

Dragon Hall Heritage Volunteers & Local History Study Group

NEWSLETTER No. 15 May 2024



DHHVs 'Vols & Guides Pack'

Everyone on the mailing list for the Study Group or Tour Guides should have received by email a link to the Pack on OneDrive: [DH VOLS & GUIDES PACK 2024](#). It contains a large selection of documents about Dragon Hall which will be updated and added to occasionally. It also contains a 'Forum' page for the exchange of views, questions etc. It would be very useful to know if anyone has experienced difficulties with accessing the Pack. If so, please tell Richard (richardmatthew24@gmail.com) or use the Forum page to post your comments etc.

A new document has been added to the Pack: the full text of **an on-line lecture by Prof. Ronald Hutton on 'Dragons'** which consists of a world-wide survey of the history of dragons. See below for a summary of the lecture.

Study Group meeting on February 19th: Talk on the *Burston Strike School* by Rachel Hobson

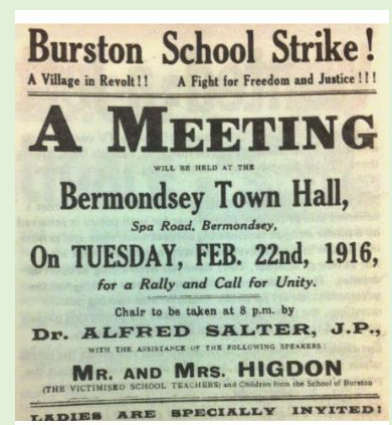
At the February meeting, Rachel gave a presentation on the **Burston Strike School** (she lived in Burston for thirty years, so actually knew some of the families caught up in the events).

The Strike School was inaugurated by Violet Potter on 13th May 1917. Violet was the leader of the Burston children who refused to attend the council school after the school mistress, Annie Higdon, and her husband, Tom, were sacked.

We backtracked to 1911 to when Annie and Tom took up their positions as teachers at the school, and we learnt how they challenged the authorities to provide decent conditions for the schoolchildren. For example, Annie lit fires in the schoolroom on cold and wet days, and was criticised as a result by the Chairman of the school Management Committee. **Annie and Tom were Christian Socialists**, and lived out their faith in a spirit of generosity – Annie allowed the schoolgirls to use her typewriter and sewing machine, with a view to them being able learn their living when they were older; the children too, learnt how to use the Higdons' telescope.

The challenge to authority (both the school Management Committee and the Rector, the Reverend Eland) together with Tom's increasing involvement with the Agricultural Workers' Union and him being elected on to the Parish Council, all resulted in a showdown. The Rector and certain key landowners accused Annie of beating two Barnardo's girls who lived in the village. Although the allegations were easily disproved, they served as stick to beat the Higdons with, and, after a futile attempt to exonerate themselves, **they were sacked**, leaving the village school on 31st March 1914.

The children loved and respected Annie and Tom, and their response was to go on strike! When Rev Eland came to the school with the new teacher on 1st April, they found the building deserted. **WE ARE GOING ON STRIKE TOMORROW** was written (by Violet Potter) on the blackboard. The children marched around the 'candlestick' (a route of about a mile and a half) around the village, Violet beating a drum! They ended up on the village green, and it was here that very soon Annie and Tom began to teach the children regularly. They ensured that the children were taught a broad curriculum, and after a short time, some temporary accommodation was found for the 'Strike School'.



