

Was this Ipswich building King Charles II's Suffolk hideout?

As part of her heritage series, **Danielle Lett** explores some of the town's most interesting and oldest historical buildings. This week, she checks out Ancient House



It goes without saying that Ancient House is one of Ipswich town centre's most beautiful buildings. It's striking, eye-catching and pretty iconic, to say the least. As you come to the corner of Butter Market (the street, not the shopping centre of the same name) and St Stephen's Lane, you can't miss it.

Its bright white exterior, covered in pargetting and wood carvings, makes it a pretty prominent landmark.

But I wanted to find out more about this building – and better yet, go inside and explore its vast and spacious rooms.

I met with John Norman, chairman of the Ipswich Society, and Clare Wright, property manager of Ipswich Borough Council to find out more about this stunning structure and some of its most fascinating and perhaps lesser-known features.

Firstly, I wanted to know all about the exterior's intricate detailing and what it all meant.

What catches your eye first is the gold leaf lion and unicorn crest above the door. That's King Charles II's royal arms, as noted by the gold cypher "C II R" above the crest (we'll come back to him later, as legend has it he was linked to the building).

The four white pargetting panels below the four bay windows represent the four continents known to the Tudors at the time – the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe.

"This pargetting was added in the 17th century and Cook didn't land in Australia until 1770," explains John.

The other panels on the front depict three elements; earth (sunflowers, lily trumpets, and a double-handed vase of daisies), water (a skate, lobster, crab, various fish, and Neptune riding a seahorse with a trident in hand), and air (swans, birds of prey, and a pelican feeding her young).

"Around the corner on the western gable there is a nice depiction of Atlas carrying the world on his shoulders, and there is also St George in 17th century

garb dealing with a recumbent dragon."

Records show that the earliest reference to Ancient House can be found in the 14th century, when it was owned by Sir Richard of Martlesham, who was tenement occupier of a property on this site.

Following Sir Richard's death in 1380, the property was owned by Sir George Felbrigg (husband of Sir Richard's daughter), and then the Sampson family.

During the 15th century, Ancient House's tenement was held by a number of different families, including Sir Thomas Fastolf – who is thought to have built the first (surviving) rooms of Ancient House.

"The front elevation – the bit with the pargetting – is a later addition," explains John.

"The oldest part of Ancient House, from the late 15th century, consists of the panelled ground floor room, east of the central courtyard, and first floor with ornate plastered ceiling with an attic above."

Originally, there was no attic, and the first floor was open to the rafters.

But when the ceiling to the first floor created an attic room, it was used as a chapel and is reportedly the room in which King Charles II hid in after he lost the Battle of Worcester in 1651.

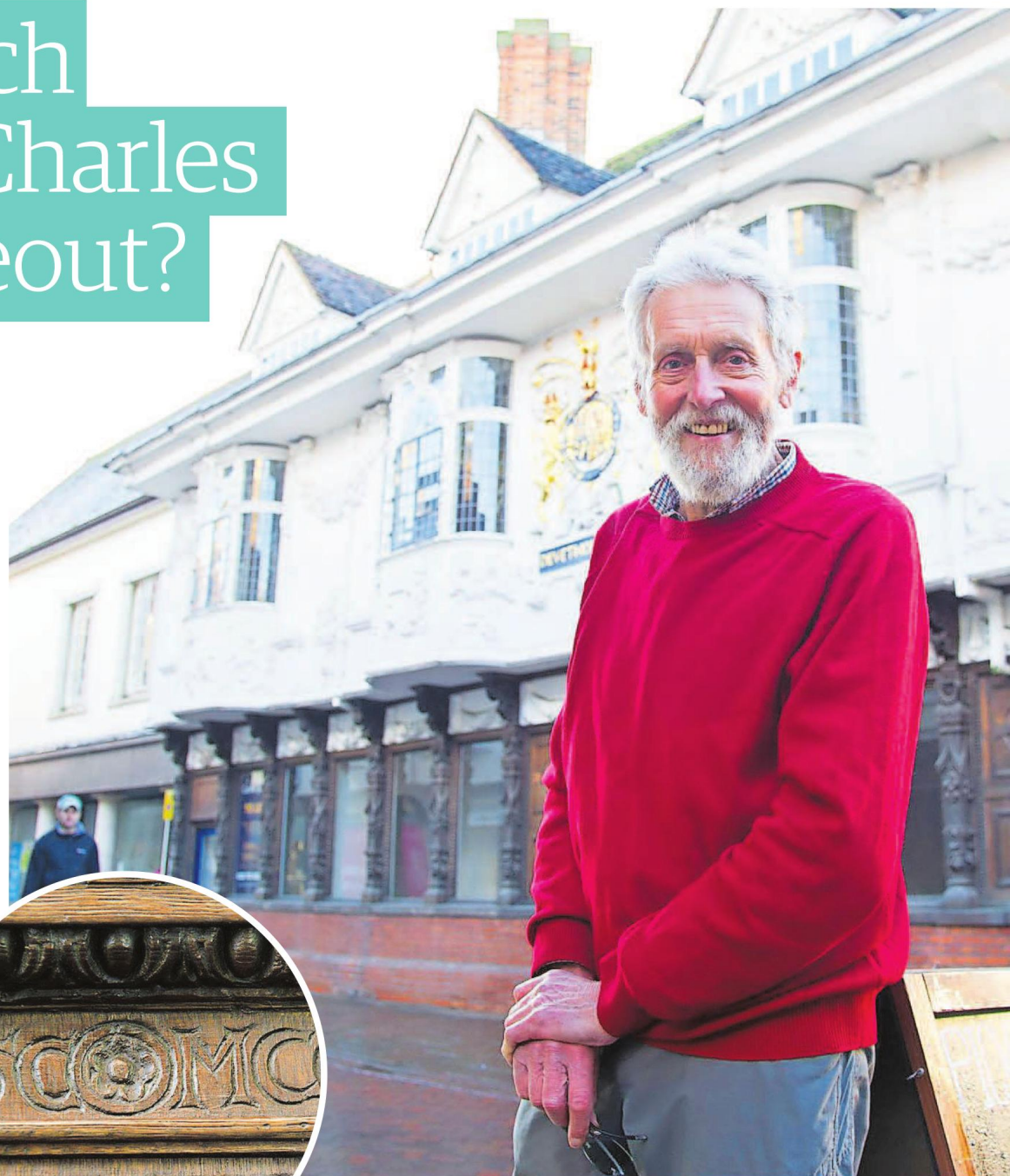
But John seems sceptical of these claims.

