

Chairman of the Ipswich Society John Norman outside Pykenham's Gatehouse

Hidden Ipswich: Inside the town's oldest standing building

Danielle Lett gets a guided tour of the historic Pykenham's Gatehouse

Have you ever wandered down Northgate Street in Ipswich and noticed a green gate quietly nestled beneath a brick arch...just opposite the public library?

Did you know it's actually part of a larger gatehouse - one that dates all the way back to the 15th century?

That building is Pykenham's Gatehouse - and I was lucky enough to be given a guided tour by John Norman, chairman of the Ipswich Society.

I meet John outside the gate on a rainy Wednesday morning, who first explained to me that the building is owned by the Ipswich and Suffolk Club.

"The gatehouse is leased out to the Ipswich Building Preservation Trust, which is funded by Ipswich Borough Council in terms of anything they do by way of repairs. It's a sister organisation of the Ipswich Society, and was founded by us in 1978 with the sole purpose to preserve buildings like this one," he explains.

Built in 1471, John says Pykenham's Gatehouse is the oldest standing building in Ipswich.

"There are bits of other buildings which are older, like the door into St Mary Elm, but this is a whole building. And in 1530, so nearly 60 years after it was originally constructed, an extension was built."

As you enter through the tiny door, to your right is a set of winding stairs. John and I make our way up them, and I can't help but marvel at the gatehouse's interior. The first level is home to a desk set against a window and a bookshelf, and the second level is a large room with sloped beams, windows, and a large table in the middle.

The place has a sense of cosiness to it, while somehow being way bigger than I had imagined.

The gatehouse is all that remains of the grand residence that once belonged to William Pykenham, Archdeacon of Suffolk.

"There have been archdeacons of Suffolk since the 12th century and there are references to a house on this site from about





from about the same time.”

The site of the archdeacon's house is today largely occupied by the Ipswich and Suffolk Club, but it is evident that much of the original structure, including many roof timbers, are hidden within later work. Substantial remains of the boundary wall also survive, including a doorway into Northgate Street. Both the house and gatehouse can be seen on many old maps of the town.

William Pykenham, became archdeacon in 1471.

“In the 15th century, the diocese was Norwich, and the bishop was based there. But he couldn't control all of the churches, so he had archdeacons,” says John. “They were essentially managers for the various areas under the bishop's control, and Pykenham was the archdeacon for Suffolk.”

This was an incredibly prestigious role, and required confirmation from the Pope.

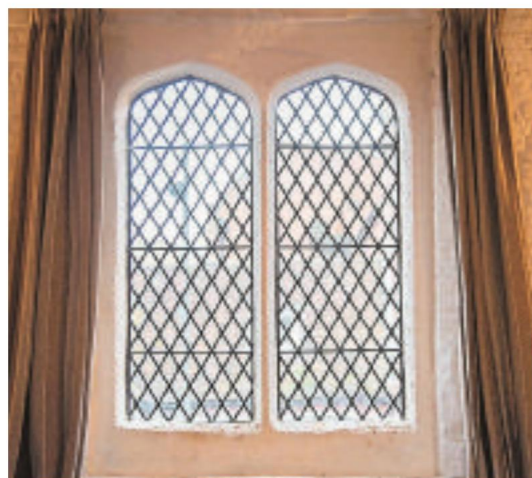
“Pykenham was an influential and important person at that time - his brother was the archbishop of Canterbury, he was in the know, and he had money. When he got the Ipswich patch, he landed the gatehouse, as well the house that is now on the site of the Ipswich and Suffolk Club.”

But what was the purpose of the gatehouse?

“Some say it was his own private shed, or a man space, if you like. Somewhere to get away from it all. Others say it was his personal library, but my opinion is that it was simply a gatehouse. When the bishop came down from Norwich, he'd arrive in a stagecoach. The bishop would go into the big house but the driver might've wanted a cup of tea so the gatekeeper who lived here would have his fire going and would make him a drink,” explains John.

“In those days, such a room because it was dry and secure was often used as a muniments store for documents, especially title deeds, because it was dry.”