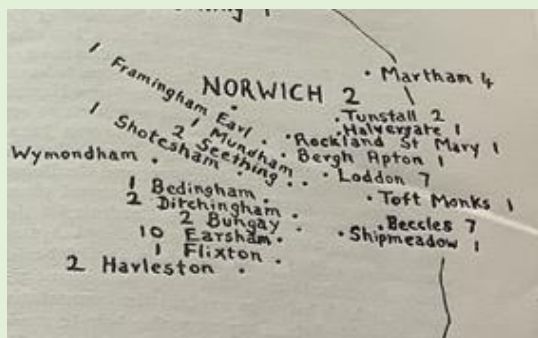
The school strike was taken up **by the labour and trade union movement**. During the years following the Higdon's dismissal, and the establishment of the strike school, money was raised all over the country, for funds to build a permanent alternative school. At the inauguration of the new building in May 1917, the great and the good of the labour and trade union movement gathered in Burston, to mark the moment. By the mid 30s, about 20 children were still attending the school, although the numbers had dropped since the heyday when **66 out of the 72 children from the council school went to the strike school**. Tom died in August 1939, and soon after this the strike school closed and Annie died in April 1946.

The strike by the Burston schoolchildren lasted over 20 years, and is still remembered by the trade union movement on the first Sunday in September, when they hold a rally, which is addressed by prominent members of the labour and trade union community.

Study Group in May, in lieu of a meeting: on ***Friday May 17th** Shea will lead a walk around north Norwich, aka 'Over the Water'. Walk commences at The Maddermarket Theatre at 10.15. All welcome. [*** Please note date**]

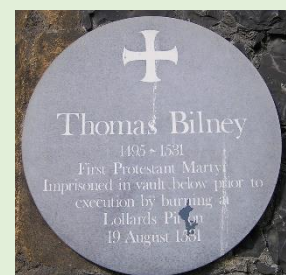
Lollards and Religious Radicals in Norwich and Norfolk by Valerie Kennedy

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* notes that the name Lollards is "derived from the **Middle Dutch lollaert ('mumbler')**," and they are generally seen as following John Wycliffe (theologian and reformer, d.1384), although **Norman Tanner in *Heresy Trials*** argues that some Lollards' alleged views went further than Wycliffe's. Many Lollards criticised the sacraments and rejected the worship of saints, pilgrimages to shrines, etc. Strongly anticlerical, they believed that individuals should pray to God directly, and not through the medium of priests or saints. From Tanner's accounts, Lollards seem to have been generally lower-class working men and women or servants. Only four of the sixty whose trials he discusses in *Heresy Trials* were **priests**.



Tanner argues that there were **very few Lollards in Norwich** compared to those in cities such as "London, Coventry, Bristol, [and] Leicester" and that this is "remarkable", but he explains this by quoting the variety of radical religious options in the city. His sketch map (below) shows that, by contrast, Norfolk provided fertile ground for Lollardy.

Of the sixty Lollards whose trials between 1428 and 1431 Tanner analyses, only three were martyred, of whom one was William White. He is commemorated in Norwich, as are the Lollards as a group. First there is the pub, **The Lollards Pit**, near Bishop Bridge, the "Pit" in the pub's name being derived from the chalk quarries nearby. The site was just outside the city walls, and therefore a good place to dispose of those who had been cast out by the church. Interestingly, the pub has only had its current name since 2012, being previously known as *The Kings Arms*. A plaque on one of the walls of the **Guildhall** next to a heavily barred window commemorates a later Protestant radical, **Thomas Bilney** who was burnt as a heretic in Norwich in 1531: Tanner argues: "it is doubtful whether Bilney was more than an orthodox radical or whether his connections with Norwich were close" and indeed, Bilney may be taken as an example of the way in which, as Houlbrooke says, "all [Protestant] heretics persecuted in England between the time of Wycliffe and the Reformation are usually loosely labelled as 'Lollards'". Also, close to *The Lollards Pit* is **William White Place**. (This assumes that the White here is the religious radical, which may be a dubious



assumption.) Certainly both White and Bilney are among those listed in the Martyrs Memorial plaque, near *The Lollards Pit*.



Richard Matthew has noted [a possible link between the burnings and Robert Toppes](#), pointing out that the *Records of the City of Norwich* declare that “in 1427 the Treasurer paid for 2 cartloads of wood for burning a heretic @ 4s 8d; for carriage of wood to burn two heretics 16d”. Richard observes: “Toppes was Treasurer in 1427/28 so possibly he signed off on this”. The details bring the reality and bureaucracy of the burnings uncomfortably close.