"Was he here? I doubt it," he says.

"King Charles II was on his way from London to France, and Ipswich would've been too out of the way," he says.

It seems that perhaps this tall tale was promoted by the Sparrow family, who took ownership of the house in 1603 and held onto it for the next 300 years.

Prior to the Sparrow family however, draper and fishmonger George Copping acquired the property in 1567. Copping was the one who commissioned the



impressive panelling on the ground floor room at the front of the home, and also built the long gallery.

Copping also left his mark on one of the ornate wooden fireplaces on the ground floor, as his and his wife Margaret's initials (GC + MC) can be seen carved in on the left-hand side.

Copping passed away in 1578, and Ancient House fell into the hands of his wife who eventually sold it to Ipswich pewterer Luke Melton before the Sparrow family took over at the start of the 17th century after William Sparrow paid £400 for the property.

In 1603, William moved the fish market, which had previously occupied the courtyard and the front, to Upper Brook Street as he didn't like the smell. And it was family grocer Robert Sparrow

who added the elaborate white pargetting to the front and side of the house between 1660 and 1670.

But this isn't the only trace the Sparrow family left behind. If you look closely at one of the windows up in the gallery room, there's a tiny etching inscribed on one of the glass windows that appears to read someone's first name, followed by "Sparrow".

Another interesting feature within Ancient House is the wonky floor in the panelled room at the back of the house. If you've ever been in there, you'll notice how much the floor slopes down steeply towards the fireplace. That's because the fireplace is so heavy, it has sunk into the ground and caused uneven foundations.

Ipswich Borough Council took on Ancient House in 1980, and has worked hard to restore and preserve it while keeping its historical heritage and charm intact. In fact, the Grade I-listed wonder houses a fascinating display upstairs in the aptly-named Museum Room, packed

with information further detailing the history of the building.

During the building's restoration process, some fascinating features were uncovered, including some stained cloths that belonged to former owner George Copping. His 1578 will describes some of the furnishings within the house and how they are not to be moved after his death. These included tables, bedsteads, benches, cupboards, and stained cloths (which were hangings like tapestries but were painted rather than woven).

Copping's cloths – which depicts scenes of the labours of Hercules – have since been restored by the Hampton Court Textile Conservation Centre. The original cloth is kept in Christchurch Mansion, while a full-sized photograph hangs over the stairs in Ancient House.

Readers will be familiar with Ancient House as it was, up until recently, the location of kitchenware shop Lakeland. Prior



Left, John Norman outside Ancient House in Ipswich

Right, the interior of the building, including the hidden loft room, top

Inset far left, George Copping and his wife Margaret's initials (GC MC) carved into the wood

Pictures: CHARLOTTE BOND




to that however, a number of other businesses have been fortunate enough to reside within Ancient House over the years.


The first business tenant to take over the historic building was James Haddocks, who ran a printing and subscription library during the mid-19th century. His successors, Fred Pawsey and W E Harrison carried on his legacy until Harrison bought Ancient House from the Sparrowe family, and in 1968 sold to the Deben Bookshop (of Woodbridge). The

latter was then taken over by Hatchards of Piccadilly in 1971, when it traded as The Ancient House Book Shop.

While no one currently resides in Ancient House, I'm sure you will agree with me when I say I hope it's not too long before someone else takes it on and throws open its doors to the public again. It's a beautiful building, and more people definitely should get the chance to see the heritage and architectural beauty contained within its four walls.



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