories.

Before we start, let me explain how this audio tour works.

As you walk around the site, we will direct you to play specific tracks from our playlist. You'll also see some exhibits with a headphone symbol next to them and a QR code. Scan the QR code with your phone to hear more information about the exhibit.

Our tour starts in the Gallery; a modern, glass-covered room. Once you have arrived there, press play on track 2.

2. The Gallery

This contemporary glass-covered room, built in the 21st century, is one of several new additions to Dragon Hall, a building which survived for over 600 years by adapting and evolving to changing times.

The buildings on this site have been shaped and reshaped over the centuries to accommodate many uses, including a comfortable home for a prosperous, medieval family; cramped tenements for Victorian labourers and artisans; two pubs; a butcher's shop, and a rectory. But its most glorious era was surely in the 15th century, when for about 40 years, it was transformed into a sumptuous and impressive trading hall for bartering over high quality cloths and exotic imports from across the world.

This trading hall, now known as Dragon Hall, is the only surviving medieval trading hall in Western Europe built by a single merchant. We are lucky enough to know who that merchant was. His name was Robert Toppes, and we'll hear a lot more about him later in the tour.

Please find a place where you can stand and look about easily. Dragon Hall stands on King Street, which in medieval times was one of the main roads running through the city.

It was home to industries, trades, and churches. Several wealthy local families had townhouses on the street, and there were also two large religious communities in the area. At times it was a lively, vibrant neighbourhood populated with prosperous families, servants, local boatmen, monks, nuns, and merchants from all over Europe. At other times it was a place of poverty, of hardship and of disease and hunger.

It was in the early 15th century that an ambitious merchant called Robert Toppes bought this site.

Toppes was a man 'on the up' and very little can be found about him or his family before this point.

In the 1420s he began work on building this magnificent hall as the heart of his trading empire.

Look out at the garden. Can you see the wide path stretching away from you down to a brick wall at the far end of the garden? In Robert Toppes' time, this was a road leading down to the staithe on the riverside.

The River Wensum flows just beyond the brick wall and boats would have moored there.

Carts loaded with goods were brought through a gate up to where you stand now. Imagine if you like the sights and sounds as the carts rattled, laden with good between the staithe and the hall, as people called to each other as they passed boxes of goods into the building.

This was a bustling part of the building, filled with sounds and with smells.

Turn around and you will see the great red brick arch in the wall. This was the entrance to Robert Toppes' warehouse. All sorts of goods, from building materials to expensive luxuries passed through here.

The timber arcade in front of the arch supported the first floor Great Hall. It also offered protection from the elements both for goods and the servants unpacking them.

Look to the left of the great arch and you will see two smaller arches. The one closest to you was a safe way for people to enter the warehouse without getting in the way of carts. The other arch led down to the undercroft or vaulted cellar where valuable goods could be stored. We'll see this later in the tour.

As you will see, this is a very complicated site. Historians, archaeologists, and our volunteers are still discovering its secrets.

When you're ready to move into the next room, press play on track 3.

3. Screen's Passage

To get to our next stop, stand with the garden to your left and walk towards the end of the gallery where there is a large arched doorway. The corridor on the other side of the doorway is the Screen's Passage. Head inside.

Robert Topps didn't build Dragon Hall on an empty site. Instead, he adopted extended and heightened buildings, which were already here.

Screen's Passage, together with the rooms on either side of it, began life in the early 14th century on this prime site between the road and the river. A merchant called John Page owned a timber framed domestic hall house here, but in around 1330, he decided to build an extension.

This part of the hall house is called the Screen's Passage because this was a service area separated from the main living space by a timber screen, such as the one which survives on your left.

This effectively screened other parts of the hall - the private areas - from the more public areas where guests or visitors might be accommodated.

The corridor provided access to the rooms where food and drink was stored. The two arches on the wall to your right led to these storage rooms and to the Undercroft at the far end of the corridor.

At the far end of the passage you'll find the original entrance to the house, used by John Page and his family, and later by numerous hopeful merchants looking for a bargain.

After your tour, it's worth going outside down Old Barge Lane to look at the impressive 14th century stone doorway that survives. The smaller archway was the original doorway. The larger stone outer frame, decorated with heraldic shields, was added later in the 15th century, possibly by Robert Toppes, to create a more imposing entrance. This entrance is still used today by National Centre for Writing for some of its events, and for weddings and parties.

On the left of the passage, in the room that is now the reception for the National Centre for Writing, was the hall or family accommodation where in the 14th century, the Page family and their servants spent most of their time.

