

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. 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



ROBERT TOPPES

Robert Toppes is believed to be the original builder and owner of Dragon Hall as recorded in the city's landgable records. (In his will he refers to it as 'Splytt's' and its modern name was only given in 1986).

Origins

From medieval documents we know a lot about Toppes' life, although we have two important gaps in our knowledge. One is about his origins and the other about his business dealings, particularly his trade as a mercer. We estimate that he was born about 1400, but know nothing about the family or where he came from. Some have speculated that he came from the Low Countries or northern Europe as Norwich had many trading links there and Flemings had settled in Norfolk and Norwich from the 14th century or earlier.

Business

As to his business, in most records he is referred to as a mercer, rather than a merchant, as this was the occupation given when he bought the 'freedom' of the city in 1421/22, that is the right to trade. Mercers originally dealt in small luxury goods, such as brooches, silks and buttons, but by this time they formed an elite both in London and in Norwich, where nearly half of all mayors of the city in the 15th century were mercers. All merchants or mercers had their own merchant's mark to label their goods and to use as a seal on deeds.



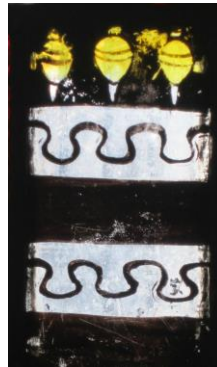
Toppes' merchant's mark

Our only specific record of his trade are a few entries in the Yarmouth Customs records about shipments of cloth, tiles, and pottery. There are no records of his trade at Dragon Hall. We know that he became very wealthy and in a Norwich tax record of 1451 he is assessed for £20 and is the wealthiest non-gentry person in the city. We also have a list of 187 people in Norfolk and Suffolk who still owed money to his estate, years after his death, so it seems that he diversified into money lending.

Property

He also diversified into property, many of them probably as investments. We have records of a total of thirty one properties that he was involved in over the course of his life, including a total of nineteen in Norwich, four of these being gardens. In 1450 he bought Hakons Manor in Great Melton, near Norwich, from which he acquired a coat of arms, comprising the Hakon arms with his rebus, or pun on his name, of three added spinning tops. In his will he left four properties in Norwich to his wife, Joan, including his house in St Peter Mancroft parish, and properties to four of his children.

*Toppes' arms in window
in Mayor's Court Room
in the Guildhall*



Family

His first wife was Alice, and with her he had probably four children. She had died by 1451 and he then married Joan Knyvett, from a prominent gentry family in South Norfolk; with Joan he had probably five children. In addition to his second marriage we have other evidence that Toppes rose socially. He was friendly with the prominent Paston family, probably through Joan, and is mentioned in two of their letters. He also donated a magnificent stained glass window to St Peter Mancroft church, which most of the city elite and gentry attended. It included a panel for himself and his two wives, which can still be seen in the church; his coat of arms; and his merchant's mark – neatly summarising many aspects of his life.

*Toppes and his two
wives in St Peter
Mancroft church
(Photo Mike Dixon)*



City offices

Toppes was clearly an ambitious man. He became city Treasurer at the young age of about 27, an alderman, sheriff, and member of the Guild of St George, and rose unusually quickly to be Mayor, a position he held four times. He was thus part of a new mercantile elite in the city, the second largest and richest city in the kingdom after London. He was closely involved in several of the disputes between the new civic elite and the church authorities. After one of these in 1437 he was exiled to Bristol for some weeks. After his involvement in a serious disturbance in 1443, known as Gladman's Insurrection, the king removed the city's liberties for several years. He also served as MP for the city several times and features in a rare record of a claim for parliamentary expenses in 1445/46 during which he spent 215 days in London on parliamentary business.

Death and Will

He died in 1467 and his long will confirms that he died a very rich man, but its dominant theme is the salvation of his soul; through masses, prayers and charitable bequests. He leaves 3 shillings and 4 pence – one sixth of a pound – to every church in Norwich and to others elsewhere. To each leper and prisoner he leaves 2 pence; 12 pence to each nun at Carrow Priory; and he leaves monies for the upkeep of the roads from Norwich to Ipswich and from Wymondham to Hethersett. He makes provision for his wife, Joan, and their children with properties and £100 – a very large sum – for each of two younger daughters on their marriage. He leaves Hakon's Manor to his eldest son, Robert junior. He leaves his brother William £20 and “my chief gown with my best hood”. All the unallocated properties and possessions are to be sold for charitable purposes and to pay for masses, as are Dragon Hall and another property in King St. Thus his trading activities helped to speed his soul to heaven.

Toppes's choice of two Supervisors is interesting, in that both were very prominent men, very much involved in the turbulent politics and property disputes in Norfolk and Suffolk of the period. Sir William Yelverton was a judge and the author of “Yelverton's Mediation” in 1452 which provided a settlement of the earlier disputes in the city, particularly in relation to the role of the Guild of St George.

The choice of John Heydon, a lawyer and sometime Recorder of Norwich, is somewhat surprising as he had also been very prominent in the disputes within the city, a member of the Thomas Wetherby faction and an enemy of Toppes. In 1439 Heydon had brought a suit against Toppes alleging that he had been prevented from attending the mayoral election and was awarded 400 marks, a very substantial amount. After the disturbances of 1443 which resulted in Toppes's exile to Bristol he had also instituted several legal suits against Toppes. Much later the city alleged that Toppes and others had been falsely indicted for high treason and fined £15 and that Heydon and others had threatened Toppes with hanging and forfeiture of lands.

That Toppes appointed such men suggests that he was able to survive such setbacks and the turbulent politics of the City and to ally himself with the county and gentry establishment. Their political power and influence was obviously more important to him than any earlier quarrels.

His executors are his wife, Joan, her nephew, Sir William Knyvett and three others. But although the will was very carefully set out, many years later we can see in the Court of Chancery a number of disputes between family members and between them and Sir William Knyvett. They culminate, some thirty years after Toppes' death, in a poignant letter from Toppes' widow, Joan, to her nephew. She is apparently on her deathbed, in dire financial distress and concerned for her children; she is pleading with Knyvett to carry out his duties as executor.

Further reading

David King: *The Medieval Stained Glass of St Peter Mancroft (2006)*

Richard Matthew: *Robert Toppes – Medieval Mercer of Norwich* (Norfolk and Norwich Heritage Trust 2013)

For a complete transcription of his will see another Heritage Document: ‘The Will of Robert Toppes’.

Film

For an imaginative re-enactment of his life see 'Robert Toppes – A Life Remembered' on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCcCjAh5eITqHq4z-JM7KrA>