

# NORWICH'S FORGOTTEN GARDEN

By Vanessa Trevelyan

When C. J. Sansom launched his latest Shardlake historical mystery *Tombland* in 2018, he said: "You can stand at Kett's Heights... on the steepest part of the escarpment next to the one surviving remnant of the chapel Kett used as his headquarters, and on a clear day you've got a magnificent view. You feel that you can almost reach out and touch the cathedral spire - that was a real highlight for me."

Kett's Heights is one of Norwich's best kept secrets. A steeply wooded space punctuated by open greens and winding paths and steps. It is a relatively small (1.23 hectares) public open space owned by Norwich City Council. It contains a medieval chapel, 19th century garden terraces and a fantastic view overlooking Norwich. It was the headquarters of Kett's Rebellion in the 16th century and a magnet for artists seeking the picturesque in the 18th and 19th centuries. It also has a surprising industrial history.

The steepness of the chalk escarpment to the west has prevented any major development, resulting in a 'green wedge' of trees and greenery and an important refuge for wildlife. After World War II the heights were neglected and became overgrown. As the city grew around it, it was forgotten. And so it might have remained had it not been for an anonymous benefactor who gifted the site to the City Council in 1980.

Various attempts have been made over the years to maintain Kett's Heights as a public amenity and, in 2015, the Friends



*View of Norwich from Kett's Heights, Dutch School, c. 1707. On display at the Museum of Norwich at the Bridewell.*  
(Photo: Norfolk Museums Service)

of Kett's Heights was established with the aim of restoring the site to its former glory for the local community and visitors to Norwich with a wide diversity of plants and wildlife and to provide event space with activities to suit a wide audience and enable its long and diverse history to be investigated and interpreted for educational purposes.

Kett's Heights are poised on the edge of a steep escarpment, the result of centuries of chalk mining. Norwich was mined for chalk and flints from the Middle Ages until the beginning of World War II. The chalk was used for liming in agriculture and in mortar for building.

Flints were used to build the city walls and some of Norwich's finest buildings, of which the Museum of Norwich at the Bridewell and the Guildhall are excellent examples. Initially the chalk was excavated from an open hole creating steep escarpments like those shaping Kett's Heights. But then tunnels were started from the side of the resulting pit, following the richest seams of flints. Tunnels have been found adjacent to Rosary Road and Chalk Hill Road, which were used as shelters during World War II.

The first colonisation of what was to become known as Kett's Heights was by Herbert de Losinga who built a Priory above the river on one side of what is now Gas Hill and a small chapel – St Michael's – on the other side.

A few years later Kett's Heights became the centre of one of Norwich's major events. Kett's Rebellion began at Wymondham on 8th July 1549 with a group of rebels



This recent illustration is by Owen Mathers ([www.owenmathers.co.uk](http://www.owenmathers.co.uk))

protesting against the enclosure of land by destroying fences that had been put up by wealthy landowners. One of their targets was yeoman farmer Robert Kett who, instead of resisting the rebels, agreed to their demands and offered to lead them. Some 16,000 men from Wymondham, Norwich and the surrounding countryside set up camp on Mousehold Heath on 12th July.

St Michael's Chapel became Kett's headquarters, while prisoners were housed in St Leonard's Priory. The rebels stormed Norwich on 29th July and took the city. On the 1st August the rebels defeated a Royal Army led by the Marquis of Northampton who had been sent by the government to suppress the uprising. Kett's rebellion ended on 27th August when the rebels were defeated by an army under the leadership of the Earl of Warwick at the Battle of Dussindale, where 3,000 rebels are thought to have been killed. Kett was captured, held in the Tower of London, tried for treason, and hanged from the walls of Norwich Castle on 7th December 1549.

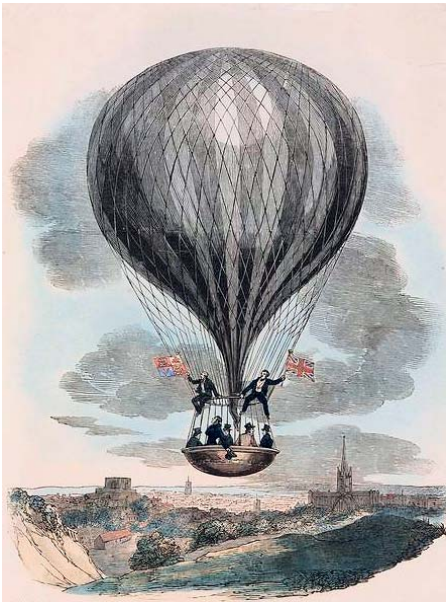
Two hundred and fifty years later these scenes of bloodshed had become picturesque ruins. The Picturesque, an appreciation of the roughness and variety in nature and buildings, especially ruins, flourished in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The crumbling Norwich city walls and other ruins, such as St Michael's Chapel provided the inspiration for artists and enthused those of artistic sensibilities.

The Norwich Society of Artists was founded in 1803 by John Crome and Robert Ladbroke as a club where artists, including John Sell Cotman, could meet to exchange ideas. The Norwich School's great achievement was that a small group of self-taught working class artists were able to paint with vitality the hinterland surrounding Norwich. Kett's Heights and the crumbling St Michael's Chapel featured prominently in their works. John Berney Ladbroke, Robert's son, built a fine house overlooking Kett's Heights, and created a number of follies in the garden out of stones taken from the Chapel.



