

Dragon Hall Heritage Volunteers & Local History Study Group NEWSLETTER No.19 April 2025



Volunteers/Study Group Meetings

On December 11th we met for our enjoyable Christmas Social at the Coach & Horses. Valerie repeated her wizardry of getting all (I think) the monies in for the tapas. She has clearly passed her probationary period and is now appointed '**Collector of Tapas Funds**' for life.

Meeting on January 20th: Amanda gave us a briefing re the NCW's plans. They are mindful of their role as custodians of Dragon Hall and are already thinking about the 600th anniversary in 2027 – any ideas? The Hall will re-open to the public for '**drop-in**' from **Easter on Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays**, including a new audio tour available on phones. Family Open Days are planned from February half term until the end of the summer holidays. The kitchen has been up-dated and is to be promoted as a space for communal cooking.

Rachel then gave us a very interesting talk about **St Peter Parmentergate church and the Maid Uncumber**. See below for full details.

Meeting on February 17th: Adrian gave us his 'full monty' PowerPoint talk on the **History of Dragon Hall** with lots of useful context and many 'bells and whistles'. He explained that this is one of the 'External Talks' we offer and for which he will shortly do a major mailshot to clubs and societies throughout Norfolk – and even Suffolk? We then hope that our small new team of speakers will be able to fill any bookings requested. There are a number of different versions of our talks available, with **Speaker's Notes**, and speakers can choose which one to use or 'tweak' them to their own satisfaction. See below re Adrian's report about briefing sessions for intending speakers.

Visit to The Great Hospital on March 17th

John Humphreys, a City and Great Hospital guide, gave us an excellent tour of the Hospital, founded in 1249 by Bishop Walter De Suffield for poor elderly clergy and still carrying out its charitable function of housing elderly men and women. We had time to take in the extensive range of buildings, set in some seven acres, among which we saw Thomas Ivory's house, the cloisters, St Helen's Church, the Swan Pit – the last surviving one in England - the Eagle Ward, in what was the chancel built in the 1380s, where we saw the 252 roof panels with their eagle motifs and the small cubicles in which the residents lived up until the 1980s. And of course the Refectory with its six





dragon carvings in the spandrels. We noted how similar the dragon carvings were to our own dragon.

A speedy and completely objective assessment by all present decided that the Great Hospital dragons were probably copies of our own but are not as colourful or beautiful as the Dragon Hall one. Quality trumps quantity!

(That's enough Fake News, Ed).



Another dragon can be seen there in St Helen's church in a pew end carving

showing St Margaret emerging from its belly.



Future meetings

(April 14th – normal guided tour for the public at 2.0 p.m).

April 28th – 'Refresher' tour of Dragon Hall with Heather and Mary.

May 19th - Susan's update on her relatives' connection with the Hall and Richard on the residents of Old Barge Yard etc.

June 16th Frances and Mary on **Sir Thomas Erpingham**.

Profile – Susan Keays

I was born in Norwich, and brought up in a small village in South Norfolk, where I lived until the late 1970s. While working in London for many years, I enjoyed travelling to exciting locations including Iceland, New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, India and Nepal, as well as various locations in Europe. After a few more years, it was time to return back home to Norwich. Having recently retired, I have resumed my great interest in family and local history. Much has been discovered about the people themselves and their lives, and indeed about Norwich, making it more than just a list of names and dates.

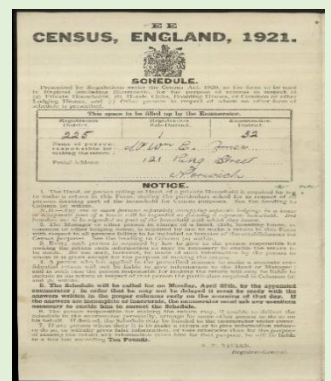
An absorbing hobby I would thoroughly recommend. *(A piece of advice here: write on the back of family photos any names, dates and locations!)*



Since joining the DHHV group and attending the meetings over the last 7 years, I have been pleased to present a few talks at the meetings on various branches of my family research, census data and residents of the 'Dragon Hall' building. Some of you will have been present and heard them, but for those who have not, I discovered that my great-grandparents lived in accommodation there from around 1914-1934 (The Comer family, 121 King Street), with other family members living close by around that time.



