

**Dragon Hall Heritage Volunteers
& Local History Study Group
NEWSLETTER No. 4: November 2020**



Two widows: Dionysia and Elizabeth de Clere

The **Cleres of Ormesby** owned the Dragon Hall site in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, shortly before Robert Toppes began his major reconstruction. I have attempted to 'bring together' some available information about them, using the sources cited below. This particular 'slice' concentrates on two women who both had a long widowhood, Dionisia de Clere (?- 1418), and her grand daughter- in- law, Elizabeth (c.1416 - 1493).

By the mid-fourteenth century the Cleres were a well-established landowning family in east Norfolk, the most important branch being centred on Ormesby. It is reasonably certain that, at some time between 1352 and 1378/9, Sir William Clere of Ormesby had acquired **the unified Dragon Hall site**, which included both the substantial Page hall house at the southern end and the Abbey of Woburn holding on the northern part. As William served as member of parliament for Norfolk, a fine town house in Norwich would have befitted his status. This area of King Street housed other gentry families at this time including several widows - Lady Audley, Lady Montague and the Lady of Brampton. After William's death in 1384, the proximity of such congenial company may well have been an added attraction to his widow **Dionisia (nee Witchingham of Upton)**. She survived until 1418 and it seems likely that she spent at least part of her widowhood in her King St property, enjoying the attractions of Norwich. In 1744 Blomefield described seeing window glass there which could have been an eagle from the Clere arms. The landgable chart in East Anglian Archaeology 112 (see below) shows her paying tax for the whole block in 1397. Residence in the hall house would not have excluded renting out part of the property. In 1390/91 Nicholas de Berford was fined for laying muck in the lane next to the Austin Friars site - on the north side of St Anne's Lane - and polluting the river; perhaps he was a tenant? In **Dionisia's will** of 1418 the Dragon Hall site, then called ' Middayes', is to be sold. She had several children including the heir, John, who died in 1420. Richard Matthew, in his book (see below), speculates that **Robert Toppes** may have had some connection with the Clere family and that this could have influenced his purchase of the Dragon Hall site.

Toppes and his second wife Joan would certainly have known Dionisia's grand daughter- in- law, **Elizabeth Clere**, born Elizabeth Ulvedale of Tacolneston. She had been married to Robert Clere, Dionisia's grandson, whose death in 1446 left her a young, wealthy widow. Because she was a great friend of **Agnes and Margaret Paston** and regularly appears in their famous correspondence, and is herself the author of four of the Letters, there is much to be learned about her life and character. She was frequently with the Paston women, lent money to the family, and her advice, on a variety of matters, was regularly sought and valued. On the occasion of a royal reception in Norwich, Margaret even borrowed **a necklace** from Elizabeth! One of the most famous of the Paston letters is Elizabeth Clere's to John Paston, privately advising him of **his mother's physical bullying** of his sister to persuade her into an unwanted marriage; Elizabeth has concern for the girl's well-being but does not question Agnes's right to coerce her daughter into marriage with a 'disfigured' 50 year old! She was a woman of her time and accepted that marriage was essentially a business affair; her knowledge of the precariousness of Paston finances may well have prevented much-discussed marriages between the Clere and Paston offspring from taking place. Prudent alliances were arranged for her two surviving children but

Elizabeth herself, despite the advice of the queen, remained a widow. It is interesting to note that in 1465, Elizabeth and Agnes, who were part of a wealthy widow group in Norwich, retreated from the **pestilence in the city**, and returned to their manors, the former to Ormesby and the latter to nearby Caister, a fifteenth century example of **lockdown**. Elizabeth had the wealth to be generous in death as well as in life and her will lists many charitable bequests but she retains her shrewdness; she is insistent that **her grandson William Clere** should wait until he was thirty before receiving his inheritance from her estate, and even then only if he was ‘... **of good, sadde and virtuous dispocioun** and rewle, lykly so to continue ...’! Robert and Joan Toppes also knew the Pastons well and Elizabeth would have been part of their social circle too. She may even have visited Robert’s premises on King Street, **aka Dragon Hall**, which had once belonged to Dionisia.

Further Reading!

Blomefield, Francis, *An Essay towards a Topographical history of the County of Norfolk* (1806).
Clayton, Jane, *Eizabeth Clere and Marriage between the Clere and Paston families in the Late Fifteenth Century*, Oxford Notes & Queries, Vol. 66, Issue 2 (June 2019).
Matthew, Richard, *Robert Toppes, Medieval Mercer of Norwich* (2013).
Shelley, Andy, *East Anglian Archaeology* 112 (2005).
Virgoe, Roger, *Illustrated History of the Paston Family* (1989).

Mary Bradford

Two Heritage Open Days 2020 experiences

*** A visit to the Berney-Hobart monument in St Peter Parmentergate**

The monument is a very grand affair. It was restored a few years ago and until recently was boxed in, safe from attack by the resident martial artists.

