

# Norwich and dragons

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The history of 'Snap' – the Norwich processional dragon – begins in the fifteenth century, in a world of saints and guilds. These ideas might need some explanation today, but would have been as much a part of the world of the citizen of Norwich in the Middle Ages as his house, his family or his church.

## Dragons and saints

The dragon, with fire belching from its mouth, and its power to devour people, was seen as a natural symbol of the terrifying forces of evil in the world. In an age when few people could read or write, the dragon symbol was used in art, in paintings, carvings, stained glass and other forms. In an age when few people could read or write, the dragon was a powerful symbol in popular art, in paintings, carvings, stained glass and other forms. All Medieval art was Christian art, and the dragon was portrayed in defeat, usually the victim of one of three popular saints.

One was ***Saint Michael the Archangel***: According to a story told in the Book of Revelation in the Bible, in a vision of the end of the world St Michael fought and conquered the dragon of evil. He can be seen doing this on the font now in the Norwich church of St Julian, which was formerly in All Saints, and also in the stone carvings over the doorway of St Michael at Plea (the dragon here has eroded very badly and is hard to see now).

The second saint with dragon associations was ***Saint Margaret of Antioch***: Her story was a very popular one in the Middle Ages: When she converted to Christianity she was confronted with all sorts of trials and temptations, one of which was a dragon that she slew. In another version of the story, she was actually eaten by it, but it was unable to conquer her faith and she burst out from its stomach. She can be seen standing over a defeated dragon on a carving on a bench-end at the church of St Helen in Norwich.

The third saint was ***Saint George***: Almost nothing is actually known about him, except that he was martyred for his Christian faith in Lydda (Palestine) at the end of the third century. He was probably a soldier in the Roman army. Many legends about him developed, of which by far the most popular was the story of the dragon. According to the legend, there was a city in North Africa, outside of which lived a ferocious flesh-eating dragon whose very breath was poisonous. The people in the city were naturally terrified of the dragon, and every day they tied two sheep in front of its lair for it to eat, so that it would not attack the citizens. The supply of sheep eventually ran low, so instead they started to provide the beast with one sheep and one human being, chosen by drawing lots. One day the lot fell upon the daughter of the king of the city. She was at the dragon's lair awaiting her fate when George happened to pass by on horseback: he attacked the dragon, wounded and tamed it, and led it back to the city using the lady's girdle as a lead. He then threatened to release it unless the inhabitants became Christian. They agreed and the entire population was baptised. George then killed the dragon.

The story of St George was known in Britain from Saxon times, but it became immensely popular after people listened to it while there were on crusade in the Holy Land. He became so highly regarded that he eventually replaced King Edward the Confessor and King Edmund as England's patron saint. Ironically, a man who had no connection whatever with England has replaced two English kings as the country's patron. His feast day – 23 April – has become associated with the celebration of 'Englishness'.

St George became especially associated with Norwich, sometimes being thought to be patron saint of the city. Victorian poet Sir Walter Scott wrote a poem set in the Middle Ages that talks of 'stout St George of Norwich' alongside Thomas of Canterbury and Cuthbert of Durham. ('stout' is here

used in its older sense of 'brave'.) Two medieval churches in the city are dedicated to St George: St George Colegate, and St George Tombland. Images of him and of the dragon appeared in these churches and in other city churches as well. The best one is a magnificent mid fifteenth-century wall painting in St Gregory's Church, showing St George killing the dragon, with the princess holding a lamb, and a city in the background. On the already-mentioned font now in the church of St Julian, George and Michael stand side by side each trampling a dragon. It is easy to tell which is which – Michael, because he is an archangel, has wings! Others have since disappeared such as the weather vane at the church at St Peter Southgate (no longer surviving), apparently a dragon in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Dragons could also be associated with other negative events, ominous weather conditions, for example. The Norfolk Record Office has a copy of a medieval chronicle describing St Nicholas' Eve in 1274 – great earthquakes, lightning and thunder, with a huge dragon and a blazing star' – some people today would probably describe such an event as a possible UFO or a comet, but in the Middle Ages it was described in terms of the a dragon.

## **Guilds**

Guilds (sometimes spelled gild) were groups of men, and some women, who came together in a sort of club, for which they paid an admission fee and a weekly subscription. They had three functions, the relative importance of which varied between guilds:

1. To celebrate the saint to which they were dedicated, with prayers at their church altar and sometimes processions in their honour.
2. To say prayers for the souls of dead members of the guild. In the Middle Age, almost everyone believed in an afterlife in heaven, hell or purgatory, and that time in purgatory could be shortened by prayers by living people: the knowledge that these prayers would be said would have been a great comfort to guild members.
3. To pay money to those members who became sick or unemployed. In a time where there was no sick benefit, unemployment benefit or old age pension, this was clearly an important function, especially among guilds of craftsmen.

