

# **THE STORY OF EVELYN SUFFIELD HOUSE 1788 – 1973**



**The home of Norfolk's WIs since 1952**

**Norfolk Federation of Women's Institutes  
Reprint of the 1973 Edition  
With additional updated information**

## Preface

The Federation Chairman Zita James wrote the definitive history of the house in October 1973 and we still use it today when giving guided tours. It is a lively and fascinating account of the house as a living, working building through 200 years of varied history.

We can now stand in the Members Room and imagine what it must have looked like in its earliest years, at a time when Jane Austen was writing and the Napoleonic Wars were in full swing. We would have been able to look out through two full length sash windows, across to the terrace on Surrey Street, and up past St Catherine's Close and the Ivory House, to the city walls, and out into the farmland beyond.

Norwich was then a thriving cultural centre riding the tail end of the Agricultural Revolution. It would have been a very elegant city, with four Pleasure Gardens, where ladies in high-waisted muslin gowns walked with gentlemen in britches and neck-cloths beneath their coats, listening to the music of the age.

Time has moved on, and the house has survived two world wars and much else besides. The WI has owned the building since 1952. Norwich is still a thriving cultural centre, and according to a survey, it is one of the most satisfying places to live in. The WI continues to have an enormously important role to play in society.

Recent years have seen the completion of concerted restoration work both inside and outside this fine example of Georgian architecture. We hope that many more generations of WI members will be able to enjoy the house in all its charm and glory, and that, in the meantime, so will you!

Louise Casson  
Federation Secretary



## **The History of 45, All Saints Green, Norwich 1788 – 1973**

In 1788, a certain John Reeve, musician, bought the piece of land on which the WI house now stands, and which extended to the corner where present-day All Saints Green is crossed by Surrey Street.

At that date, the name All Saints Green was limited to the wide space in front of All Saints Church. Present-day All Saints Green, leading from All Saints Church to Queens Road, was until about 1900 known as Upper Surrey Street.

From Hochstetter's plan of Norwich, 1789, it can be seen that this was an empty plot of land, and must have been a desirable place in which to build a house at the time. Norwich, in the 1780's, had its narrow, tightly packed medieval streets, its poverty and squalor, but it was still prosperous, and in this 'City of Gardens', there was ample space within its walls for its wealthier citizens to build themselves large and comfortable houses befitting their status in society.

In the previous two decades, a number of large and elegant houses had been built in this neighbourhood, several of them designed by the well-known architect, Thomas Ivory, who designed the Assembly House. Next door to John Reeve's plot of land there were already two recently erected substantial houses with gardens to the rear (present-day 41 and 43 All Saints Green). Further up the road, towards the city walls, were two even more elegant houses: St Catherine's Close, built in 1778, now the headquarters of BBC East Anglia, and Ivory House, built in 1771. On the corner of nearby Surrey Street (present day 25 - 31 Surrey Street) was a four storied terrace built in the 1760s and further down Surrey Street were two of the largest Georgian houses in the city, one of which, built in 1764, is now the Norwich Union Fire Office.

A short distance away, just outside the still largely intact City Walls, on the site of the National car park and Queensway Warehouse were Ranelagh Pleasure Gardens, modelled on the fashionable London pleasure gardens of the same name, and beyond that, very close, was the open countryside.

In the Norwich Directory of 1783, John Reeve is listed as a 'Music Master', then living at No 5, Upper Surrey Street. We do not know exactly where No 5 was, except that it was on the other side of the street from the plot which he bought five years later. Nor do we know much about him, except for a possible clue in the Committee Book of the Theatre Royal, Norwich, from 1768 – 1786, in which there is the following entry:

"1777 Mr Reeve and Mr Siseland were retained in the Band of Musick, the former at one guinea per week, and the latter 12s per week. They are both to remain one month upon their good Behavior and are also to write Musick whenever there shall be Occasion, without making any Charge on the Proprietorship for the Same."

Norwich at this time had a population of not more than forty thousand and it seems reasonable to presume that this "Mr Reeve" might well be the same John Reeve, musician, who eighteen years later had earned himself enough guineas to buy a sizeable plot of land in Upper Surrey Street and build our present house.