William Edward and Eliza Comer (nee Burgess)



The 1921 Census address page

FREE to a good home: a **Hitachi (CP-X275 Multimedia Mobile LCD) Projector**. It's the old Dragon Hall (c.2006) projector used for external talks, now surplus to requirements as we bought a new one in 2015. Believed to be working OK and could be used with a laptop to show photos, films or Power Point shows at home. Contact Richard@dragonhallnorwich.org.uk

Update: Dragon Hall Archive Project

The Digital Collection: we have a new impetus in our work to edit the thousands of images. Nikki Morris, Susan Keeyes and Jane Rose, led by Adrian O'dell, are being allocated images to check on their quality, whether there are duplicates, or if they need the titles amending: one example was of an image of **Prince Charles** visiting Dragon Hall in the 1990s but it had been titled "King" Charles.

	A	B	C	D	E
1	Reference Number	Level	Title	Creator(s)	Description
2	DH/DC	Collection	COLLECTION	Volunteers	organised into four series levels.
3	DH/DC/01	Series	EDUCATION	Volunteers	Documents and images relating to events
4	DH/DC/01/01	File	CREATIVE WORKS	Volunteers	Dragon Hall.
5	DH/DC/01/01/01	Item	1350-1900 (PLB)	Volunteers	Hall and King Street.
6	DH/DC/01/01/02	Item	Sketches 3.19	Jennie Dowling	2 images showing Dragon Hall exteriors.
7	DH/DC/01/01/03	Item	Toppes & the Dragon	Volunteers	Animated film Toppes and the Dragon pr
8	DH/DC/01/01/04	Item	Haikus Feb 2010	Leftwich	visit to Dragon Hall in February 2010.
9	DH/DC/01/01/05	Item	Remembered	Volunteers	Robert Toppes - A Life Remembered film.
10	DH/DC/01/01/06	Item	world built'	George Szirtes	commissioned by the Writers' Centre No
11	DH/DC/01/01/07	Item	sketch Working Girls	Doff Ransome	Working Girls' outside Old Barge pub
12	DH/DC/01/02	File	DRAGONS	Volunteers	educational/entertainment purposes.
13	DH/DC/01/02/01	Item	documents)	Volunteers	relating to dragons.
14	DH/DC/01/02/02	Item	Education Pack	Regeneration Trust	designed for use in schools.
15	DH/DC/01/02/03	Item	(2016)	Volunteers	1 document describing different dragons

Nikki Morris, clearly a bit of a wizard when it comes to spreadsheets, has made some changes to the Catalogue by adding **hyperlinks** so that the images can be seen with one click. Both the Catalogue and the Digital Collection are held on **Microsoft's OneDrive** in 'the cloud' which means that any of the editors, future editors or researchers can access them at any time. Although the work can be tedious at times, it's important that we try to make sure that the contents of the **Digital Archive** will be accurate, and of good quality.

The NRO Collection: we continue our close association with the **Norfolk Record Office** which holds the collection of physical documents, photographs, plans and maps relating to Dragon Hall, which we, or rather our Intern, Sally Piper, **catalogued earlier**. We hope that this **Catalogue** will soon be accessible on line via the NRO for future historians and researchers.

