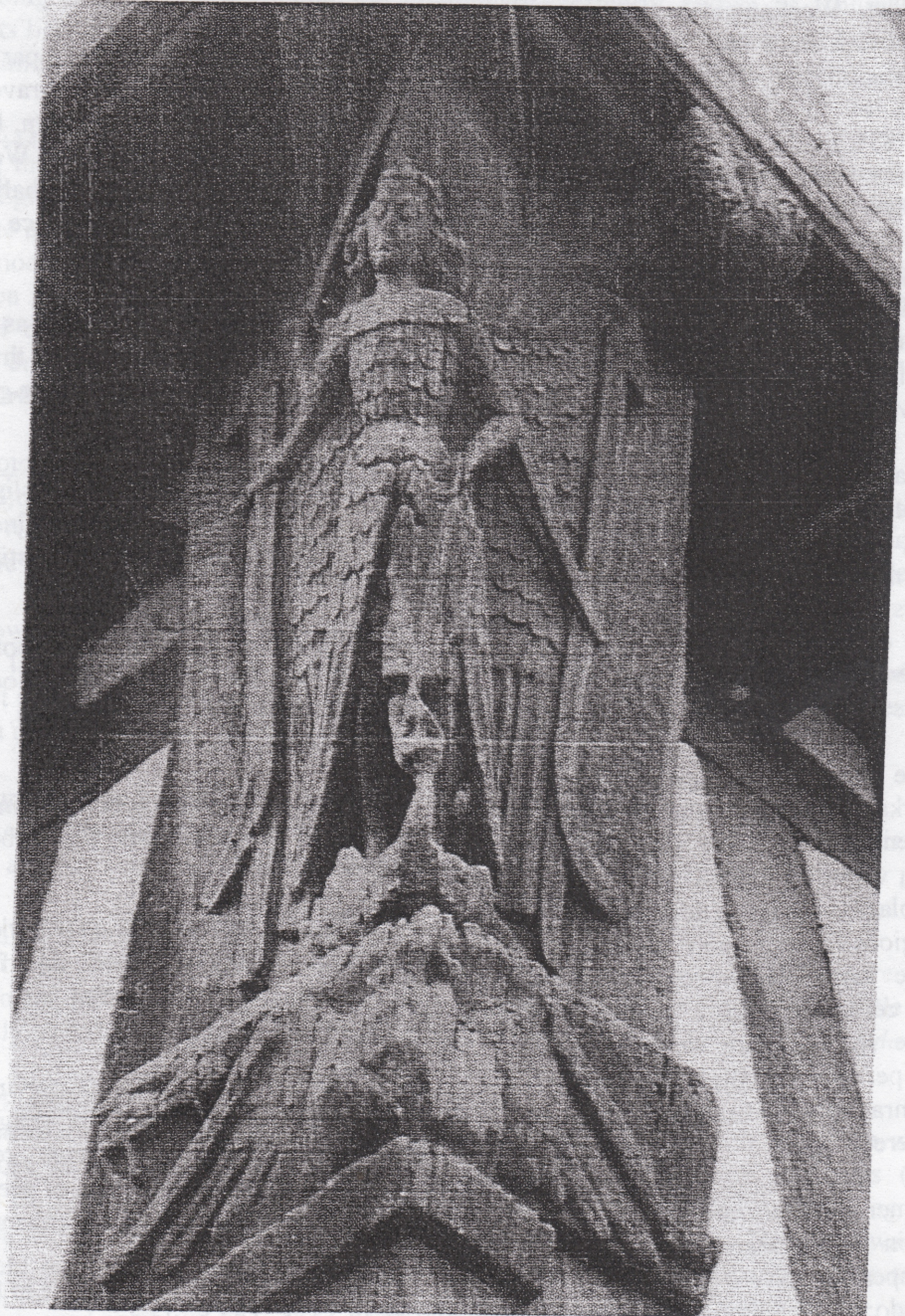




Eavesdropper

The Newsletter of the Suffolk Historic Buildings Group

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So many Dragons in Suffolk.

But was this a Guildhall?

The hunt is on. See page 8.

