

Dragon Hall Heritage Volunteers & Local History Study Group

NEWSLETTER No. 12: June 2023



After a rather long 'winter break' – caused by what RyanAir call 'operational difficulties' - the Newsletter resumes publication – so rather a lot of news to read.

A Quick Question to start off: Which medieval resident, living close to Dragon Hall, now has an international reputation? Clue: In May this year the Anglican and Catholic Cathedrals in Norwich received a message about her from the Pope – see below.



Happy 90th birthday, Jim!

The main item at the Study Group meeting on May 15th was the celebration of the 90th birthday of, we think, our longest serving Volunteer, **Jim Marriage**. Jim regaled us with some slides and memories of the early days of the restoration of Dragon Hall. He recalled meeting Chris Barringer who,

as for a number of the 'older vintage' of Volunteers, with his drive and enthusiasm, got Jim and his late wife, June, involved in fund raising and a variety of events, ranging from German poetry to a book fair at Wolterton Hall. Jim became the Chairman of the Friends of Norfolk and Norwich Heritage and raised considerable sums of money. It was the Heritage Lottery Fund project in 2005/06 which, to Jim's regret, led to the winding up of the Friends.

See below for some more of Jim's memories



Study Group meetings:

Our very well attended meetings have continued through the winter:

Dame Julian of Norwich.

This year is the 650th anniversary of the visions of 'our famous local mystic., the anchoress of St Julian's church and on April 23rd Andrew Mitchell gave a fascinating talk about her. Julian has a world wide reputation because of the miraculous survival of her great work, 'The Revelations of Divine Love' which was **the first 'book' written in English by a woman.** In this work, Julian tells us that in 1373, when she was 30 years of age and close to death, she received visions or 'showings' of Christ as she looked at the crucifix the priest was holding before her eyes. She recovered and later became the anchoress at St Julian's Church , living a life of prayer and seclusion, although she did have a maid and people, Marjorie Kempe, for example, could visit her and receive counsel. Julian received bequests in four extant wills, the last of which was dated 1416 so she was still alive then.



A medieval copy of the 'short' version of her writing survives and two of the longer one from the seventeenth century, but it was in the twentieth century that her writings became popular. In her time a woman writing of a deep personal relationship with the suffering Christ and of Christ as Mother could be viewed with suspicion but her optimism speaks to the modern reader: **'All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well'**. It is fascinating to think that whoever was living in

John Page's hall house in 1416, now part of Dragon Hall, only some 10 years before Toppes built it, would have known of Dame Julian and perhaps even visited her.

The Bells of St Peter Mancroft' was the title of Rachel Hobson's talk on February 20th. Most of us knew nothing of the part played by our city church in the development of the uniquely English art of change ringing on church bells.

On 2 May 1715, at St Peter Mancroft, a pivotal event in the story of bell-ringing took place: the completion of the first recorded true peal on seven bells. This landmark change-ringing performance took more than three hours to ring, and set the standard for such performances in the centuries to come. Peal-ringing, though little understood by the Church or the public, has, in part, kept the art of



ringing alive. It involves the bells being rung continuously, in **more than 5000 different sequences** which are rung from memory, without visual aids, and without comfort stops either, and they usually take between three and four hours to complete. For the peal in 1715 they had to prove it mathematically - without calculators or computers.

[There is a lovely Sidney Carter song 'The Bells of Norwich' which deserves to be better known. Interestingly it was inspired by the words of Dame Julian and it incorporates one of her famous lines: 'All shall be well ...' It can be heard online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-irwWT3oYg>]

'For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain' by Victoria Mackenzie

Rachel Hobson has also provided a short review of this novel based on the real life meeting of Dame Julian and Norfolk's Margery Kempe, who dictated the first ever autobiography in English:

To be honest, I think that Frank Cottrell-Boyce sums up in his Guardian review the impact of this work far more expressively than I can. You can read his review here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jan/14/for-thy-great-pain-have-mercy-on-my-little-pain-by-victoria-mackenzie-review-a-pocket-epic>

For me, the book is a beautiful, lyrical, intensely sympathetic account of these two women's lives – I had to keep reminding myself that the account is fiction (albeit based on what we have of their writings) – as Victoria Mackenzie inhabits their personalities (and souls?) in such an extraordinary way.

