

u3a visit to Strangers Hall (Roland Clark)

Behind an unassuming gate in Charing Cross lies one of Norwich's most historic buildings, Strangers Hall.

Dating from the 14th century, the large vaulted undercroft built for the secure storage and display of goods by Ralph de Middelton, a wealthy merchant, can still be seen

Considered a prestigious dwelling, it was owned by a succession of wealthy businessmen including several mayors of Norwich

In the 15th Century William Barley added the Great Hall, a large space for entertaining one's peers with a display of wealth and ostentation. Later owners added a fan vaulted bay window and gallery (figure 1)



The Great Hall is still used for private dinners, a memorable experience for those lucky to participate.

Over time smaller and more private rooms were added extending the size of the house.

How the house got its name remains a mystery

In Elizabethan time's Dutch protestant textile workers, known as Strangers, fleeing religious persecution at home settled in Kent. However Thomas Sotherton, a grocer, mayor of Norwich and owner of the Hall was keen to attract these skilled workers to Norwich and records show he wrote several letters from the Hall inviting them. While they came, and contributed significantly to the prosperity of Norwich there is no record of them living at the Hall.

The house is now a museum of domestic history displaying through a series of period rooms how the house changed from the 14th to 20th Centuries.

We met our guide in the Great Hall, laid out for a 14th century feast with the lord seated at the high table arrayed with pewter, glassware and food appropriate for the age. In a corner a 15th Century oak aumbry used to store valuables (fig 1).

Upstairs to Lady Paine's 17th Century Chamber with its original furniture, including the small mirror reflecting the price of glass at the time, and replica textiles, household goods and personal objects of the period (fig 2). Here she would spend her time reading, embroidering and receiving guests



Onto Joseph Paine's 17 Century Great Chamber with its dark wooden panelling (fig 3) Things had moved on and guest could be entertained in privacy. The table has chairs, a thick covering and examples of early knives and two pronged forks. Serviettes make an appearance, not to cover ones clothes, but to protect the ever enlarging ruffs



For a while, in the 18th Century, Strangers Hall became the official lodgings for visiting Assize Judges and its Georgian dining room with its light pastel coloured walls, large windows and candle lit chandelier were adapted to meet their needs

The group reacted well with our enthusiastic and knowledgeable young guide but the tour was well over time and had to end. But there was still an opportunity to explore the Victorian rooms and the garden with its Elizabethan Knot Hedge (fig 4)

Everyone enjoyed the experience a pleasing end to my association with the discovering Norwich Group