There was certainly plenty of work for musicians in his day, because Norwich was a flourishing cultural centre, with much music making. The newspapers of that period have frequent advertisements for concerts in Assembly Rooms, public houses and public gardens. The Theatre Royal, opened in 1759, was flourishing, with a regularly playing orchestra. The fashion for Pleasure Gardens – and there were four in Norwich at this time – gave more employment for musicians. In 1777, The Norwich Mercury advertised the following programme in the Ranelagh Gardens:

"While the Company are assembling in the Gardens, they will be entertain'd by a Band of Wind Instruments, consisting of Clarinets, Bassoons, and French Horns; and a Military Band of Drums and Fifes will be stationed on the Top of the Triumphal Arch; and two Bands are to answer each other alternately from Six o'clock till half past Seven: the Concert in the Pantheon will then commence with the overture and chorus in *Acis and Galatea*. This Performance will receive the Addition of an excellent organ..."

Music was taught in schools or by private tutors to ladies and gentlemen of all ages and in the Norwich Mercury there were many advertisements for books of songs. One such – perhaps of interest to the WI – was a Song Book for the Ladies, containing a new choice selection of the most favourite songs, duets, cantatas etc., to which is prefixed "An Address to the Ladies of Great Britain".

All in all, there certainly seems to have been scope for the employment of musicians in Georgian Norwich, and John Reeve was doing well enough in his profession to be able to indulge in property investment and build himself a pleasant new house. This he did at some date between 1788 and 1798, and appropriately, the WI Music Guild still periodically holds musical evenings.

We do not know what happened to John Reeve after 1798, when he sold the whole property as far as the corner to James Dobson, carpenter, for £630. He does not appear as a resident of Norwich in the Norwich Directory of 1802, so we presume he had either died or moved elsewhere. In the deeds of the sale to James Dobson, we have the first reference to our house; "...a dwelling house then lately erected by the said John Reeve... with yard, garden, outhouses, edifices, and other appurtenances".

James Dobson died in 1822, and in 1828 his widow sold the estate to John Athow, stonemason. But before long, John Athow too was dead, and in 1834, his widow sold it again to Thomas Bacon, ironfounder.

Thomas Bacon was at this time already established further down on All Saints Green as an engineer and steam engine manufacturer, in a firm called Howlett and Bacon.

Steam power was the key to Britain's prosperity in the nineteenth century, but not for Norwich, left high and dry and impoverished when the Industrial Revolution was enriching the Midlands and the North. Nevertheless, in 1834 Thomas Bacon must have seen a rosy enough future for his business, because he busily covered the land between our house and the corner with foundry buildings, workshops, warehouses and stables.

A rosy future was not for him, however, because six years later he died, and yet enough widow was left to sell the estate. Next door to our house, the last of Thomas Bacon's foundry buildings, altered and adapted for other purposes since his time, was actually being demolished as this booklet was being written and so another small piece of evidence of the industrial history of Norwich had disappeared.

From 1840 to 1913, the ownership of the house and adjoining property changed a number of times. The house and garden were leased separately from the rest of the property, and from 1841 until 1902 were occupied by Alfred Day, a solicitor. The deeds concerning this lease show that the ground floor front rooms were used respectively as "Mr Day's Office" and "The Clerk's Room". The rest of the house was used as the private residence by the Day

family, with dining room, kitchen, drawing room and bedrooms. The garden during his tenancy contained "... 3 vines, 1 nectarine, 3 apricots and a magnolia".

Some of Thomas Bacon's foundry yard at the Surrey Street end of the property had a rapid change of use after his death: the deeds of change of ownership in 1841 refer to the "...schoolrooms and other buildings newly erected on the said piece of land, in the occupation of the Committee of the St Stephen's District Schools, formerly of the occupation of T. C. Bacon..." – presumably one of the early and worthy steps in Norwich towards the education of the poor.