In this year when we celebrate the 650th anniversary of Dame Julian's 'shewings', it is a great opportunity to dig a bit deeper into not only the lives of these two Norfolk women, but also the lives of medieval women in England – wives, mothers, widows, daughters, sisters; what constrained, but also enabled, their domestic and spiritual lives. Reading 'For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain' is a brilliant place to start. Can you tell that I loved it!

[Thank you, Rachel – perhaps others will be emboldened to contribute short reviews, articles, questions etc! Ed.]

The River Wensum

On January 16th we were delighted to welcome Steve Silk, an experienced journalist who is now a producer with Look East. Steve is also an enthusiastic canoeist and cyclist and has already published three very well received books, one of which ' **Hidden Riverside Norwich** ' was the subject of his illustrated talk. We followed the course of the Wensum from Ringland to its confluence with the Yare, not from a footpath but from Steve's canoe! This opened new vistas of the river today but Steve had also included past images which

demonstrated the change from an industrial waterfront to a greener more peaceful scene. Inevitably this prompted reminiscences from the audience, learning to swim in the river, for instance. The extent of the Colman site was quite revealing too. Although I don't think many of us will be buying canoes, we have all been fired with enthusiasm for strolling along our river to admire its present tranquil beauty and reflect on its busy past. We expressed our thanks to Steve for such an enjoyable, informative hour.



[More news from the Study Group below]

News from the Archive Project

Since the last Newsletter our Intern, Sally Piper, has concluded her very effective and



valuable stint and we owe her a debt of gratitude for setting up the basic 'architecture' of our archive and for 'populating' the spreadsheet catalogue of the NRO Collection with some 700 entries. She has also inducted our new Archive Volunteers into the mysteries of cataloguing and they, led by Adrian O'dell, have now completed the catalogue for the NRO Collection.

Sally and Archive Volunteers at the NRO

We now hope that we can do likewise for the Digital Collection. **We are meeting at Dragon Hall on Wednesday 21st June at 1.0 p.m to 2.30** to start on this process. It will be an excellent opportunity to get to know the many aspects of Dragon Hall's history - largely in the 20th century. Please come along if you are interested or just want to see what's involved - no previous experience required! Bring your own sandwiches etc and a laptop will be handy.

News from NCW

Old Barge Yard doorway and Great Arch - the much needed restoration work, to which we have contributed, has been completed. It looks good.

The Wolfson Suite (aka Butchers Shop + Rectory Rooms) is to be one free flowing space to improve accessibility and the installation of a new gate into the garden plus improvements to the drive surface will also aid this.

Chris Gribble, CEO and the moving spirit behind the establishment of NCW, is moving on to be CEO of The Forum Trust. A new CEO is being sought.

The Undercroft and cellars have been cleared – thank you, Amanda & Freya! – (so tours can resume as in Ye Olden Dayes).

Tours – since we have recruited new guides Amanda is actively considering whether we could run two tours per month. Payment can now be taken by card.

Heritage Open Days – please note dates

Plans are as follows:

Monday 11th Sept: Tours at 10.00, 12.00 & 2.00.

Sunday 17th Sept.: *'Dragon Hall Stories'* 2.00 to 5.00.

Planning Application for 125 King St – the 'Boleyn Building'

This planning application is for the building to the right of Dragon Hall (as you look at it from King Street). The developer (Norwich River Limited) has formed this new company specifically with a view to developing this site, and there was a consultation for local people on 18th May, where artist's impressions of the new site, along with plans, were shown.

The proposal is to provide a mixture of new houses and apartments (55 in all) 'to make an efficient use of what is currently an under-used car park and commercial buildings'. The site in question extends from the frontage of King Street, right back to the river, and the artist's impressions show a well-planned mixture of dwellings, with some open spaces, and a walkway down to the river from the street. The developer is mindful of the problem of flooding, and the buildings closest to the river will only be used to live in from the first floor – the ground floor will be used for parking (although this area, too, will be designed not to be flooded). In fact, there is only a small amount of car parking in the plan – the intention is for most dwellings to be accessed on foot or bike.

The developer proposes to repair and refurbish the 'important and fragile listed buildings on the site's frontage' – the building was once owned by Anne Boleyn's grandfather, Sir William Boleyn, probably as just a 'Buy to Let'. The developer has had initial conversations with planning and conservation officers from Norwich City Council, and also Historic England.

