
The Old Courts and Yards of Norwich

A Story of People, Poverty and Pride



Beckwith's Court, Quayside, c.1930

The 'Old Courts and Yards of Norwich' is published by Norwich Heritage Projects, an independent non-profit-making organisation which simply aims to encourage an appreciation of the heritage of a wonderful city.

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Foreword

It was back in 2009 that together with a group of friends we first researched the old courts and yards of Norwich, often simply referred to as 'yards' or 'courts', the terms being interchangeable. At the time we concentrated on interviewing people who either lived in, or could remember, the yards in the interwar years. We then produced a selection of material, including a website, a short film that was shown on the Fusion Screen (in the Forum) and published a short pamphlet written by Brenda Reed.

Since then we have given many talks on the old yards which has made us very aware of the high level of interest in the subject. This is largely because so many people from Norwich discover that their families lived in the yards and so want to find out more about them. We therefore decided to revisit and expand our earlier project.

The story of the yards touches on many aspects of the City's history and heritage. Starting with their origins, when Norwich was England's second city, to the 1930s, when the City Council cleared the worst of the yards and there was a huge migration from the City centre to the new council estates in the suburbs. As in all of our projects, we bring that story alive by combining living memories with archive material. In particular we have integrated contemporaneous material from a variety of resources, including newspapers and books together with governmental reports and records. We have aimed to give a balanced view. This is very important, because clearly the yards divide opinion. In fact they are mired in controversy. At one extreme is the view that they were the worst hell-holes in Norwich and needed to be razed to the ground, at the other is the notion that they contained historic buildings and were the homes of bustling communities. We have aimed to address both sides of the argument.

In the bibliography we have included details of websites and sources of information which will help with further research. In particular, the Norfolk Record Office has extensive files on the interwar clearance schemes and our website, www.norwich-yards.co.uk contains a comprehensive yards' index. Additionally, we are all very lucky to have online access to the wonderful images on the George Plunkett and the Norfolk Library websites.

Finally, many thanks must be given to all those who shared their memories and recollections. Since we spoke to them, some of our interviewees have passed away. We dedicate this book to all who contributed.

Frances and Michael Holmes



Ladies of Globe Yard, Heigham Street, c.1916

Introduction

Any visitor to Norwich's historic streets will soon become aware of the many narrow entrances accompanied by a sign proclaiming the existence of a court or yard. Some lead through to pretty squares containing restored or new properties, but often what lay beyond has long been demolished. Going through the same passageway in the 19th and early 20th centuries the visitor would have entered a world very different to the one we live in today; this was a time when the courts and yards were not only the homes of bustling communities but were also notorious for containing the City's worst housing.

In years gone by the alley generally led into a claustrophobic cul-de-sac containing dilapidated homes sharing inadequate water supplies and communal toilets. Although many houses in Norwich suffered from poor sanitation, most premises built in yards were also airless, dark and gloomy.

However, the story of Norwich's ancient yards is so much more than one of bricks and mortar. It is also the story of the people who lived there and who built vibrant, supportive communities, who despite living in conditions over which they had very little control, still had their dignity, friendships and standards to maintain. As explained by Joyce Wilson, who lived in Fairman's Yard, Barrack Street:

'People living in the yards did struggle, but it was funny they had a certain pride. They were dark little houses with one door, but it was so strange often the door step outside was whitewashed and the door knobs were "Brassoed" [polished]. So, on the outside you had a shiny door knob and a gleaming white doorstep, which we were told to walk over and not to stand on, we had to stretch over it so we didn't leave a footstep. But, I think that the whitewashed step was a little bit of defiance, it was if the women were saying: "Look it's not too bad after all."



Pope's Head Yard, St Peter's Street, c.1935

The Rise and Fall of the Old Courts and Yards of Norwich



Old Barge Yard, King Street, by Thomas Lound, c.1850

The Rise of the Yards: Origins to WWI

Origins: Before 1600

In 1066, when the Normans invaded England, Norwich was already a prosperous centre, and hence attractive to the invaders who built both a castle and cathedral as very visible signs of their authority.