It would have been open to the roof; and the ceiling was inserted later. This space has been frequently altered over the centuries to serve changing requirements. In the 15th century, it was used as the reception area for visiting merchants.

In the 20th century it was the back bar of a pub called the Old Barge Inn, and will have rung with the sound of laughter, rowdy conversation, and the singing

of seashanties as the locals gathered around the large fireplace with their drinks. You might hear the clanking of glasses or perhaps the noise of a spirited disagreement which was about to spill out onto Old Barge Lane.

The tour continues up the short flight of steps from Screen's Passage into the Old Barge Room. If you can't manage these stairs, please ask one of our volunteers to take you to the accessible entrance outside on King Street.

When you're ready to listen again, press play on track 4.

4. The Old Barge Room

This room was also part of the 1330s hall house owned by John Page. Although the floor level has changed, it was one of the service rooms common to all hall houses, called the Buttery. It wasn't for storing butter, though!

The name comes from the old word for a barrel, and the Buttery was where the household drink was stored in barrels.

From the mid-18th century this room was used as the front bar of the pub known as the Three Merry Wherrymen. A bit of a tongue twister even before a pint or two of the local ale!

Maybe that's why the pub was renamed in the 1880s as The Old Barge Inn, which closed in 1969. The building is still known as The Old Barge building for some older Norwich residents.

To continue the tour and meet Robert Toppes, go up the staircase to the Great Hall. If you are unable to use the stairs, retrace your steps to the far side of the glass gallery to the lift. The Great Hall is on level 3. When you arrive, press track 5.

5. Great Hall: Robert Toppes' Showroom

This is the most spectacular part of Dragon Hall: Robert Toppes' Great Hall!

This space was the showroom where goods were displayed for merchants from England and Europe to examine and buy. It is the only surviving medieval trading hall in Western Europe built by a single merchant. The best place to start your exploration of the hall is near the top of the stairs.

Robert Toppes constructed this room in about 1427, above the existing 14th century building. We can be fairly certain about the date because scientific analysis of the main roof timbers has shown that they were made from trees cut down in the spring of 1427. At this time Norwich was a thriving and growing city. In fact, it claimed to be the second richest and most populous city in England after London.

Imagine how the hall must have been in Robert Toppes' day: full of the sounds of trade and the smell of exotic spices, bales of undyed local cloth laid out on trestle tables next to French wine, German pottery and Swedish ironwork. Fine linens and fashionable clothes from Holland, Belgium and northern France, the area known as the Low Countries.

Cloth was big business in the 15th century. Before cotton and man-made fibres were available, Norfolk specialised in a woven cloth called Worsted. Named after the Norfolk village, it was made from long sheet paths and was spun using hand spindles. This cloth was one of Robert Toppes' main exports.

As you walk around imagine all the people who worked and traded here. Robert Toppes would have welcomed merchants from all over western Europe so there would be raised voices as people negotiated prices for their wares in a range of languages and accents.

Feel free to wander around this part of the Great Hall. Tracks 6 to 12 will tell you more about this magnificent space.

6. The Roof

If you look up, you'll see the remarkable survival of a complete **crown post roof**, so-called because of four curved braces at the top of each upright post which form a shape, something like a crown.

All the crown posts and cross beams here are original. This particular style of roof was popular in eastern and southeast England before 1500 and was often used in high status buildings owned by wealthy landowners or successful merchants such as Robert Toppes.

There are eight crown post trusses or cross beams in this roof, all of them original. They were used to create a feeling of **light** and **space** in the hall.

The Great Hall impressed upon visiting merchants that Robert Toppes was a very **wealthy** man; a man they could do business with. Everyone who came to the hall would look at the oak timbers and know that they came from the finest and most expensive trees. But Toppes was a true businessman and chose to save money in the areas that were not on public show. The less visible parts of the roof were built from cheaper sapwood and most of these have not survived. They were replaced when the Great Hall was restored in the early 1980s.

7. The Dragon

The dragon was a very important symbol in medieval Norwich. It was the symbol of the religious guild of St. George, who were influential in running the city. Toppes was a major figure in Norwich, he was elected mayor four times.

When he chose to put dragons in his hall, Toppes was showing people that he was proud to be part of this fine city. But can you see where our dragon is?

Look above your head to where the large beam which crosses the hall meets the wall. In the space formed by the curved arch brace - called a spandrel - you will see a dragon carved in Indonesian hardwood still with much of its medieval paint. It was this carving that gave the hall its modern name in the 1980s, after the re-discovery and restoration of the hall. Toppes referred to the hall in his will as 'Splytt's'.