My views are that the plans look attractive, and that if they come to fruition, they will be a welcome addition to King Street. A neighbour who attended asked about the proposed timescale, and was told that they would hope to make a start before the end of the year! A number of people I know were pleased with the plans – however some expressed concern that they might get watered down, and the site become less attractive than the plans we were shown.

Rachel Hobson

More Study Group News

Future Study Group Meetings – A date for your diary

On July 17th Shea is going to take us on **one of his famous King St. Walks** from Rose Lane to the Novi Sad Bridge. In case the weather is unsuitable we will keep our booking of the South Hall and keep free the following Monday 24th July as a back up. We hope that the walk may encourage others to familiarise themselves with the material (Shea has plenty!).

Building with Flint

Phil, who has been on a course about building with flint, during which he worked at St Margaret's and St Etheldreda's, shared his knowledge with us on March 20th. It was good to hear that efforts are being made to preserve this traditional craft. It is very important to position the flints correctly and to get the mortar mix just right. Phil was able to put his new skills into practice and build his own wall – which looked pretty good!

[Robert Toppes owned a lime kiln in King Street (aka Conesford Street) for the production of the quicklime which was mixed with sand, aggregate and water: was it used for the flint wall on King Street which supported – and supports - the first floor joists of the Great Hall?]

Dragons

Also on March 20th David Newman gave us a most interesting talk on dragons, both through the ages and across the world, all accompanied by some wonderful illustrations. He ranged through mythology, the ancient and medieval worlds and their writers, the Bible and stories of the Christian saints and the importance of dragon imagery and lore in China and the Far East.

Snap in a roundel of 1832



The descriptions and pictures showed many variations in physical features and powers; the oriental dragon, for instance, was rather more benevolent than his western counterpart, though both were feared. Size, wings, legs, fire breathing capacity could all be different. Some dragons were more serpent like than others and there was some identification with Satan in biblical texts. Christian figures like Margaret of Antioch and George didn't just vanquish a dragon, they destroyed evil. Dragons have become such a universal image and feature on many coats of arms and flags but It was good to see some illustrations of the many fine Norfolk examples. I am sure our own Dragon was listening to

David's talk with particular interest - and he didn't drag – on at all!

MB

Sounds of King Street

On Wednesday 14 June some of us attended a talk by Jonathan Draper at NRO about unique oral history recordings relating to King Street, Norwich and the surrounding area. Captured in the 1970s and 80s, the recordings were made by the **Norwich Oral History Archive** which was based at the Norwich Community Workshop. We heard clips related to the early twentieth century, and topics such as the 1912 Norwich flood, domestic life, and industry. The recordings were preserved and catalogued as part of the Unlocking Our Sound Heritage project, which was supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

These recordings were the forerunners of the **King Street Community Voices** project run from Dragon Hall in 2012 – see our website for some transcripts.

Some memories by Jim Marriage

The things that stick most in the minds of volunteers of that period were the rickety wooden staircase that probably dated from the early 20th century, and almost certainly would not conform to present day Health and Safety regulations, the gaps in the walls that seemed to get bigger every time you looked at them and the uneven blockboard floor in the main hall. There was no heating and you needed two overcoats to survive the winter. There was no till - just a metal cash box - which was replaced much later by one of those new fangled modern things that will do everything for you if you served at Bletchley Park during World War 11 and could operate the Enigma machine. How we all cheered when David Vince did his best to destroy it by violently throwing it to the floor in a fit of rage.

*I never ceased to be amazed by the beauty and magic of the building especially when it is used as a setting for an evening of early dance or a Shakespeare play. As you sit in the twilight you can almost sense that the ghost of Robert Toppes is looking down on you. Something June and I often talked about was that we would have a 'Son et Lumiere' production of the history of the building and its inhabitants throughout the centuries - Medday, Toppes, Sir William Boleyn, Publicans, American servicemen, the vicar, families living in the courtyards - but we decided it was a bit too ambitious.**

[* It's never too late Ed.]

Guildhall Tours – these have resumed, courtesy of the N & N Festival – see their website

If you prefer not to receive these Newsletters please contact Heather Pfeiffer at h.pfeiffer@btinternet.com

RJM/HP/MB