By 1297 the City contained more than 50 churches and it was around the outermost of these and the magnificent cathedral that its defensive walls were built. Once completed (c.1334) the walls, together with the eastern boundary marked by the River Wensum, embraced an area some six miles in circumference. Located within the boundary were the large houses of the gentry and the merchant classes as well as those occupied by their less prosperous neighbours. There were also large open spaces and even farming took place on a limited scale.

There was a housing boom in Norwich between 1475 and 1525, partly fuelled by the need to rebuild some 700 houses which were destroyed by fire in 1507. Building continued through to the mid-16th century. In particular larger houses were built in the parishes of St Peter Mancroft and Mid-Wymer (including St Gregory's and St Andrew's) and north of the River Wensum. Despite this activity, Braun and Hogenberg's map (produced in 1581) shows that the City, which was mainly contained within the walls, still encompassed large, undeveloped tracts of land. Although the bulk of the population lived in the centre of Norwich, the still small suburbs of Pockthorpe and Heigham had already been established outside the walls to the north-east and west respectively.

For the remainder of the 16th century there is little evidence that larger houses were built, instead properties were increasingly provided for the working classes. In particular, demand was generated by an influx of Dutch and Walloon refugees who arrived in the late 1560s and early 1570s. Amazingly at a time when Norwich's total population was only 16,000 their numbers grew to around 6,000. This raised the tricky question of where the incomers would live. The obvious solution would have been to erect more buildings in the open spaces which existed throughout the City, but in general these were kept. Instead there are signs that large houses were adapted for multiple occupation. Excavations, for example in Oak Street, have shown that there was also a steady development of 'cottage housing' in the courtyards behind the large properties which fronted onto the street. The discovery of substantial amounts of imported pottery suggest that many were occupied by the refugees. Such developments became the main housing for the poorer working classes well into the 20th century. They already incorporated characteristics which would define the old courts and yards throughout their life time. In particular: these were speculative buildings, squeezed into a small space adjacent to, or behind, existing buildings; they were put up with little recourse to planning; they lacked light, ventilation and sanitation; they were owned by landlords who sought to maximise their return on a minimal investment.



Braun and Hogenberg's map of Norwich, 1581

1600 - 1800: The Prosperous Years



An unnamed yard in Ber Street, by Henry Ninham, c.1850

By the turn of the 18th century, Norwich's population had almost doubled to around 30,000, making it the second largest city in England. It had also grown rich. Its success arose 'from the City's capacity to combine its long-standing role as a centre of distribution and consumption, with a specialist industrial role as a centre of textile production' (Corfield). Put simply, Norwich owed its size and wealth to a combination of factors, including its strong trading links, its agricultural hinterland, the financial services it offered and its role of regional capital. Underpinning this was the production of high-quality textiles.

Although the City was generally viewed as prosperous, it was also a city of contrasts. Rich merchants owned the vast majority of wealth which was propped up by a broad base of poorly paid labourers, and of course the labourers needed somewhere to live. Such homes continued to be provided by the simple method of creating tenements out of large buildings or erecting small cottages in existing yards adjacent to these buildings. As a result, despite the increase in population between 1570 and 1700 Norwich's

medieval street pattern remained largely unaltered.

In the 18th century the growth in population levelled out, and by the 1801 census it stood at 37,000. Although Norwich was still the tenth largest urban centre in England, somewhat ominously, ahead of it now were the expanding industrial centres of Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds and Liverpool.

Definition of a Norwich Yard

In Norwich a typical old yard or court (the terms are interchangeable) was located behind an ancient building which fronted the street. It was entered through a narrow opening, often tunnel-like which led to a cul-de-sac. Around its perimeter were shoddy dwellings, often formed out of larger houses, which shared inadequate water supplies, toilets and waste-disposal facilities. Occupants living in yards suffered from both a lack of ventilation and dismal light.

1800 - 1914: The Growth of Norwich's Old Courts and Yards

Over the 19th century the population of Norwich escalated almost threefold to 112,000. In response, new houses for the working classes were increasingly built outside the medieval street plan. Beyond the City, new developments included Crook's Place which was located west of St Stephen's Road and comprised about 250 houses along three wide streets. Within the City, new terraces and cul-de-sacs were also built, for example in the area between King Street and Ber Street. However, this was insufficient to meet growing demand, and so buildings continued to be crammed into the yards behind old buildings, especially pubs, which fronted the streets.