I took the opportunity to pop in over HODs and have a look at the husband and wife lying in an elaborate tomb, quite unlike contemporary Jacobean monuments in Norwich (usually Mr and Mrs kneeling at prayer with the kids lined up behind them). It was put there in 1623 by Elizabeth Hobart’s brother. She demanded burial in the chancel and ‘a decent memorial tomb to be placed there’. The inscription reads:

‘Here lie richard Berney, armiger, late of Langley, whose last day closed on the 27th day of June AD 1615, and Elizabeth wife of the said Richard, who was a daughter of James Hobart, armiger, late of Hales Hall in Loddon, who died the 16th day of April AD 1622’



We know that the area was fairly well to do as several mayors were buried there, although the 15/16th century rebuild is rather plain compared to other city centre churches. The question is - where on King Street did these prominent members of county gentry live?



A clue comes from the Norfolk pubs website which sites Berney's inn at No 86 - 90. The invaluable George Plunket goes further to state '*in the 14C here was Berney's inn**. *John Berney of Witchingham being entered on the roll of burgesses at the time*'. He goes on to say that '*in the 16C this was the city house of Heydons of Baconsthorpe*'.

Shea Fiddes

Heydon's House (George Plunkett 1935)

[* This Berney was of course at least 200 years before the Berney-Hobart monument and it's not been possible to find out anything about him. It also raises the question of what exactly is meant by an 'inn' in this context. It seems unlikely that a gentry family would be operating a pub. Answers on a postcard please!]

*** A visit to St Giles on the Hill**

Although I must have passed it hundreds of times and been inside several times, I had forgotten what a beautiful, light, church it is – and still a parochial church with a welcoming ethos. And its position is probably the best of all the Norwich churches, with its magnificent tower standing up so tall, looking beautiful when lit up at night. This little poem is to be found on a tablet inside the ringing chamber:

*Near this place John Webster fell
Beloved by all who knew him well
The most ingenious and noted ringer
St Giles sixth bell round did bring her
He closed the peal, struck well his bell
Ceasing the same, down dead he fell.
November 17th 1760
In the 63rd year of his age*



Richard Matthew

King Street Memories 1

Reading Linda Jones' memories in the last Newsletter reminded us that, although it was a transcript of an interview done for the [King Street Community Voices Project](#), how vivid her descriptions were. So here is an extract from another transcript which reminds one of how huge the changes have been over the last 100 years or so:

Irene Robbins: The Keel & Wherry Inn & bombing

I was born in 1920 in King Street, where my parents kept the Keel & Wherry Inn, and later moved to Argyle Street to bring up my family. My first memory is going to Horns Lane Infant School and my fear of passing the huge brewery horses from Youngs, all loaded up and ready to start work. They were Clydesdales and they would have their nosebags on while they had their breakfast. If they shook their

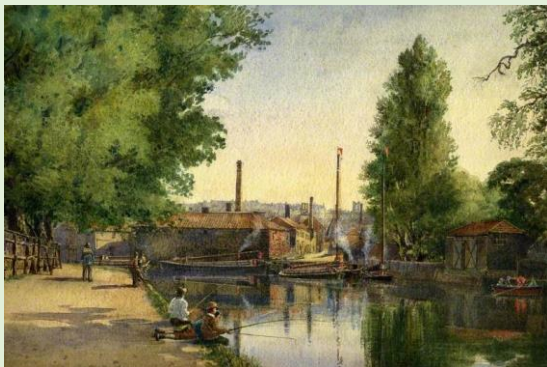
heads or sneezed, I thought it was the end of the world! Mother used to watch me along the road to see I got past them safely.

You could get everything you needed in the King Street shops. There was a butchers, fish shop, Haydens the bakers, and everybody delivered. The milkman brought the milk round in a churn, measured out in a little measure. You would be cleaning in the pub in the morning so he would come in and start to read your paper, then the horse would put its head in the door, as much as to say, "That's time we moved!". Bakers also had horse-drawn carts. It wasn't a lonely street. People would sit on their doorsteps on warm evenings, knitting or whatever, or bring a chair out from the yards. Children played out in the street after tea - hoopla, marbles, swing on lamp posts, skipping. There was not much traffic then and no buses or trams on King Street.

The pub was bombed out at six o'clock one morning. A string of bombs went across King Street and one fell on a wall at the back of the houses. We were all in bed, mum and dad's bedroom ceiling came down and the kitchen had disappeared. The family that lived next door, their kitchen and small bedroom went down, and when they dug the boy out he was still in his bed and fast asleep. That hit Argyle Street and Pecks Opening and killed a whole family in one of those small houses.

All the transcripts that have been made of the recordings can be seen on the DHHVs website, on the history tab; they are well worth a look at: www.dragonhallnorwich.org.uk The original recordings are in the Sound Archive at the Norfolk Record Office.