We think that there used to be dragon carvings in all but two of the spandrels, and this dragon is the only one to survive. If you look at one or two of the empty spandrels you'll see the slots and evidence of pegs and Pecos where the lost carvings were fixed once into the cross beams.

When Toppes died the hall was sold and divided up into residential sections.

A partition wall was built across this part of the hall and a new floor was put in to create an attic: you can just see the line of the attic floor below the carving. We know anecdotally that residents lived, worked, and even aired their laundry in this attic space.

Our dragon was hidden from view for 500 years. Over the centuries all the other dragon carvings were destroyed as the building was changed and adapted but somehow this one survived. In the 1970s the building was surveyed by building specialists. Imagine their surprise when they explored the attic and found this dragon!

If you'd like to hear more about the architecture of this Great Hall, play track 8.

8. Architecture

Much of what we know about Dragon Hall, how it looked and how it operated in the past, we have discovered by carefully looking at the building around us. Let me show you what we mean.

It is possible to tell when a tree was cut down by analysing the tree rings. Tree rings are formed as a tree grows. A new ring is added each year. We have been able to use tree rings to work out when the timbers in this hall were cut down. We now know that all the crown posts, the tie beams that support them and most of the upright timbers in the Great Hall come from oaks which were felled in the spring of 1427.

Can you see the wooden screen which divides the Great Hall in two? This is a modern oak screen, but it is in the same place as one which was there in Toppe's time. We know this because there are slot and peg holes all along the tie beam which crosses the Great Hall at this point.

By looking at the architecture we were also able to work out what happened to the Great Hall after Toppe's death. We know that the hall was divided up. How do we know this? Look up - at the end wall, below the two high windows about eight feet or 2.5 metres above the floor you'll see a series of filled-in holes and horizontal lines. Do you see them?

These are where joists were put into the walls to support attic floors, which divided the hall. If you look very carefully you will be able to find traces of wallpaper on the wall on the street side. These show that after the hall was divided there were domestic rooms here.

These dwellings were not often the homes of wealthier inhabitants of the city and would have been crowded and noisy as families and children cooked, slept, ate and chattered. It's possible that these families did not know much about the hall or really know about its history. For many, their focus was on the day-to-day business of living

9. View From the Window

Let's now move and look out of the largest window in this room. This window is a modern replacement of one that was here in Toppes' day. It's near the stairs and looks out over our garden towards the river.

The window lets in plenty of light to the showroom but was also a good vantage point for overseeing activities on the staithes and in the courtyard.

Glass was an expensive luxury in medieval England and this room was full of it. Everything about the Great Hall said one thing to visitors: wealth.

Medieval people were used to large open spaces: they encountered them in cathedrals and guild halls.

However, this building belonged to one man. It's interesting to think about what kind of man this might be, an ambitious man, certainly. A successful man but also a man with a bit of verve and flair, maybe with a cocky confidence too.

Looking out you will see a wide path leading down to a wall.

Merchandise, piled high on carts, would have entered the building through the large red brick arch, along this path. You may remember from earlier in the tour this was Toppes' warehouse yard. Toppes created a secure gated courtyard. Goods were brought here before being taken to the undercroft or warehouses or hoisted up to the Great Hall for show. Heavier goods, like timber, tiles and tar may have been laid in the yard for visitors to inspect.

By the end of the 19th century, the whole area between the hall and the river was filled with a maze of workers' cottages. In the 1930s, they were declared slums and demolished. You will see the only surviving cottage attached to the end of the timber clad block on the left when you visit the garden. The cottage is now used for visiting writers and translators to Norwich UNESCO City of Literature.

On the other side of the wooden screen is the south end of the Great Hall, now called the Weston Hall. When you get there, please press play on track 10.

10. The Weston Hall

This part of the Great Hall was away from the hustle and bustle of the main trading hall. We think that this was where traders came to negotiate a final price and to seal the deal. It may also have been where wealthier merchants were entertained in greater comfort than most visitors.

Every part of the hall has a specific purpose. It was designed by Toppes to help him to make the most of the business associates who came to visit him here.

I'll let you into a secret: Toppes' servants had to be ready when customers came up the stairs into the Great Hall. They needed to be able to see how things were going downstairs.

Can you see how they might have done this? If you face the fireplace and look to the wall on your left you will see a small slit window, or 'squint', below shoulder height. Look through it.

In Toppes day this window looked into an open hall, originally part of the 1370 hall house, where we think visiting merchants began their business.