There is some discrepancy in records as to how many old yards existed at the start of the 20th century. A special committee set up in 1897 to look at their conditions estimated there were around 650. The social historian, Charles Hawkins, writing in 1910, puts the number at 749. The variation is likely to be the result of the definition of a yard. The commission was set up to look at yards which had been squeezed into any nook and cranny available. As noted above, newer developments also incorporated properties built around a cul-de-sac and are assumed to have been included in Hawkins' calculations. Another reason for the inconsistency was identifying them. The courts and yards in question could also be called, squares, terraces, rows or even buildings. Some yards contained high-quality buildings, whilst others, such as Thoroughfare Yard on Magdalen Street, had all the characteristics of an old yard, even though they were not cul-de-sacs but very narrow alleys.

In the circumstances it is impossible to definitively state how many people lived in the old yards at the turn of the 20th century. However, if we take the conservative figure of 650, and using a very rough estimate (based on government reports and other literature) the average number of dwellings per yard was seven and each household averaged three people. This would mean that around 11% of Norwich's population lived in such accommodation.

To explain the continuing dominance of yards as a source of housing we need to look beyond the growth in population. The dwellings built in the yards in Norwich's historic centre were amongst the worst in the City, and this raises a number questions, including: Why did people choose to live in such poor accommodation? Why did such accommodation form such a large part of the City's housing stock? Where were the yards located? To answer such questions we need to look at two aspects which are still important in today's housing market: demand and supply.



A yard in St Andrew's Parish, by Henry Ninham, c.1850

Demand

Until the industrial revolution Norwich was one of the country's pre-eminent commercial centres. Its wealth was based on the production of high-quality textiles. However, from the end of the 18th century Norwich lacked the natural resources necessary to compete in the new industrial age. The centre of economic activity moved north and Norwich was left in decline. In 1750 worsted weaving was Norwich's major industry, but by 1901 there was not a single worsted weaver left in the City. This had both an impact on levels of employment and the general wealth of the City. The failure of the industry did not happen overnight, but in 1845 a Royal Commission examining living conditions in towns summed the position up: 'Norwich, it is feared, has seen its best days as a place of commerce and would appear to be in that painful state of transition from a once flourishing manufacturing prosperity to its entire decline, and must, ere long, revert to its original condition as a capital of an extensive agricultural district....Neglect and decay are now conspicuous in the streets and quarters occupied by the working classes, so as to render them places of the most dismal aspect.'

During the second half of the 19th century a diverse range of industries, led by shoemaking,

emerged in Norwich. The growth of new trades was considerably aided by the low wages paid to Norwich workers, which in almost every sector were below the national average. Low wages themselves were a consequence of both the City's remoteness from the main industrial districts and the influx of agricultural labour from the surrounding countryside. Traditionally farming wages in East Anglia were amongst the lowest in the country. The depression in agriculture from the mid-1870s reduced rates further causing a migration into the City: between 1841 and 1911 the proportion of Norfolk's population living in Norwich increased from 14.9% to 24.3%. The social historian, Charles Hawkins, writing in 1910, had no doubt that low wages brought employment here: 'Norwich enjoys no special advantages in the actual processes of manufacturing blue starch and mustard and chocolate [which all flourished in Norwich]. The important factor is the cost of labour for packing the finished article ready for consumption. It is here that her advantage really lies and it is good cheap labour which enables Norwich to command a world market for these commodities.' Such work was better suited to women. In contrast, there was a shortage of regular work for men as many industries, including shoemaking and tailoring, mainly offered seasonal employment and relied on outworkers to maintain production. By 1901 43.2% of Norwich's workforce was female, well above the national figure of 31.6%.

Thus, four factors epitomised the local labour market over the 19th century: high levels of unemployment amongst textile workers; low wages; proportionately high female employment; and high levels of seasonal and casual labour. Which leads to the somewhat leading question: Where did people with both low and seasonal wages live? Obviously it needed to be somewhere cheap, and the vast majority of the cheapest and shoddiest accommodation in Norwich was located in the yards which were located within the parameters of the City walls or in the immediate suburbs of Pockthorpe and Heigham.

