

Visit to the Great Hospital Norwich, 27th May 2015

The Great Hospital in Norwich was founded in 1249 by Bishop Walter de Suffield, as a charitable act for "the remission of sins", to save his soul from Purgatory. It was originally for the indigent poor and as a charitable organisation & housing association it still fulfils the same purpose. It currently provides housing for some 150 people from Norwich. The important documents are all still extant and so its history is well documented, see (www.thegreathospital.co.uk/)

In 1300 there were some 17 hospitals in and close to Norwich, many of them outside the city walls and many of them leprosarium's (people were willing to give to charity to support lepers, but "not in my back yard"). St Giles Hospital (as it then was) provided religious and health care; and for a while there were also lessons for twelve poor boys. But the main supporters wanted preferential treatment for their families and servants, and the hospital became a more monastic organisation. The hospital church (now St Helen's) was greatly enlarged in 1381, in length and height and decoration.

Around 1530 Henry VIII nationalised the monasteries but the hospital was untouched. Later, Edward VI gave the whole site to the Corporation of Norwich and the accommodation was gradually enlarged. The chancel and most of the nave of St Helen's became open wards for both women and men becoming known as God's House... These were converted into separate cubicles in the early 19th century so that the church now has an oddly truncated wider-than-long shape. The building was condemned for living-in after the Second World War but the women particularly didn't want to leave. The last one leaving in about 1980. Their cubicles in Eagle Ward remain as they left them, not prettied-up but honest reminders of how they used to live.

Our tour had started in the Ivory Room at St Helen's House, a grand house built around 1750 by Thomas Ivory, builder, speculator and the first named architect in Norwich. It was used as offices by the Hospital and then used from 1952 by Norwich Union as the first private hospital in Norwich. It then reverted to office use, accommodation and for visitor education. The rooms we saw were elegant early Georgian, with wall paintings by Angelica Kauffman. One room had previously been used as an operating theatre, the most elegant I have seen.

We also saw the Chaplain's House, the Cloisters (the smallest of four cloisters remaining in Norwich, and finally had tea in the new community hall, erected (with an accommodation block) in 2014 after a plot of land given by Queen Elizabeth I had been sold.

If you can visit the Great Hospital, it is a fascinating insight into the history of social housing and its religious origins; but it is a residential site, and visits must be arranged in advance. Our thanks are due to June Brereton who masterminds the Group, Judith Vincent who arranged the visit, and Rod Spokes who was our informative and entertaining guide for the afternoon.