The space was open from floor to ceiling. Servants in this room could peep through the window, keep an eye on who was arriving and prepare to entertain them. Perhaps they might tell Toppes who was about to enter the hall, prepare their favourite tipple or arrange the wares to impress a new guest or visitor with whom Toppes hoped to trade.

To hear more about Toppes' household, play track 11.

11. Toppes' Household

We have managed to piece together a lot of information to build up a picture of Robert Toppes' life. His will tells us about his family and properties. We have records of the taxes he paid and his role in the city government and the goods that he traded. We know that Toppes was much more than a merchant. He was an entrepreneur with his finger in many pies - a landlord and perhaps a money lender. He was a politician at a time of great unrest in both Norwich and England.

A man like this must have needed a lot of people to look after his interests - from humble labourers to well-off agents who did his business overseas, from domestic servants to family and kin who represented him in Great Yarmouth and London. However, we do not know the names of any of the members of his household. Their stories have been lost, as with so many working class people of this area over the centuries.

Toppes' wealth and prestige meant that he left a substantial imprint on medieval life in Norwich. Huge profits could be made through trading with Europe, but it was also a complicated and risky business. Toppes had to manage ships and tides, negotiate with foreign traders, pay taxes and avoid the threat of pirates. He was clearly very successful at this and became an extremely wealthy man, but we also know that he may have made enemies and perhaps even had some dealings with the law during his business affairs.

He donated a very expensive stained- glass window to the St Peter Mancroft church before his death

and in his will was able to leave donations to every church in Norwich, as well as elsewhere in Norfolk and Suffolk. He gave to prisoners and the poor and helped fund roads and bridges. Toppes lived to the age of 62, which was more than 20 years more than the average lifespan of this period. His wealth ensured that his family was well-provided for after his death. His daughters married and his sons were set up with lots of property.

To hear the rest of the story so far for the Great Hall, after Robert Toppes' death, play track 12.

12. After Toppes

When Robert Toppes died in 1467, he left instructions for Dragon Hall to be sold, and the money used to employ priests to pray for his soul so that he could be sure of entering heaven. The open hall we can see today was gradually hidden from view as new partitions, ceilings and floors were inserted and the space divided up into separate properties.

Over the next 500 years the showroom gradually disappeared. By the 19th century the building was subdivided into five or six properties. At the end of the tour, you might like to walk onto King Street and look at the front of the building. You should be able to count six doorways, some of them blocked, which gave entrance to the different properties.

The 1841 census shows that there were 48 people living here in 12 households, and it seems that the six main properties were divided up into smaller lodgings. A further 100 people were squeezed into the cottages behind that. It must have been cramped, too noisy, and the people living here would have been poor. These poverty-stricken and crumbling households could hardly have been more different to the 15th century lavish open showroom which had once been so admired.

During the 20th century, the fortunes of Dragon Hall began to change. In the late 1960s the earlier history of the building was rediscovered, and during the late 1980s the decision was made to take out most of the inserted floors, partitions, and chimney stacks to reveal once again the hall in all its glory.

To continue your tour, please leave the Great Hall through the doors on the right at the end of the hall, leading to the modern extension. Go down the stairs and when you reach the bottom turn right and then right again, through the doorway opposite the lift and head straight back to the Dragon Hall entrance.

If you are unable to use the stairs, then take the lift to level 3. When you arrive, play track 13.

13. The Rectory

During the 20th century Dragon Hall was almost unrecognisable as a single building as it had been divided into three dwellings. This floor shows the rooms which were created when the building was split up. The Dragon Hall entrance and reception was a butcher's shop but had earlier been the studio of a portrait painter.

Head through the open doorway in the Dragon Hall entrance through to the workshop space. Mind the step!

The room you are standing in, and the writing room adjoining it, were part of a pub called The Black Horse from about 1850 to 1880.

After the Second World War, the rooms became part of the rectory for the parishes of St Julian and St Peter Parmentergate in King St. You'll see the cross in the glass of the front door, a reminder of its past. Father Seear, the rector who moved here in the 1960s said that you could get 'beef, bibles and beer' without leaving the building!

I'd like you to take a closer look at the fireplace. The fireplace and cupboard in this room both date from the 17th century and the cupboard still has its original hinges and latch.

Stand where you can get a good view of the beam above the fireplace.

Can you see the mark carved out of the wood which looks like a lollipop? This is a 'witches' mark' and was put there to ward off evil spirits. The black marks on the beam aren't accidental either.

They are burn marks which were made to protect the building from being destroyed by fire. Belief in witchcraft and magic was very strong in the past and these sorts of markings are common in old buildings. They represent ways of dealing with a life was much more dangerous - where fires were more likely or where people were more likely to die from disease or injury. If you'd like additional information on the history of witches' marks in the building, you can listen to track 16.