Celebrating Wensum Lodge
A legacy of Adult Education
Join us to celebrate the story of Wensum Lodge King St, Norwich

Drop-in exhibition:
Sat 26th – Sun 27th April 2025

- Opening Doors 10:00am – Talks 10:30am–11:30am
- Displays and films at 11:30am–4:00pm

Dragon Hall, 115–123 King Street, Norwich NR1 1QE

Book **FREE** tickets on Eventbrite <https://tinyurl.com/yx8fthk2n>

With thanks to Dragon Hall (National Centre for Writing) for their support

WISEArchive
Working Lives

Exhibition at Dragon Hall: Sat 26th – Sun 27th April - Free drop in

'Celebrating Wensum Lodge - A Legacy of Adult Education'

Opening Doors 10:00am – Talks 10:30am–11:30am

Displays and films at 11:30am–4:00pm and a small talk on the Saturday morning which is ticketed – see poster.

We owe a great debt to Wensum Lodge as much of the initial impetus to research and restore Dragon Hall originated in Chris Barringer's King Street Research Group based there.

NLL* Study Day at Dragon Hall on March 7th

*Norwich Lifelong Learning

Adrian and Richard gave a repeat of their Study Day on ‘**The Inside Story of Dragon Hall & Robert Toppes**’ – given last year as part of the WEA programme. We had a full house in the very pleasant Freemens Room, with two PowerPoint talks, a tour and an ‘exercise’ with original documents relating to Toppes’ role in the so-called ‘Gladman’s Insurrection’ of 1443. We were ably assisted by Freya and Duty Manager, Jill and we raised some £170 for DHHV/NCW funds.

Rachel’s Talk about St Peter Parmentergate and the Maid Uncumber

I pass this church nearly every day, and from when I moved into King Street I had been intrigued by the name ‘**Parmentergate**’. It transpires, according to the OED, that it means, *(Latin) parmentarius, tailor, robe-trimmer, or furrier (12th cent. in continental sources, 1086; c1280 in British sources).*



I delved a little more into the history of the church, getting a lot of material from *The Ecclesiastical History of the Parish of St Peter Parmentergate* by Rev **William Hudson** – who originally presented a series of articles in the parish magazine, between 1889 and 1893. The edition I used was edited by Mary Rodgers and published by King Street Publications in 2009.



There are still a number of interesting features inside the church (which is owned by the Norfolk Historic Churches Trust and leased to Community East who use it as a skateboard park currently). If you are visiting, do look in particular at the east and west windows, and the Berney Monument – well worth a visit in themselves.

The Berney Monument

One thing led to another, and I was intrigued to read that in an inventory of church belongings in 1548, there was a reference to:

- *Item, an old silk cope for a child and a green silk vestment for a child*
- *Two old quilted silk cloths and a mightier (mitre)*
- *Item, two of Maide Uncumber’s best cotes.*
- *Item, a cote of Maide Uncumber of redde silk.*



The Skateboard Park

The reference to the vestments for a child must refer to the custom of appointing a **'child bishop'** in December, on St Nicholas' Day, who 'ruled over' the church for a month or so, reminding the congregation that adults often lose their way, when they lose their innocence – and it takes a child to point out the foolishness of adults (there are associations with the *Feast of Fools* and *Feast of Asses*). This tradition, of course, is still revived in English cathedrals and churches from time to time (**St Peter Mancroft has had child bishops** several years in the past decade). My attention, however, was taken up more by the reference to Maid Uncumber's *'best cotes'*, in the inventory, rather than the child bishop's clerical dress.

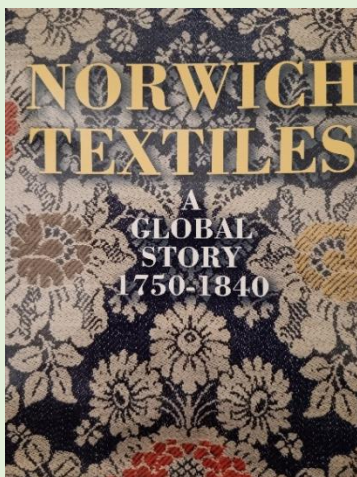
So, who was Maid Uncumber? Well, it transpires that she is a **'folk saint'** found in many European traditions (Vilgeforte in Portuguese, Ontcommer in Dutch, Frasnobliva in Polish). In all the translations of her name, there is the suggestion of a person of sorrow, or of avoiding or escaping from something. The English story is that Vilgefortis (a version of the Portuguese name is used) was a princess, **betroted in marriage to a man she found repugnant**. She prayed fervently to be delivered from this terrible fate, and, low and behold, on the morning of her wedding, she awoke to