Of the sixty Lollards discussed by Tanner, nine were women; some seem to have derived their beliefs from their husbands, but some seem to have held them independently, like [Margery Baxter](#), who stands out “in a particularly individual way” and who, says Tanner, was “on the lunatic fringe of Lollardy”. [She called the Bishop of Norwich “Caiaphas” and his ministers “devils”](#) and asserted that “the devils who fell from heaven with Lucifer entered the images in churches, and have continued to dwell in them, so that people who adored them were committing idolatry”. From Tanner’s account it seems she was fortunate to escape burning, since this punishment was generally reserved for relapsed heretics: Baxter *did* relapse but without being convicted a second time. There is no record of her in Norwich’s streets or buildings, to my knowledge.

List of Sources

Houlbrooke, R.A. “Persecution of Heresy and Protestantism in the Diocese of Norwich Under Henry VIII.” *Norfolk Archaeology* 35, 308-326.

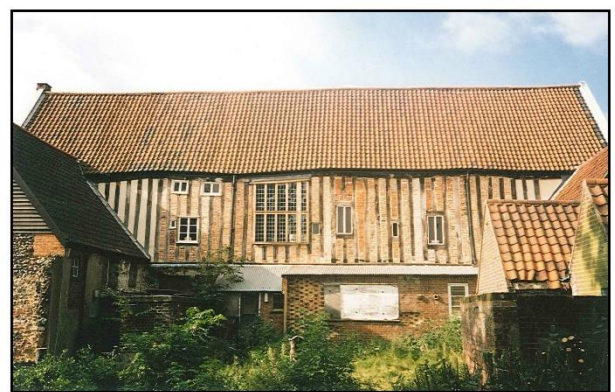
Tanner, Norman P. *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1428-1431*. London: The Royal Historical Society, 1977.

----- . “Religious Practice.” *Medieval Norwich*, eds. Carole Rawcliffe and Richard Wilson. London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2004, pp. 134-55.

----- . *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich 1370-1532*. Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984.

Profile: Shea (pronounced ‘Shay’) Fiddes

I come from Great Yarmouth where the pinnacle of my achievement was to serve beer (Lacons) at the Winter Gardens, and moving on to greater things at the Birds Eye factory where I was tasked with disappearing into the top of a fully laden lorry to appear clutching a collander of peas to test. I went off to train as a drama teacher at Coventry and then worked at a secondary school in Nottingham, before I joined a theatre-in-education team employed by the London borough of Newham. I became team leader, acquired a couple of degrees and ended up being made redundant and given early retirement from running an Arts Education Centre.



The rear of DH before the HLF Project 2005/06

Along with my wife Chrissy, an infant teacher from East Ham, we decided to come and live close to Carrow Road so I didn't have to walk so far on a Saturday.

Soon after we arrived we enrolled in courses at Wensum Lodge and went along to the Christmas party. However this turned out to be the Dragon Hall Volunteers Xmas bash.. I won the raffle and there was no looking back. At the induction there were about a dozen guides and luminaries along with myself and Richard Matthew.

The hall was semi-derelict, boarded up to the rear with few facilities. The great hall was as it is now while the rest was a jumble of stairs and ramps. The job of the guide was to lurk about in the shop and if anyone put their heads around the door they were whisked off into the interior and treated as if they were prospective buyers.

Once the money flowed staff appeared along with fresh volunteers. I don't remember a vote but I had a hugely enjoyable time on the Volunteer Liaison Committee and



Starring in Robyn Hode



The Mummers – ready for action

editor of Toppes Times. We had an extensive wardrobe of medieval costumes and it didn't take much to get volunteers to clamber into them, especially at the annual Christmas Fair. It was there that I spied a copy of Robyn Hode and along with Richard and two members of staff gave a performance at the Dragon Hall Christmas do. For the following ten years or so the Dragon Hall Mummers entertained/annoyed audiences with our many versions of St George & the Dragon in and around the city.