The Guilds and Guildhalls of Suffolk

SHBG Day school, 27 May 2000

Not just one, but three illustrious historians, David Dymond, Philip Aitkens and Leigh Alston, had us engrossed at this excellent day-school, appropriately held at the 13th century Guildhall in Bury St Edmunds (of which more later).

Rather apt, you might think, that Christopher North should ask *me*, administrator of one of Suffolk's finest, to write a report on this event. But I have been asked, and will try my best, to be brief since there may be a more weighty article on Guildhalls in the next SHBG journal.

The illustrious three, David Dymond, Philip Aitkens and Leigh Alston each provided a different insight into guilds (to use the original spelling, from *geld*, or payment), their origins and the fine buildings they constructed.

David began by saying that there has been a lot of confusion about the nature of guilds and explained that there were three different kinds. 'Guilds Merchant', first set up by royal charter in the 11th and 12th centuries were mainly found in larger towns and were involved in the regulating of commerce and trade. They held Borough status – Ipswich still has its Gild Merchant documents and this year celebrates its 800th anniversary. Bury Guildhall was rented from the Abbey but used and maintained by the town.

The second form of guilds were craft and trade guilds. These appear by the 12th century and were basically associations of those with the same occupation. Bury St Edmunds had a Bakers Guild, which decreed that to bake or sell bread without the consent of the gild should bring a fine of 20 shillings, and the Weavers Guild, whose rules were drawn up in 1477, specified that no weaver should have more than four looms.

Third and by far the majority were religious and social guilds. The first recorded examples are late Anglo-Saxon, but by the early 16th century their numbers ran to thousands throughout the country – over 500 in Suffolk. Usually dedicated to a patron saint, religious guilds offered security and comradeship, with charitable works being done to assist members should they fall on

hard times, and the provision of help for the poor of the parish.

The most important element of gild membership was the 'collective purse', which provided funds to pay a priest or chaplain to sing masses for the souls of departed brethren. The Catholic faith believed that sins perpetrated on earth must be paid for in purgatory, but that this time of suffering could be relieved through prayers being said by the living on behalf of the dead. Wealthy people could afford private chantries, but guilds provided the funds for the names of all members - known as the Bede Roll – to be recited.

David explained that documentary evidence was fragmental, the main source of information being wills. Membership was voluntary, and it seems that a certain amount of elitism existed as to which gild one belonged to. Open to both men and women, guilds were taken very seriously, with an oath of entry being sworn upon payment of a subscription, and a set of rules which were binding for life. Statutes from the Gild of All Saints, Moreton in Essex, from 1473, showed just how strictly these rules must be obeyed.

Members must wear their best clothes to church and gild meetings; they must not betray the confidences of the gild; at gild meetings they must 'hold silence and make no great noise'; and should a conflict arise between members, it must be taken first to the gild Alderman for arbitration rather than to the courts. The penalties of not doing the Alderman's bidding ranged from fines of a meagre 1lb of wax to 40d, or "the dean shall deliver him the yard" – a sharp whipping to you or I!

Much time was spent preparing for the anniversary of the chosen saint or festival. David read accounts of the splendid pageants and processions which were the culmination of the gild year. An example from the Gild of St George in Norwich saw St George mounted on a horse, both wearing armour, with the dragon shooting fiery flames produced by gunpowder. 12 priests wearing red and 12 in white, all on horseback, and the cross, the gild banner and holy water all carried on high. With the cathedral bells ringing throughout and the great feast which followed, what a spectacular sight it must have been!

An interesting statistic from a statute of 1504 states that "Every brother shall have at his departing five priests; each priest to have 4d. from the gild....." but goes on to say "Every sister shall have at her departing two priests....". A clear indication, we must assume, that the gentlemen sinned more frequently than the ladies. Ah well, 'twas ever thus!

Some guilds were very wealthy, while others had no halls of their own, borrowing equipment for their meetings and feasts and congregating in members' houses or perhaps the parish church. Through wills, David was able to show that bequests to guilds ranged from sums of money large and small, through to livestock, land and property, which in turn could be rented out to



A very early morning view of Lavenham Guildhall.
[JG]

build up gild funds. Members growing old or frail could expect to borrow from these funds, to be supported through times of need, and be provided with a dignified funeral.