St. Wilgefortis, Westminster Abbey

discover that **God had given her a luxuriant beard!** On arrival, her fiancée took one look at her, made his excuse and left! So she became known in English, as Maid (or Saint) Uncumber – **she was 'unencumbered' from this hideous fate!** We don't know why this popular figure was so cherished by the good people of St Peter Parmentergate that they provided at least three coats for her statue – which, sadly has been lost over time. But it is details like this that **bring the lost parishioners of St Peter Parmentergate alive today.**

Norwich Textiles – A Global Story - a talk for the Norwich Society by Michael Nix on January 24th – (with some material gleaned from his book)



Based on his recent book of the same title, his talk, illustrated with some colourful slides, was an excellent summary of the Norwich Textile trade from 1750 to 1840 when the trade experienced a major downturn due to competition from the recently established industries in the north. It brought home to me **how complex both the weaving process and the selling of the textiles was.** He described the many stages in the production of wool and yarn: the manufacturers, dealers, factors, staplers, spinners, wool-comb makers, warpers and scourers; and the stages of wool combing, spinning, reeling, singeing, dressing, heddle, reed, shuttle and bobbin makers, throwsterers, twisterers, fullers, doublers, hot pressers, dressers, glaziers, drawloom mounters, pattern drawers, bobbin makers, journeymen, calenderers, weavers and putters out ... the list goes on.

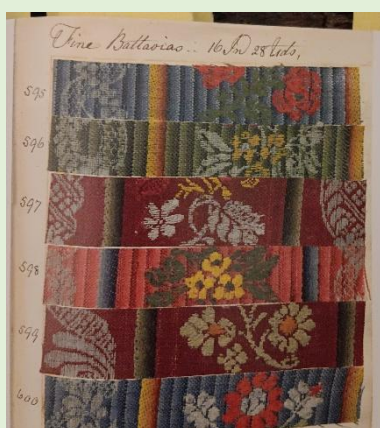
We learnt that Norwich mostly produced 'stuffs' using long staple wool imported from Lincolnshire and from Ireland. The reelers produced skeins of wool which **by law had to be 560 yards long**, created on huge wheels which had to be turned by hand 560 times for each skein. The trade was highly regulated and between 1776 and 1815 there were more than 2000 convictions for the skeins being too short. The calenderers had a horse and a boy to turn a wheel which lifted a weight of between 10 and 20 tons to create a sheen on the fabric.

He gave an example of how an order was received from **Moscow via St Petersburg**, paid for via London and Amsterdam, and shipped via London, Denmark and St Petersburg. The trade was truly global, exporting to Italy, Spain, south America, Russia, Scandinavia and The Netherlands. In 1793 one shipment alone was worth £8000 and Norwich agents who travelled abroad were known as '**foreign riders**', i.e. commercial travellers. Sweden, Norway and Holland incorporated Norwich textiles into their 'folk costumes'.



I was reminded that the production of these textiles was at the cost of dire working conditions for the weavers: in *The Rings of Saturn*, W.G. Sebald wrote, "A great number of people spent their lives with their wretched bodies strapped to looms made of wooden frames and rails, hung with weights, and **reminiscent of instruments of torture or cages**" - but also, "Many of the materials produced in the factories of Norwich were of a truly fabulous variety and **a quite indescribable beauty** as if they had been produced by Nature itself, like the plumage of birds." (*The Rings of Saturn* p.283)