It was a lot of fun and we found ourselves scripting and doing the voices for a UEA animated film. Then came a short film as part of the oral history project; if you come across it the fancy camerawork was not mine but a trainee cameraman loaned by the BBC. There was quite a lot going on. I took part in readings, storytelling and even a character in a Toppes presentation. Also around were groups involved in costume making, the Wise Women, talks, the beer festival and a host of education activities. It was a good place to volunteer and still is.



Linda Jones being interviewed for the King Street Community voices film

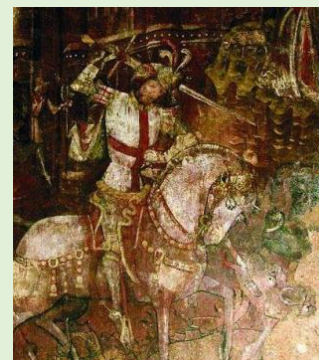
Gresham Lecture: Professor Ronald Hutton on Dragons

'Why did Europeans believe in dragons so much, and why are European dragons so nasty and Chinese dragons so nice?' This is the question with which Professor Ronald Hutton began his Gresham lecture on Dragons which we noted in the last Newsletter. He went on to say that most peoples have traditions of monsters and that this may be due to *'an ancient collective memory'* of having to deal with large dangerous animals. But two areas have made such creatures especially prominent in art and story: Europe and the Far East, especially China. **European dragons are 'super-predators' but Chinese dragons are 'friendly and beneficial to humans'.**

Some extracts from the text of the lecture:

- The very real human fear of predators meant that a good lord or chief in a traditional human society was expected to guard its members against animal as well as human foes. The greater the legendary hero, the most spectacular the predator against which he was matched. There are **two kinds of European dragon** in popular folklore and medieval literature: the fire-drake, a reptile with wings, and the worm or cold-drake, a huge snake which spits venom or breathes poisonous gas. England has the largest number of dragon legends for a country its size anywhere in the world: sixty-eight in all. The chief narrative function of English dragons is to get killed, and killing them is a very tough, one-off, activity. English dragon slayers include five saints, above all the national one, St George.

He was possibly a real person, a Roman soldier martyred for his Christian faith who is first recorded in the sixth century. He first got mixed up with a dragon, however, six hundred years later, during the Crusades because the Crusaders captured Joppa, in Palestine, which was both a cult centre of George and the ancient setting for the story of Perseus and Andromeda. Perseus rescued Andromeda from a sea monster, and his legend got built into George's, **with the sea beast turned into the more familiar European dragon**. The Crusaders then brought this story home.

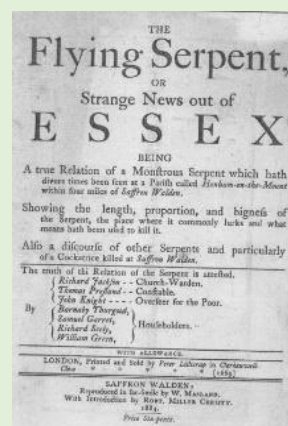


St George and the Dragon: a fresco in St Gregory's church.

- It is also clear that there was **a particular boom period in the creation of English dragon legends: between 1350 and 1500**. This was because it was the time at which St George was adopted as the national saint. Behind all these traditions lay much older precursors such as the Roman mythical class of winged snake, which they called '**draco**', the basis for the **English word 'dragon'**. Some historically recorded dragons were misidentified real animals. The dragon of St Leonard's Forest, Sussex, reported in a pamphlet of 1614, was a huge serpent* which sounds like an escaped king cobra or black mamba.

[*As late as 1669 this sort of report was circulating. Ed.]

- The classic form of European dragon, **the fire-drake**, is not known elsewhere in the world because it is distinctively Christian, and comes from the Book of Job, chapter 41, where God himself speaks, and describes a beast called a leviathan. In medieval Europe, however, real alpha predators were missing. **Europeans therefore had an imaginative need for an alpha predator** that was even more powerful than the lion and could be treated as a symbol of evil as well as ferocity. The dragon filled that conceptual gap.