In 1547 religious gilds were abolished as part of the Reformation. We can only imagine the effect on the lives of gild members, but it must have been devastating. At a stroke, generations of voluntary, self-governing groups which had brought respectability and status were stripped away, and it is only recently that historians have begun to understand just how important these fraternities were to the social and religious fabric of late medieval life.

Following an excellent ploughman's lunch (the Chairman and I somehow missed out on the strawberries and cream!), Philip Aitkens showed us the differences between domestic buildings and those purpose built as gildhalls. Many had recently been discovered, having long been hidden, disguised as houses or barns.

The majority of Suffolk gildhalls date from the late 15th or early 16th centuries, and none were built after 1547. During this period open halls were starting to give way to buildings floored over from the outset, often with elaborately carved jetties, but the style and quality of gildhalls varied regionally and greatly depended on the wealth of the individual gild.

Using excellent drawings and slides, Philip demonstrated features which many gildhalls had in common. Some of the tell-tale signs to look for are the often elaborate carving and decoration on the upper floor, the lack of heating in the meeting rooms and the close proximity to the church – enabling the gild to process easily between the two and make use of the churchyard for its festivities.

In most cases, the gild meeting rooms would be situated on the first floor and the most detailed decoration would be reserved for this high status area, access to which was often via an external stair. Philip described many examples.

Hawstead Guildhall comprises a three-bay meeting hall opposite the church, with a chimney taking up the entire width of the building. Fressingfield, begun in 1507, is jettied, again with first floor meeting hall and costly brick nogging. Laxfield is a copy of

Fressingfield, but 10 years later in date, with a four-bay meeting room and a room downstairs which Philip interpreted as a committee room. Other impressive gildhalls illustrated were Kelsale, Wrentham and Thorpe le Soken.

Evidence suggests that a strict hierarchy existed in the planning of gildhalls. Officers of the gild would have areas to which only they had access, and it seems that parts of many halls were used to create income for the gilds, for example incorporating shops into their ground floors.

Many had their own external kitchens (Hadleigh being one of the best known) although urban gilds might use local inns to cater for gild festivities.

Finally, Leigh presented us with some conundrums – buildings with many of the features described by Philip which were not in fact gildhalls at all but clearly other types of public building, and others which were known to be gildhalls but which digress from the architectural details of most others.

Let me clarify with two famous examples. Thaxted Guildhall, a mid-15th century building, is now known to have been a market house, not a guildhall. And my own (whoops, sorry, National Trust) gorgeous Lavenham Guildhall was, without question, the hall of the Corpus Christi gild, but it has its meeting room on the ground floor and is not situated close to the church.

Leigh showed us some wonderful pictures of court-halls, inns and market houses, all high status buildings and many of which, before recent research, could have been interpreted as gildhalls.

Cases of mistaken identity appear all over the county; the reputed example in Bures with a spectacular carved jetty was not a gildhall (although there was one, in front of the church, now demolished). The frontage of Hadleigh Guildhall was a market house, with the gildhall at the rear and not joined to the front until a later period.

Walsham le Willows Guildhall, looking for all the world like an unassuming row of cottages, has a roof very similar to that at Lavenham and a first floor meeting room of 60 by 20 feet. Worlingworth has both a ground and a first floor hall, and may well have been shared (as elsewhere) by two gilds. Stoke by Nayland, a first floor meeting hall 83ft by 20, with a processional way downstairs, evidence of an external stair and previously a hammerbeam roof.

We ended by looking at slides of our home for the day, Bury Guildhall. This wonderful structure dates from the mid to late 13th century and is a remarkable 120 feet long, with 10 undivided bays and a king-post roof with double curved braces. There is one crown-post, above the high end, with a handsome carved capital, painted with yellow ochre, positioned over the high-end bench. Gilds might need a secure place to store valuables such as silver plate, and this was often the chamber over a porch. Both Bury and Lavenham probably used their porches for this purpose.

By now I hope you will have got a flavour of these remarkable buildings and the gilds who built them. Along with the parish church, they were probably the most respected of places, bringing together the social and religious lives of many thousands of people. We can only wonder at the symbolic and ceremonial ways in which ordinary people showed their devotion to their faith, and perhaps feel slightly envious of the close comradeship and security which these places offered.