William Pykenham spent around 20 years overseeing the gatehouse before moving on to



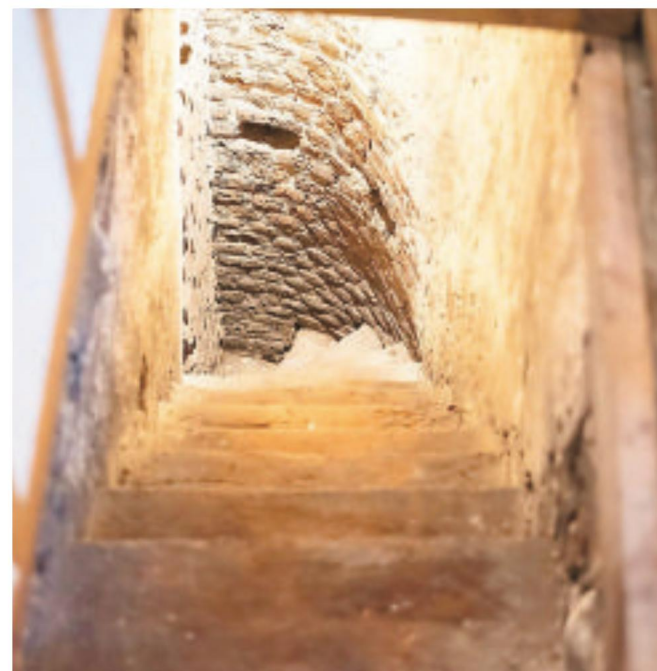
pastures new.

“For some time we must assume he was satisfied with his new and distinguished Ipswich residence. But it seems that eventually he grew restless, and after about 20 years his attentions turned to Hadleigh where he built the Deanery Tower - a much larger and quite magnificent portal to what was to be a new deanery. Whether work on the house actually started is not certain; Pykenham died in 1497, and although the tower survives to this day a later deanery stands beside it.”

According to the Ipswich Society, there is no record of where Pykenham died or is buried - but Stoke-by-Clare and Hadleigh both lay claim to this.

Local historians are also unsure how long the gatehouse took to construct. “It certainly would've taken them some time though as that's how the craftsmen worked, and it's evidently good quality. It's still standing after 500 years.”

The front of the gatehouse is an important façade, as it faced the populace and greeted the visitor. “That, together with the walls flanking the archway, were constructed of brick as befitted such a distinguished owner. The rest, although it had a good



peg-tile roof, was timber-framed with wattle-and-daub infill - a striking contrast. At the time, timber-framing was attractive for its cheapness but was never highly-regarded.”

Fast forward to the 18th century, and the gatehouse underwent a restoration and a brick façade was added. “Originally, the front wall was buttressed, presumably for grandeur rather than strength since the structure has remained stable following the removal of this feature in the later 1700s.

“The view from the rear of the gatehouse is interesting. The original gatehouse, a single room above the arch, is jettied on this face and to the right (south) but on the left. This is emphasised by supporting timbers where a dragon beam on the right carries one end of the floor joists in both directions whereas on the left the joists run front to back. This suggests that the gatehouse was attached to another structure, presumably part of this house, on this north side.”

What most takes me by surprise however is John revealing to me the hidden brick staircase underneath the floor.

“People argued the tread on these steps are oak, and they wouldn't have used oak unless it was for the archdeacon. If he was coming up these steps, they'd have been of the highest quality. When we took this building on in 1982, we didn't know these stairs were here at first and it wasn't until we renovated it that we found a hole in the floor and saw the stairs. I suspect these stairs got disused when the extension was built in 1530.”

Another feature of note is on the rear of the archway on the carved spandrels. On the left is a fish and an animal, and on the right is a five-pointed star. “Supposing the fish to be a pike, and the animal to be a pig, early researchers were quick to identify a rebus indicating Pykenham. Disconcertingly, the resemblance of the animal to be a squirrel makes this interpretation difficult to sustain.”

Over the years, the gatehouse slowly became disused as the power of the church diminished. “For example, we don't really know what it was used for in the 18th and 19th centuries, and it was derelict at the beginning of the 20th century until midway when we listed it.”

Pykenham's Gatehouse achieved Grade I-listed status in 1951, and every four years undergoes a

quinquennial inspection to see if it needs to be renovated.

Today, both the Ipswich Society and the Ipswich Building Preservation Trust hold regular meetings there. It is also open to the public on the first Saturday of the month throughout summer.

“It's one of the key buildings during Heritage Open Days. It continues to be a popular attraction, and people don't expect it to be so big inside.”

To find out more about Pykenham's Gatehouse, visit ipswichbuildingpreservationtrust.org.uk

TOP: The main room at the top of Pykenham's Gatehouse and a secret staircase

ABOVE: Windows inside Pykenham's Gatehouse

RIGHT: The 'Pykenham' crest and a wrought-iron bar dated 1673

Pictures: CHARLOTTE BOND