Supply

The pattern set by speculative 16th-century builders, who either crammed poorly built cottages into existing plots or sub-divided large houses into meagre accommodation, gathered pace over the centuries that followed. Such developments would have been relatively cheap for landlords to acquire, which was important considering there was a high level of demand for low-cost housing. At the end of the century the average rent for a house in a City-centre yard, which would often be one-up-one-down was 2s. 6d. a week whilst rooms in a tenement cost around 1s. per week. Yards were found throughout the City but were particularly prevalent in Ber Street, St Benedict's, St Martin's, Botolph Street, Fishergate, Cowgate and Barrack Street. Probably the best



Ber Street, OS Map, 1884

document to show how and where they developed is the 1884 OS map. The map shows the west side of Ber Street stretching between two pubs, the Lock and Key (89) to the Bull's Head (135), from which we can derive:

- In this small area there are approximately seven yards (they are not all named on the map).
- In all cases buildings have been built around a space (yard) behind the line of properties fronting the street.
- Lock and Key Yard, Jolly Butchers' Yard (unnamed on the map) and Bull's Head Yard are all located adjacent to pubs, which give the yards their names.
- The yards are mainly entered through narrow passageways.
- Some of the yards are in two or more sections, e.g. Lock and Key Yard.

Although not shown on the map most yards were paved with cobbles. Water was supplied from a central pump, open drains ran across the middle whilst the toilets would either be midden or pan closets, shared by a number of households. This was an age when sanitation was universally poor, but what set the yards apart was their cramped, confined space and, as one end was enclosed, they generally had poor ventilation and light. We'll leave you to imagine what the smell was like! If you can't, it was summed up by a reporter from the *Norwich Mercury* who visited the yards around Oak Street in 1897: 'Each parish seems honeycombed with courts and alleys, and city life is at its lowest ebb here....In most instances the only entrance to these [courts and yards] is by a low and narrow archway abutting onto the main street....The stranger gropes his way up one of these passages, and his olfactory nerves soon let him know he has entered upon a new land – a land of stinking slops and refuse of all kinds. The comparatively fresh air of the outside world gives place to an ever-tainted atmosphere which at the first whiff, is well-nigh stifling.'

At Your Convenience

Sanitation, or lack of it, plays a big part in this book. At this point we thought that it would be useful to give a few definitions:

Privy Pit: A pit where sewage waste was dumped.

Middens: These consisted of large, pervious receptacles which held more than a week's sewage. Ash was used to cover the contents to create a more or less solid mass.

Privy: A toilet located in a small shed outside a house or other building.

Ash Closets: These were similar to middens but the receptacles were smaller and held less than a week's sewage.

Pail Closets: In some cases the receptacle used in an ash closet was reduced to the size of a pail (sometimes called a bin) which was located below the seat. These pails were either sealed for removal and cleansing at a central depot or emptied into a cart for immediate return. Although in theory they were cleaner and more efficient than large middens or privy pits, they often overflowed whilst wooden pails proved difficult to clean. The pails would be collected by a 'scavenger' in what was often, rather sarcastically, called the 'honey cart'. In Norwich the collectors, who were employed by the City Council, used to work at night because of the stench they generated.

Water Closets: A cheap and hygienic water closet

for the working class was not developed until the last quarter of the 19th century but by 1890 the design of the 'modern' w.c. had been perfected. However, its widespread adoption depended upon the provision of water. In Norwich, in 1893 fewer than 5,000 houses had water closets but by 1914 around 96% of households had access to this form of toilet.



In the book 'The Seventeenth Child', Ethel George (b.1914) recalls growing up in Pockthorpe: 'Then there were the men what used to empty the toilet bins. They came with a big cart and two horses. They were different to the ordinary bin men. Someone told me that they had three eyes, but I never saw them, 'cause they came in the middle of the night. It probably took two men to carry a bin, 'cause it must have swirled around inside, mustn't it? Like when you carry a saucepan what's full of vegetables.'



Wally Feeke's honey cart, Litcham, c.1950

The Norwich Cockeyes were natural streams that flowed towards the river. They ran both along and across streets, and also underground. Between them they traversed large areas of the City and were used both as a water supply and to carry away effluent.