A Picture Puzzle: Two views from Riverside both by Arthur Montague, around 1875



St Anne's Wharf



'Riverside'

The left hand one was sent in by Shea Fiddes and presents a rather idyllic picture. Because there is a bend in the river the view would seem to be up St Anne's Lane, and if you zoom in you may be able to make out a gable end. This might belong to Rose Cottage – now accommodation for visiting writers – or an earlier building. Behind that you can see chimneys which are probably on the Morgan's Brewery site. The right hand picture is almost certainly also up St Anne's Lane and one can see the tower of St Julian's church and possibly a dim outline of only one chimney. But the configuration of the buildings on the staithe is different from the left hand one. The first one's title is 'St Anne's Wharf' and the other one is titled just 'Riverside'. The other puzzle is that the two chimneys in the left hand one seem to be too far apart to both belong to Morgans. So are they the same view or has the artist employed some artistic licence in one or both?

Norfolk Record Office blogs

Some of the best sources of Local History are the blogs from the Norfolk Record Office, written by 'amateur' researchers on a great variety of topics, in bite-sized chunks, and in a readable style. The latest one is about how much information can be derived from churchwardens' accounts, in this case about defending the nation, looking after the poor and coastal erosion:

<https://norfolkrecordofficeblog.org/2020/10/03/defending-the-nation-looking-after-the-poor-and-preventing-coastal-erosion-the-varied-expenses-found-within-churchwardens-accounts/>

On this website you can also access all the previous blogs, including such topics as Religion in Norfolk at the time of the Mayflower – seven of the emigrants were from Norfolk – and Black Residents of Norwich.



An itinerant Norwich shoe salesman, 1820



Pablo Fanque in Norwich

One of these black residents, William Darby, was indirectly the inspiration for John Lennon's song 'Being for the Benefit of Mr Kite'. Darby, a circus performer and owner was known as Pablo Fanque and it was on a poster for a performance of his circus in 1843 that Lennon saw the words 'Being for the Benefit of Mr Kite'. William Darby was born in Norwich in 1810 and baptised very close to our 'patch' in the parish of St John's Timberhill. He was the son of a black Norwich man and a white woman. The full story of Pablo Fanque can be seen in another blog from the NRO:

<https://norfolkrecordofficeblog.org/2019/10/20/pablo-fanques-return-to-norwich/>

The NRO also offers a series of on line talks: just click on

https://norfolkrecordofficeblog.org/history-talks/?fbclid=IwAR1vj4rr4w6aw0yJgxX5UO7n3MQXNaC5v4p85W1NKteJWzKSRLdRu_xh-Zw

One talk being on 'Bootiful Norfolk Dialect':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pzt4wKW7Tsg>

News from Amanda at the National Centre for Writing

Most Dragon Hall staff are still working from home with only a little bit of activity in the building. We had a small Covid-secure wedding ceremony and drinks reception on 19 September and some nice pre-wedding coverage with some lovely shots of the Great Hall on Look East. We are also hosting some sessions for Creative Futures on a Monday afternoon - these are sessions/activities for young people from the migrant refugee communities who don't speak English as a first language. Again Covid compliant. Weddings and youth activities are two of the few things that can still go ahead at the minute. I don't think we will be looking to add any more physical events into the building in the foreseeable future - you wouldn't believe the hoops we have to jump through with Covid risk assessments, safety policies, staff briefing, training, provision of PPE etc.

We have had a request from a gentleman asking if his mother's ashes can be scattered within the grounds of Dragon Hall. Apparently she was born in number 121 King Street* and one of her dying wishes was to be brought back. With permission from Norwich City Council, we are arranging for this to take place later this month.

* **An interesting link:** No. 121 is the northern part of the Old Barge Room, previously, we think, the Billiard Room of the pub. Before that it was occupied by William Comer who was the great grandfather of Susan Keeys, a member of our Study Group – a lovely direct link from the past to today! William lived here from 1914 (approx.) to his death in 1934. It is also interesting that No. 121 is where Agnes Palmer lived from 1841 to 1911- the only resident that we know of who lived in Dragon Hall throughout this period.

DHHV 'Archive stuff'

We think that the more recent material relating to Dragon Hall is as much part of its history as any other period. When the Trust was wound up some of us 'rescued' various files, folders, photos, etc.. Now at long last they have a home, courtesy of NCW, in our own lockable cupboard in the north cellar.

A lot of our recent documents are also available for anyone on our website but we don't know how long that sort of 'archive' will last, so 'hard copies' of these will soon be deposited in the Local Studies department of the library in The Forum and hopefully catalogued.

A 'Stunning Apartment' in Dragon Hall ?

Is it the Old Barge Room? The old Rectory Rooms? Or the Cottage?

No, it's not fake news, it's true But it's not our Dragon Hall; it's in an apartment block in Unthank Road. But why did they use this name? Is it a breach of the Trades Descriptions Act ...? Below is the advertisement:

"Enjoy our stunning Dragon Hall apartment with all the modern essentials you could need—including super-fast WiFi and a smart TV. Dragon Hall blends modern convenience with a classic, luxurious setting. This self-contained ground floor apartment has full mobility access and comfortably accommodates two people. Dragon Hall boasts a beautiful modern wet room with complimentary toiletries as well as a spacious, fully-equipped kitchen"