Around 30 former gildhalls are known in Suffolk, fewer in Essex. Many more must exist; our three speakers have a great deal of research still to do, and I for one can't wait to see the results.

Jane Gosling

The spelling of guildhall/gildhall and gilds/gilds has been left to the considered choice of the authors. Eds.

Angels, Saints, Dragons and Ale

The recent SHBG day-school on Gilds and Guildhalls at Bury St Edmunds sent me away a little the wiser and inspired me to delve deeper into this fascinating subject. As a result, some of the buildings with which I was familiar in Mid and South Suffolk became visible in a new light.

During the day-school a number of features of known surviving Guildhalls were described, which, although not exclusive to this building type (and not all present on all such buildings) do provide a useful diagnostic list:

1 Proximity of Guildhall to parish Church, often to be found adjoining or overlooking the graveyard; e.g. East Bergholt, Eye, Fressingfield, Hadleigh, Hitcham, Laxfield, Palgrave, Stoke by Nayland, Stradbroke, Westhorpe, Worlingworth etc. It seems that the majority of the known Guildhalls in Suffolk are near the Church, or maybe this is the only place in which they have been sought?

2 Since Guildhalls also served as an early type of parish room or church hall, some survive to this day with the name of 'Church' House, 'Church' Cottage etc; e.g. East Bergholt (Church Gate House).

3 Guildhalls are usually of a slightly larger scale than domestic buildings, and incorporate finer detail and ornament (which fact is often reflected in their listing grade being II* or I, rather than just II):

a) They often have elaborate roof structures designed to be seen from an open hall at first floor; e.g. Badwell Ash, Debenham, East Bergholt, Gislingham, Hadleigh, Lavenham, Palgrave, Worlingworth

b) They often incorporate herringbone patterned brick nogging between exposed studs; e.g. Debenham, East Bergholt, Fressingfield, Laxfield

c) They are often long wall jettied at first floor level, and many are jettied on two or more sides incorporating a dragon post and dragon (diagonal) beam; e.g. East Bergholt, Eye, Laxfield, Stoke by Nayland

d) There is often elaborate carving to bressumers and other structural members, especially dragon posts, sometimes featuring saints or angels (perhaps reflecting the Gild's dedication, which is not usually that of the parish Church); e.g. East Bergholt, Eye, Fressingfield, Lavenham, Palgrave

4) Most Guildhalls were built prior to the dissolution of the monasteries in 1538. The buildings have sometimes survived as, or associated with, public houses, thus carrying on the tradition of celebration and feasting within a parish; e.g. Debenham, Fressingfield.

The above features were enough to get me started on a search through the listings, looking for quality buildings on appropriate sites with sometimes the right associations to clinch it.

The following are by no means the final word on the subject, but rather suggestions for further research; some will be confirmed as Guildhalls, but many may fall by the wayside under closer scrutiny. I present them in alphabetical order partly for ease of reference, and partly because, as yet, I have no other framework in which to organise them, although certain themes may become apparent. The figure in brackets after the parish name is the minimum number of Gilds there for which there is documentary evidence (as published by Peter Northeast in *An Historical Atlas of Suffolk*, D Dymond and E Martin, third edition, Suffolk County Council, 1999).

Boxford (2): The Old Chequers, Church Street (II)

Here we have a building of the right age on the right site overlooking the churchyard. It is a little better than average in quality and has some remaining ornamentation with its carved bressummer. It was until relatively recently a public house. A possible.

Cockfield (2): Church House, Church Lane (II*)

Another building immediately adjoining the churchyard, formerly known as Church Cottage and described in its listing as 'Originally the church house, used for parish festivals and holidays'. This is a high quality building, longwall jettied on the north side with herringbone brick nogging. A 'very likely'.

Glemsford (2): Angel House, Egremont Street (II*) [Illustrated on front cover]

Not adjoining the Church, this high quality building lies at some distance in the formerly outlying settlement of Egremont Street, an area of some commercial importance that may have justified its own Guildhall. The area is however linked to the Church by an ancient route still preserved as a footpath link through modern housing and known as the 'Causeway'. The building is joined to the Angel Inn public house on its north side and interestingly abuts the relatively modern graveyard to the Ebenezer Baptist Chapel on its south side. It is long wall jettied to the north with exposed studding and incorporates a dragon post with an elaborate carving of St Michael killing a dragon at its north-east corner. An 'extremely likely'.