1800 – 1914: The Road to Reform

During the 19th century Norwich's suburbs grew. Additionally, terraces for working-class tenants were built in the City centre. However, higher quality housing attracted higher rents which were beyond the lowest-paid workers, and so many had no choice but to live in City-centre slums. This was despite the fact that by 1911 there were over 1,500 empty houses in Norwich, mostly in the middle-class range. Poverty was rife, in fact in 1907 a Royal Commission calculated that around 11,000 of Norwich's population (exclusive of vagrants and pauper lunatics in the asylum) had been in receipt of poor relief for at least one day. The old courts and yards survived because they were all that a large portion of the population could afford. Charles Hawkins neatly summed up the position: 'There is in Norwich a very large under-employed, and therefore semi-employable, class who are always on the verge of destitution. Bad times, old age, widowhood, sickness, and any of the normal accidents of life leave them with absolutely no resources.'

Legislation

In 1851 William Lee completed a report on living conditions in Norwich for the General Board of Health. He concluded that as a result of a diverse range of deficiencies, in particular an inadequate and bad water supply, improper and inadequate privies, defective dwellings and overcrowded burial grounds that '...there is a great amount of preventable disease and mortality in a city, that ought to be one of the most healthy in the kingdom'. Moreover he identified that 'by far the most numerous class of houses consists for the most part of old houses, very much varied in plan, that are built around irregularly-formed courts or yards'. He succinctly explained: 'A separate wash house is scarcely ever found attached to these houses, some have a wash house in common with three or more dwellings, and many are without any at all. The supply of water to these houses is almost solely by means of wells and pumps; they are most of them within reach of the water mains and in some cases the water pipes are made use of as well as the pumps. Sinks are most uncommon and the house-water is mostly poured on the surface, or into small surface drains and finds its way into the sewers or river. There are very few cesspools in these yards; the privy and bin are commonly found, and the latter is the receptacle of the worse portion of the house-sewage or water. In most instances there is no other open space attached to these buildings than the

yard which gives means of access to the tenements around it. This space although often of a considerable length, is not often of a sufficient width to admit a proper quantity of light or air, and...is seldom found to be sufficiently cleansed or drained.'

Across the country, growing awareness of the links between public health and housing conditions led to the Government passing extensive legislation in the period 1850 – 1900 which was supplemented by a series of local government acts. Unfortunately, quantity did not necessarily equate to quality.

In 1858 new housing in Norwich was subject to by-laws which both regulated minimum dimensions and also stipulated that open space had to be left behind new dwellings. The latter should have effectively prevented the building of any more back-to-backs or squeezing properties into yards. However, the City authorities were somewhat lax in applying the legislation, and it was only after the adoption of the Public Health Act of 1872 that the City began to tackle the problems of poor housing. In 1873 Norwich appointed T. W. Crosse as its first Medical Officer of Health; sadly his reports made it clear that life for the very poor was as bleak as ever. However, increasingly the links between poor sanitation, abysmal housing and health were being recognised. For example, in 1880 epidemics of scarlet and typhus fevers in Norwich were directly related to the crowded and dirty conditions experienced in the City's densely populated areas, in particularly its yards.

The 1872 Act also marked the gradual involvement of Norwich Council in what is now known as 'slum clearance'. The first tentative steps occurred in the parish of St Paul's where 2.5 acres of land, containing 144 dwellings, occupied by 505 inhabitants was cleared, which led to the following entry in White's 1883 Directory: 'A rookery of disgraceful tenements in St Paul's has been demolished under the Artisans' Dwelling Act, and a colony of trim cottages erected in their place.' It was a costly exercise, as the Council had to pay some £11,000 for the buildings before it could even begin to demolish them, a sum which did not go down well with the rate payers.

Although other legislation was passed in the 19th century, it was the Local Government Act of 1888 that compelled Norwich City Council, which had been slow to accept its responsibilities, to take stock of its position. In August 1889, in a bid to clarify a mass of confused legislation, the Council passed the Norwich Corporation Act. This Act regulated every aspect of public administration, including sewerage, drainage and control of infectious diseases.