If you turn round, with your back to the fireplace, look up at the joists for the hall above. Timber frame buildings were prefabricated and assembled on the ground off-site to check everything fitted before being taken to the construction site. Above you, you can see some carpenter's marks.

These are in Roman numerals, which can also be found in the Dragon Hall entrance and The Old Barge Room. These were used to identify and match

each joint when the building was erected. No screws, nails or glue were used to make the building.

Try to imagine the scope of this project in a time before computers and detailed architects' drawings. Here teams of men led by perhaps one or two master craftsmen would have prepared timbers - holding an imagined picture of the finished building in their heads - as they created each joint and joist, oversaw the sawing of each piece of wood and planned how they would all fit together to be hoisted up into the structure that you see around you.

Head into the writing room to hear about the rediscovery and restoration of Dragon Hall in the 1970s. Play track 14.

14. Writing Room

When Robert Toppes died in 1467 Dragon Hall was sold off and the building was soon divided. It was to remain divided for more than 500 years. King Street became a commercial and trading centre and the wealthy residents moved out. As the population of Norwich grew, many fine buildings like Dragon Hall were divided into units.

By the 19th century Dragon Hall comprised at least five properties. Attic floors were added, and chimneystacks built so that the Great Hall no longer looked like a medieval hall. The building was only 're-discovered' in the late 1970s when building specialists came to look at it as part of the Norwich Survey of historic buildings. The building needed immediate attention. The brewery which owned the site sold it to the city council who established the Norfolk and Norwich Heritage Trust, who took responsibility for the preservation of the building and for telling its story for many years.

In 2015 the National Centre for Writing took over the lease of Dragon Hall, helping to secure its future and upkeep for years to come. Work began on adding a new south wing, which houses a workshop space and a staff office, which was finished in 2018. There are lots of opportunities for lovers of writing and reading from around the world to visit the Literature House, as well as members of the public who wish to admire the history of the building or celebrate a special day within its walls.

You can find out more about writing at Dragon Hall by picking up a copy of the National Centre for Writing season brochure, chatting to our volunteers or even trying one of our in-house writing and activity packs. The old Brewer's Cottage located at the rear of the grounds has even been renovated into a two- bed house for visiting writers and artists to use during their visit to Norwich.

To finish your tour, head back to the Dragon Hall entrance and play track 15.

15. National Centre for Writing

Thank you so much for visiting the National Centre for Writing at Dragon Hall, our Literature House and the centerpiece of Norwich UNESCO City of Literature. Home to 1,000 years of Norwich's history, it is now a place of storytelling and story making dedicated to the development of writing, new and emerging writers and literary translators, and the power of words and ideas to connect communities and shape our futures.

We hope very much that you have enjoyed your visit here today and that you have enjoyed discovering Robert Toppes' hall, the only surviving medieval merchant's hall in western Europe. If you want to know more about the history of the site, or how you can help to support its upkeep for years to come, please do speak to a volunteer or member of staff at the Dragon Hall entrance. You can also visit nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk to find out more about the National Centre for Writing and get involved.

Don't forget that there are many other important buildings that you can visit in Norwich, including Norwich Castle Museum, Norwich Cathedral and the Guildhall.

Thank you and enjoy the rest of your day.

16. Witches' Marks

The marks on this fireplace, which are called upper triple marks, occur in old buildings too frequently to be classed as meaningless graffiti. They remind us that in previous centuries, in a pre-scientific age, people lived in fear of evil spirits and demons, or of being coerced by witches who could steal your soul and consign it to eternal damnation. Witches were hard to detect because they could change shape into a cat or dog, a bat or a toad, and creep into the home to lie in.

People painted, scratched, and burnt symbols on all the possible points of entry into the house, the windows, the doors, and in particular the fireplaces. These signs were believed to have the power to deter witches. Dragon Hall, which of course was a residential building from the late 15th century onwards, has over 50 of these marks.

You may have seen some on the wall posts in the trading hall. How do you distinguish them from other graffiti such as Masons or carpenters? Marks!

Look for repetitive circle walls, scorch marks like Teardrops or Candle Flame or a Petal Daisy Wheel design. These shapes have symbolic powers. The V for the Virgin or M for Mary is often seen.

The Virgin Mary was looked to for protection. The shape of the cross or repeated axes, and what looks like a lollipop on a stick were also used. These can be found frequently throughout East Anglia, where in the 17th century fear of witches was rife and where many witches were hanged.