Remains of St Michael's Chapel  
(Photo: John Trevelyan)





*The Nassau balloon over Norwich in 1840*

As the 19th century progressed art was replaced by industry. The establishment of the gas works opposite Bishop Bridge in 1830 was a significant industrial event for Norwich. The gasworks took advantage of the large flat plateau created by chalk mining conveniently adjacent to Bishop Bridge to allow easy access for the wherries delivering the necessary coal by river.



*One of the gas holders before these were demolished in 2018  
(Photo: Kevin Vincent)*

The gas works changed the character of the housing around Kett's Heights with the creation of terraces of small cottages built out of the clinker from the gas kilns in contrast to the larger houses and terraces occupied by professional people, including the manager of the gas works who had his own private staircase and gate onto Kett's Heights. The rows of terrace houses are now sadly the only evidence of Kett's Heights industrial past as the gas holders were recently demolished.

Gas was initially used for lighting but soon became used for cooking and heating as well. But gas also had rather an unusual function. Ballooning was a popular event in Norwich. In the 1820s and 1830s balloons were inflated with coal gas, which comprised around 60% hydrogen and was, therefore, lighter than air. Balloonists often started their flight from the bottom of Kett's Hill to take advantage of the adjacent gas works. On September 24th 1840 a crowd gathered at Bishop Bridge to watch the record-breaking balloonist Mr Charles Green ascend in his balloon 'Nassau'. Mr Hampton also made a flight from the same place on September 25th. With him was a monkey, who was provided with a parachute. The monkey was 'detached' from the balloon as it was passing over Mousehold Heath: nothing is known of its fate. Coincidentally, St Michael is the patron saint of paratroopers and his feast day on 29th September is celebrated by airborne forces across the world.

The gas works had a direct impact on Kett's Heights itself. During the latter part of the 19th century the manager of the gasworks turned the slopes of the heights into a garden; terraces were dug with steps leading to them used material salvaged from the works. St



*St Michael's Terrace  
(Photo: Vanessa Trevelyan)*

Michael's Chapel fulfilled a new and somewhat surprising role. After religion, rebellion and art, the ruined chapel walls became the foundation of Victorian glass houses, heated with boilers fed from the gas works and growing exotic fruit. These terraces were perhaps an attempt to emulate the pleasure gardens that were so popular in Norwich from the late 17th to the mid-19th centuries. One example is the Wilderness which opened off Carrow Hill in 1750 and was famous for its breakfast entertainments. In the evenings the medieval city walls were illuminated and there were walks through the gardens and views from the towers.

During the early 20th century, when Kett's Heights was owned by the Gas Works, the area was effectively the private kitchen garden of the manager of the gas works. The lower green grew asparagus and salad vegetables, while the upper green was given as an allotment to a long-standing employee of the gas works in recognition of long service.

During World War II, the need to produce food locally became critical. One way of supplementing meat rations was to join a Pig Club. For centuries, gardeners and smallholders kept poultry and the odd pig or two for their own



*Steps leading to the viewpoint  
(Photo: John Trevelyan)*

use. During war, the government encouraged people to form clubs to buy, feed and look after pigs. Each club member was called upon to contribute money and to care for the pigs. The pigs were fed mostly with scraps from homes, cafés, bakeries, and anything edible that came to hand. Clubs were also allowed to purchase small rations of feed or corn to supplement this meagre diet. When the pigs were slaughtered, half of the carcasses were sold to the Government, to help with the rationing and the remainder was divided between Club members as either pork or bacon.

The gas workers were allowed to house their Pig Club in an old stable block on the Heights and you can still see the remains of the pigpens and the concrete-lined pond that was used as a source of water for the livestock.

The tradition of growing food on Kett's Heights continues today. The

Heights contains a number of fruit trees and a plum orchard, although the trees have reverted to a wild state. The area had become very overgrown but recent work to remove ivy and brambles have given the trees more air and light.

The Norwich Fringe Project has helped by planting 20 new apple, plum and cherry trees around the site. It is the aim of the Friends of Kett's Heights to bring these trees into improved production through proper pruning and management, with the fruit then free to anyone who cares to visit.

The crowning glory of Kett's Heights is the wonderful panorama of Norwich from the viewing point. This is designated by the City Council as a strategic viewpoint, which means that the effect that any development would have on the view has to be taken into account when considering planning applications.

The viewpoint is marked by a large beacon, which was erected in 1988 on

the 400th anniversary of the attempted invasion by the Spanish Armada. Norwich was not particularly threatened by the Armada but was part of a nationwide project to install beacons at prominent places. The beacon has been lit only three times; firstly at its inauguration in 1988, then in 2016 during a performance of 1549: Kett's Rebellion by the Common Lot theatre company, and most recently in 2018 when Professor Alice Roberts was filming for a TV series about Britain's most historic towns.

Kett's Heights is fast becoming a popular place for walking, outdoor performances and playing. It has a fascinating past that brings together so much of Norwich's history.

*Vanessa Trevelyan*



*Panorama of Norwich from Kett's Heights*

*(Photo: Michael John Button)*