Groton (1): Groton Hall, Church Street (II*)

Immediately adjoining the churchyard at Groton we have another high quality building on the right site. In the early 17th Century this building has many associations with the Winthrops and the early settlement of the United States, which perhaps have obscured any earlier history. A possible.

Hartest (1): Crown Inn (north wing), The Green (II)

The Crown Inn lies immediately west of the church in Hartest and has an interesting jettied north wing that looks like it may have been there first. I understand that Clive Paine has already suggested that this is a parish room or church house, and I would agree, a probable.

Hoxne (2): Swan Inn, Low Street (II*)

Although at the opposite end of the Low Street settlement to the Church, this public house is of the right age and quality, and has both a dragon beam and herringbone nogging going for it. Another possible.

Nayland (2): Butts (II) and The White House (II), Church Lane

Two candidates here of the right age that both adjoin the churchyard. Butts is smaller, nearer and jettied to the north, its name perhaps related to the brewing industry. The White House lies a little to the east and was originally jettied too. Possibles, but see Eavesdropper no.16, *The Buildings of Nayland*.

Needham Market (Barking - 2): Bull Inn, High Street (II*)

Although not immediately adjoining the Church, this quality building originally faced the west end of the Church across the former market place, now filled with more recent buildings (again see Eavesdropper no.16, *Visit to Needham Market*). Needham Market was originally an outlying settlement of Barking parish, its Church remaining a Chapel of Ease until as late as 1906. Needham was linked to Barking by an old route still known as the Causeway, along which the deceased were taken from Needham Church to Barking for burial. The Bull was until very recently a public house, and is well known for its elaborate carved corner post depicting an angel. A 'very likely'.

Newton (1): Butlers, Church Road (II)

Another building of the right age on the right site, immediately north of Newton Church. Its name shown on old maps as 'Botelers', could again be referring to the brewing industry. A possible.

Rattlesden (2): Old Moat House, Lower Street (II*)

Recently given back this old name, this building along with another in the village was known for many years as Church Cottage and also as The Butts (see Nayland and Newton above). It is situated immediately south of the churchyard, is of high quality construction and jettied on three sides. Another 'very likely'.

Shelley (1): Church Cottage (II) and Chapel House (II)

As we saw with Nayland, here we have two candidates close to the Church. Church Cottage has the right name but is perhaps too domestic in scale. Chapel House, however, is larger, jettied and 15th Century. Possibles.

Stratford St Mary (2): Church Cottage (II) and The Gables (II)

Another pair of adjacent houses, this time across the road from Stratford's Church. Church Cottage again is smaller, whilst The Gables has suffered substantial 19th Century remodelling. Possibles.

Stutton (1): Quarnams, Stutton Green (II)

Immediately west of the Church on Stutton Green, this 15th Century house is of the right age and in the right place. It is long wall jettied to the front and might well justify internal examination. A possible.

A number of other less likely options were also considered, which however might warrant further investigation, as follows:

Botesdale	St Catherine's	Debenham	Angel Inn + nos. 1&3 High Street
Finningham	Church Farm House	Hitcham	Great Causeway Farmhouse
Horham	Dragon House	Hoxne	Red House Farm, South Green
Little Stonham	The Magpie Inn		



So there you have a list of some likely contenders for the title of Guildhall. The themes given at the day-school have been stretched a little to include 'angels, saints and dragons' where I believe the buildings have been 'badged' to advertise their purpose, and to include associations with pubs, either by their taking on just the functions of the Guildhall, or the name such as Angel Inn or associated words such as 'Butts'. Another associated area of interest that has arisen is the question of 'causeways', perhaps a useful clue to look for linking a Guildhall to a distant Church.

The end result here is that there remains much still to be done; the above covers a small geographical area in a rather cursory manner, and in addition we know so little about how these buildings were actually used. Hopefully the above ideas will spur on some further research, so that one day the definitive guide to Guildhalls in Suffolk can appear in print.

Patrick Taylor

Part of the corner post at Fressingfield, showing the possible figure of St Margaret of Antioch, to whom the gild was dedicated.