Guilds were an important aspect of medieval society. According to a list made in 1389, there were 19 guilds in Norwich at this date. Nearly fifty guilds and similar organisations are known to have existed in the later Middle Ages. The one with the longest life was the guild of Saint George.

## **Saint George's Guild and its own dragon**

The guild return for Saint George tells us that it was founded in 1385. Each member subscribed a farthing a week. In the case of a member falling into poverty that person would be given eight pence a week, but the main intention was to raise money for an image, or statue, of St George. The guild held services on St George's feast day – April 23. The services were held in Norwich Cathedral, where there was an altar dedicated to Saint George just below the high altar.

Early members of the guild included Norfolk knights like Thomas Erpingham, Simon Felbrigge, John Wodehouse and John Fastolf. There is no mention in the guild return of a procession, and none of a dragon, but these features must have developed later – the procession of St George became the most visible expression of the power of this important group of men. The four knights mentioned above were comrades in arms. They were all army leaders at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, where King Henry V rallied the English troops by invoking St George. In 1417 the guild was important enough for King Henry V to grant it a royal charter, in return for which the members would pay for a chaplain to pray for the king. The charter may well have been given in recognition of the achievements of the Norfolk knights at Agincourt.

The records of the guild are held at the Norfolk Record Office. The earliest surviving ones date from about 1420, but there used to be earlier ones. A historian who saw records for 1408 wrote

that they referred to George and to the dragon. Guild orders for that year provided for two new red cloth jackets to be bought for the 'henchman' (attendants upon George in the procession): he also had a man to carry the sword. There is no mention of the dragon itself but this might be because the dragon bearer was not be a guild member, but just someone paid for the task each year.

The 1408 Orders also stated that the figure of George was to 'go in procession and make a conflict with the dragon'. We do not know what this early dragon looked like, or how it was made so it may not have looked like the Snap we recognise. One brother was chosen each year to play the role of St George in the procession, with four others to go with him on horseback: one to bear the sword in front of him, another to carry the banner and two others to carry candles or tapers.

The earliest surviving documents that talk about the dragon itself date from the year 1420. An inventory of the possessions of the guild includes a sword for George, armour, banners *and a dragon*.

An account roll of 1420/1 records that a new dragon was made in this year: it cost 9s. 4d. John Diggard was paid four pence for playing in it, so this dragon was clearly designed to be operated by a man inside its body, it was the direct ancestor of the Snap of later years. Two shillings was spent on the hire of horses for George and his companions.

In 1428, Diggard was paid extra to store the dragon, presumably in his house, and in the 1430s, it was a man called *Thomas* Diggard who bore the dragon, so perhaps the role of dragon bearing had early become a family tradition! By 1442, however, the dragon and the rest of the guild's equipment was being kept in the Cathedral: an inventory refers to a great chest with coat of armour, banners, clothing for George and his henchmen, and '1 dragon'.

The St Georges day celebrations got more and more elaborate through the later middle ages. In a document of 1532, a female companion for George called Margaret is mentioned for the first time. No doubt she was the Margaret of Antioch whose dragon-slaying was mentioned earlier – an early recognition of a role for women, presumably to be played by a sister of the guild as the George was by a brother. She also rode on horseback, and wore a costume decorated with jewels. She was attended by one henchman, (George had two).

The celebrations were clearly flourishing in this period. In 1534/5, a man named Roose Steyner rebuilt the dragon. He charged the guild eight pence for 'his neck and a new staff' – this refers to the movable canvas neck of the dragon.

One part of the English Reformation of the 1530s and 1540s was the abolition of guilds. The guild of St George was the only one in Norwich that was not dissolved: because of the special powers it had from the royal charter of 1417. However, in 1548 the title of the organisation was changed from St George's guild to the Company of St George.

In 1645, The Puritan government ordered that at the next procession there must be 'no beating of drums or sounds of trumpets, no Snap-Dragon or fellows dressed up in Fools Coats and Caps; no standard with the George thereon, nor no hanging of Tapestry Cloth and Pictures in any of the streets'. This could have been the end of Snap, but the Puritans did not last: in 1660, the monarchy was restored and all the old ways returned – including the Norwich dragon.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Dragon was accompanied by the Whiffers and fools as well, and although the Company of St George had ceased to exist, the procession, and Snap, became part of the Mayors, and later Lord Mayors procession.

The lord Mayor's procession is still a major event in the city calendar, and is watched by a great many people every year. Few of them know of its origins in a running fight between St George and his arch-enemy the dragon, held originally on St George's Day, in the early years of the fifteenth century. The procession embraces almost 600 years of Norwich heritage, recalled fondly in just one word – **SNAP!**