

This is one of a series of briefing documents produced between 2005 and 2015 for Dragon Hall Volunteers. We have put them on our website [in order to make available to the public as much information and archive material related to Dragon Hall as possible](http://www.dragonhallnorwich.org.uk). The documents cover a range of topics and anyone is welcome to use or copy them, although an acknowledgement of the source would be appreciated.

The Dragon Hall Heritage Volunteers work in partnership with Writers' Centre Norwich, the current tenants of Dragon Hall. Details of how to contact Dragon Hall Heritage Volunteers and of their activities, including talks, walks and performances, can be found on our website: [dragonhallnorwich.org.uk](http://dragonhallnorwich.org.uk)



## **A SHORT INTRODUCTION to DRAGON HALL**

### **A medieval trading hall**

Dragon Hall is a medieval trading hall built in about 1427, by a wealthy merchant called Robert Toppes, as a business complex to display, store and sell Norfolk goods and imports from Europe and beyond. It is thought to be unique in being the only such trading hall in Northern Europe owned by one man. It is now acknowledged as one of Norwich's medieval architectural gems and an iconic building in the city. This was not Toppes's home but was used solely for trading goods, situated on the River Wensum which flows, via the River Yare, to Great Yarmouth on the Norfolk coast, providing access to the North Sea and thence to the Low Countries, Bruges, Antwerp, the German states and the world beyond.

### **The site before Toppes AD 1000 - 1430**

Archaeological research shows evidence of a Saxon hut c. 1000. beneath the Hall. In the late 13th century on the northern part of the site, the Abbey of Woburn in Bedfordshire had a fish processing operation with various outbuildings and a track to a staithe or quay on the River Wensum. There was also a boundary wall with a large brick arch to give access to King Street. In about 1330 an L-shaped domestic 'hall house' owned by John Page, was built on the southern part of the site with an undercroft and an entrance on the south side from Old Barge Yard.

### **Toppes's re-development 1427**

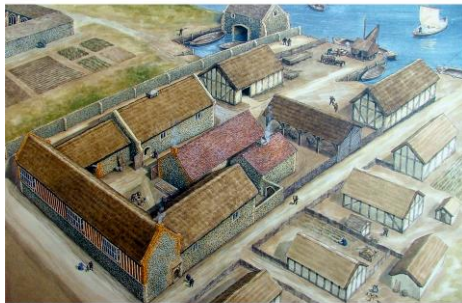
In about 1427 Robert Toppes re-developed the site as a commercial complex. He built his first floor trading hall on top of part of the

domestic house and on top of the existing boundary wall and brick arch. He retained the 14th century entrance to the hall house for his customers. From the entrance passage his customers went up a new staircase to the first floor trading hall. This was a timber construction of seven bays with a crown post roof, decorated with carvings of 14 dragons.



*The remaining dragon carving in a spandrel*

The hall was constructed with English oak, using some 1,000 trees. Clearly Toppes wanted to impress his customers. At the rear of the building he created a yard space with access to the river for his imports and exports, a warehouse area under the hall and a new stairway down to the extended undercroft from the yard. Part of the hall house was retained as a ground floor reception area.



*Dragon Hall site c.1430  
Artist's impression, (courtesy of PLB Ltd)*

### **Robert Toppes c.1400 - 1467**

We do not know Robert Toppes's origins or exactly when he was born but he became a very successful entrepreneur after he acquired the Dragon Hall site in the 1420s. Toppes exported Norfolk worsted cloth

and imported fine textiles, ironware, wines and spices.

His wealth allowed him to rise through the civic ranks and he was an important figure in city politics. 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. He was also involved in two major disturbances in the city, one being over a disputed mayoral election after which he was exiled to Bristol for some weeks; the other was the so-called 'Gladman's Insurrection' when he was indicted in the Kings Bench court.

He was married twice and had eight children. His second wife, Joan Knyvett, belonged to an established gentry family in South Norfolk, closely linked to the famous Paston family. He acquired a large portfolio of properties throughout Norfolk and Suffolk, as well as diversifying into money-lending. By 1450 he was one of the richest men in Norwich. Robert Toppes prepared carefully for the afterlife, paying for a great stained-glass window in Norwich's largest parish church, St. Peter Mancroft; some of the panels can be seen there today. When he died in 1467, in addition to bequests to all city churches, his will stated that Dragon Hall should be sold to pay for priests to pray for his eternal soul.



*The donor panel in St Peter Mancroft church  
(Photo: Mike Dixon)*

### **After Toppes: 1467 - 1969**

When the hall was sold off it was sub-divided into residential units, initially quite large with chimneys and fireplaces. Then gradually it became sub-divided into smaller, crowded tenements and the three large bay windows were replaced with the doors and sash windows we see today. An attic floor and a new ground floor were also inserted and cellars were dug out beneath. Toppes's trading hall was effectively 'lost'. At the rear of the site and in Old Barge Yard a variety of poor and crowded tenements also grew up. The southern end of the hall became The Old Barge pub and by the 19th century some 150 people were living on the site. In 1937 a Slum Clearance programme removed nearly all the tenements at the rear. By the 1950s at the northern end of the main hall building on the street side there was a butcher's shop; in the central section was a rectory; and at the southern end was The Old Barge pub.



*Frontage with Swatman's butcher's shop*

### **Restoration 1970s to 2006**

Following deeper examination by the Norwich Survey, based at UEA, architectural historians and other interested people realised that the building was of great historical importance and a committee was set up to restore the hall. In 1979 the City Council bought the building which was by then uninhabited and a major programme of fund raising and restoration began. In 1986 the Norfolk and Norwich Heritage Trust was formed to run the hall; partition walls, attic floors, chimneys and fireplaces were removed and the hall was restored to something like its original state. It was re-named as 'Dragon Hall' and became a heritage attraction, a resource for the local community and an educational centre. Following a major Heritage Lottery Fund grant

in 2005/06 further improvements were made, including the addition of a north wing with displays, a lift, offices, a kitchen and a meeting room and it became a venue for weddings, celebrations, business functions and arts performances, and open to the public for four days a week.



*Medieval Christmas market*

### **Writers Centre Norwich 2015**

Dragon Hall is now home to Writers Centre Norwich who are planning to establish a National Centre for Writing. This will be a new major cultural venue for the city which will ensure Dragon Hall remains at the heart of Norwich civic life for many years to come. Where once it was a place for international trade it will now be a place for the exchange of stories from all over the world.



*The restored trading hall*