- Since humans first acquired their capacity for reasoning, they will have noticed that huge bones are found in rocks, often of creatures with sharp teeth, huge jaws and horns. Such beasts were clearly no longer around. To societies before the sciences of geology and palaeontology, and the concept of evolution, developed, the obvious explanation was that they had been killed by heroes. Every time that a relic of a historic dragon has been preserved, it turns out to be a long-extinct animal.

The full text of the lecture has been added to the **DH Vols & Guides Pack** available via the link to OneDrive above. We have also added to the Pack a very readable summary: '**Norwich & Dragons**' by Frank Meeres.

Another excellent source of information is [Colonel Unthanks' blog](https://colonelunthanksnorwich.com/?s=dragons&search=Go):

<https://colonelunthanksnorwich.com/?s=dragons&search=Go>

Two Questions

For our dragon carving, a mystery remains: as far as we know, Toppes only became a member of the prestigious Guild of St George in 1453 when he became 'alderman' of the Guild ex officio, after his year as Mayor. If so, **was it not rather presumptuous** of him to decorate his new trading hall with dragons c.1427? On the other hand, given what we know of his drive and ability, perhaps it was his way of announcing his ambition to become one of the Norwich elite. Was there some 'huffing and puffing' among the 'old guard' at this upstart's arrival – from 'trade'!?

A further question about dragons in general: in Christian thought* **the dragon was a symbol of evil**, slain by St Michael, St George etc., so how did it become a popular decorative design?

[*Revelation 12.3: *'And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns'.*]

A Competition for 'Top Dragon'



versus



Refectory in The Great Hospital

Dragon Hall

Clearly the final score, using VAR, is: **Great Hospital 0, Dragon Hall 5!**

WEA Day School

In March Adrian and Richard tutored a WEA course on **'The Inside Story of Dragon Hall and Robert Toppes'**. We had a full house of 30 attendees in the Freemans' Room and were grateful for the backup, tea, coffee etc. provided by Amanda and her team and Duty Manager, Leighton. The room and the big screen proved to be a very pleasant and practical venue and it was good to be on 'home turf'. There was a net profit to the DHHV funds of some £200.

We hope to repeat the course next year, but under the aegis of **'Norfolk Life-Long Learning'** the new venture by ex-WEA folk.

Study Group News

Meeting on 15th April: **Adrian** gave us an erudite and well illustrated talk about **William of Norwich**, who was murdered in 1144 and mistakenly called in the past **'Saint William'**. (He was never declared a saint by the church). The primary source is a fictitious account by Thomas of Monmouth, a monk at the Priory, where he states that William was murdered by local Jews and his blood used for ritual purposes: probably the origin of the **'blood libel'** used by the Nazis to

justify the holocaust – a very unhappy association for Norwich. As, unlike Canterbury, Norwich didn't have a saint's relics or a shrine, it seems that the purpose of Thomas's fiction was to create **Norwich's own shrine** which would attract pilgrims and the income that they generated.

June Meeting: Monday June 17th: Susan will brief us on her continuing research into the people of King St. Her great grandfather, William Comer, actually lived in 'The Old Barge Building' at no. 121. Also Rosemary Woods will tell us about her researches into the Clere family and some possible Toppes connections. William Clere bought the Dragon Hall site from the Midday family before 1378 and left it to his widow, Dionysia Clere. In her will of 1418 she calls the property 'Middayes' – an example of how the name of a previous owner becomes attached to a property. This would explain why Toppes called it 'Splytte's'

More Dragons

2.

3.

1.



4.

5.

6.



7.

- 1. Carving**
- 2. St George & St Michael**
- 3. St Ethelbert's Gate**
- 4. Cathedral boss**
- 5. Advert by Backs**
- 6. Rood screen in St Helen's, Ranworth**
- 7. C.19th engraving of Guild Day**