A numbered pattern book 1790s



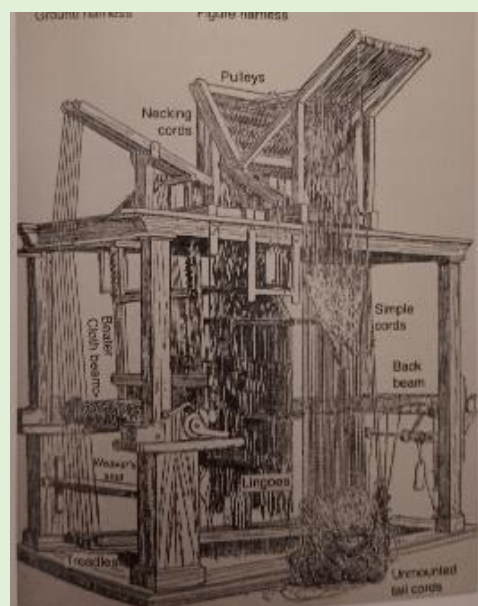
The export trade began early on: **in 1601 the first East India Company fleet** to the East Indies took 100 pieces of Norwich stuffs; between 1799 and 1800 the Company's sales of camblets were of the value of £72,000. In 1804 Norwich shawls were sent to Australia on a **female convict ship**.

Michael's book is the fruit of **ten years of research**, weighing in at 600 pages and £45; it must be the single most comprehensive account of the Norwich textile industry - long overdue. From its extensive tables, maps and diagrams I gleaned, rather

to my surprise, that in **the parish of St Peter Parmentergate** in the late 18th century there were 114 weavers, the greatest number of all the Norwich parishes – the next greatest number being 113 in St Stephen's.

RJM

A Draw Loom



A Short Video about the book:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSvj0-g_4pl

Costume & Textile Association 'Miscellany 2017': many articles and images about Norwich textiles:

https://www.ctacostume.org.uk/uploads/1/1/9/5/119530260/miscellany_final_2017.pdf

INFORMATION BOARD: LOCAL EVENTS, TALKS, MUSIC etc.

- **Assembly House Classical Concerts:** Lunchtime monthly **chamber music concerts** on a Thursday with excellent, professional, mostly European, musicians: highly recommended:
<https://assemblyhouseclassical.co.uk/>
- **Norfolk Record Office**
Free (mostly) **Talks, Holiday activities, 'Behind the Scenes' Tours:**
<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/norfolk-record-office-4418147045>
Occasional Blogs by volunteers on various local history topics using archived material:
To get on the **mailing list:** <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/norfolk-record-office-4418147045>

NRO Newsletter: <https://www.archives.norfolk.gov.uk/article/30890/Keep-in-touch-with-us>
- **Norfolk Historic Buildings Group: Talks on YouTube:**
<https://nhbg.org.uk/winter-lecture-series-2021-2022/>
Including an interesting one on the **Merchant Houses of Norwich** and one on **Norwich Undercrofts:**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUCRTEIgw-I>
- **Norwich Society Talks on line:**
<https://www.thenorwichsociety.org.uk/events/the-virtual-historians-talks-series>
Particularly recommended: Sophie Cabot on **The Jewish Heritage of Norwich**, not least because there are plans for a Jewish Heritage Centre in the Music House, aka Wensum lodge:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSLTG34u0qY>
- **Norwich Lifelong Learning**
An excellent selection of short courses, day schools etc. at The King's Centre
<https://norwichlifelonglearning.co.uk/>
- **Tours of buildings**
The Great Hospital: monthly tours @ £15
<https://www.ticketsource.co.uk/whats-on/norwich/the-great-hospital-norwich/the-great-hospital-tour/e-yeojez>
Anglican Cathedral – six tours per day Monday to Saturday
<https://cathedral.org.uk/visit/cathedral-tours/>
The Guildhall – twice a month @ £5
<https://nnfestival.org.uk/whats-on/norwich-guildhall-tour/>

Please let me know of any events and activities that you feel should be publicised