One of the several owners of the land after Thomas Bacon was Charles Evans, MA, Barrister and Chancellor of the Diocese, then living at nearby St Catherine's Close. In 1866, the deeds referring to the sale of various subdivisions of the original property contain some protection for the peace and quiet of the occupiers of our house, from which we have perhaps subsequently benefited. Charles Evans covenanted that "...he and his heirs would not permit any public house or beershop to be erected ... or any noisy, noisome or offensive trade to be carried on ... nor any building to be built within 20 feet of the north or north-east boundary".

Between 1888 and 1910, most of John Reeve's original piece of land was owned by Mr W. E. Bird, decorator, but our house and garden continued to be used as an office by the solicitor, Alfred Day, until 1902, when it was leased to Dr H. J. Starling.

Like his solicitor predecessor, Dr Starling used the ground floor front rooms for his professional work – a consulting room and a waiting room for patients – and the rest of the house was his private residence. The house was conveniently placed for the hospital, and in 1911 Dr Starling, in addition to his own private practice, became Honorary Assistant to the Visiting Medical Staff at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, a first step up the ladder to the position of Consulting Physician, which he reached in 1939.

Mr Bird's death in 1910 ultimately brought the house and garden up for auction in 1913, and as sitting tenant, Dr Starling bought it on 11<sup>th</sup> June 1913 for the sum of £640.

Dr Starling was obviously one of the early car owners in Norwich since, by that date, according to the sales particulars for the auction, he had already built "... a brick and slated Motor garage, and paved washing place..." in the garden. The house also had full electric wiring and electric fittings and "...Company's

Water Service for kitchen and bathroom.” (The first floor “WC with pedestal fittings” is now almost a collector’s piece in the world of sanitary fittings, and has been carefully preserved in the recent modernisation of the house. The electricians did not however feel in the interests of safety, that we should take the same preservationist view of the hitherto untouched wiring system!)

Dr Starling died in 1950, and it was from his widow that in 1952 the Norfolk federation of Women’s Institutes bought the house and garden which has now been our headquarters for 21 years. The £4000 required for the purchase – a very large sum in 1952 – was raised entirely by the efforts of the members of the Federation at that time.

Their hard work in raising the money and their foresight in buying such a centrally placed, useful and charming house has brought incalculable benefit to the Federation.

It is not only the administrative centre for a membership of 13,000 in Norfolk, but also a centre for all manner of educational and social activities. With the rapid development of Norwich, its value as property has increased to a figure that would never have been believed in 1952.

We are very proud of our nearly 200 year old house, and it has been a great joy to us all to be able to modernise the interior extensively as a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday present.

The modernisation of the kitchen and dining room was paid for from funds accumulated for this purpose over the years. The rest of the house was repaired, redecorated, carpeted and refurnished with the profits from the sale of over 10,000 copies of the Norfolk federation’s book of Norfolk reminiscences, “Within Living Memory”, and with generous gifts from individual Institutes and members.

From John Reeve, Musician, in 1788, to 13,000 women as its owners in 1973, 45, All Saints Green has passed through many hands. But we, as its present owners, are glad to have been able to preserve an attractive piece of Georgian Norwich, and to put it to worthy use.

October 1973

ZITA JAMES



## **Bringing the information up-to-date**

Mrs Zita James was the county chairman from 1969 – 1974 and since then several modernizing programmes have been completed. All the rooms have been repainted, re-wired and re-carpeted since 2000 and secondary glazing was added in 2008. The kitchen was completely updated in 2006, due to two legacies from members. In the summer of 2010 the Front Office and Members Rooms were painted and re-organised.

Other changes are that the BBC is now located in The Forum and the National car park, and Sainsbury's and Marsh Insurers now occupy the area which used to be the Queensway shop. There is no longer a WI Music Guild and the House is now over 200 years old.

In 2016, there are 166 WIs and over 5,250 members in Norfolk, which reflects the changes of more women working full time and the many additional activities available for women in their 'spare' time. However, these members are just as fully committed to the WI as those in the 1970's and we are all delighted to be based in such a beautiful house. We continue to need members' support in order to stay here.

In 2007 we became involved with the Heritage Open Days, when private historic buildings in the county are open to the public for several days in September. We have learned even more about the house from these visitors.

Louise Casson  
Federation Secretary  
July 2016