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Statues and Heroes Beyond the Sound Bite

Chris Wood

Recent events have brought the role of statues into sharp focus. Who do we honour and why? Who decides? And what do their statues mean to us?

Ambivalence and politics in statues

On 7th June 2020, Black Lives Matters protestors in Bristol toppled the statue of 17th-century slave-trader, Edward Colston, and threw it into the river. Others have since been daubed with graffiti, leading to the statue of Sir Winston Churchill, in London's Parliament Square, being placed behind hoardings.

Churchill was the man who led Britain in the Second World War. Some of his actions during that time are decidedly questionable, but not many would not have liked to have been in his shoes at the time. He was also an apologist for the colonial domination of indigenous peoples by Europeans.



Admiral Lord Nelson, Norwich Thomas Milnes, Portland stone, erected 1852, moved 1856

Picture: Chris Wood.

On 9th April 2003, the people of Baghdad pulled down and beheaded a statue of Saddam Hussein in a celebration of liberation from his tyranny. A celebration some Iraqis have since questioned. Two years previously, on 21st March 2001, a very different destruction occurred. The Taliban destroyed sandstone statues of Buddhas that had graced a hillside in Bamyan, Afghanistan for 1500 years. That was an act not of celebration, but of wanton iconoclastic vandalism.

Blinkered iconoclasm is not only seen in such obvious fundamentalism, however. There have been calls for the statue of Constantine the Great outside York Minster to be removed, on the basis that he supported slavery. That is hardly surprising: he was after all a Roman Emperor! Of course, slavery was not the same then as what was later practised under the British Empire. That is not to say that it was a good thing, just that the same assumptions cannot be made. There are in fact much better reasons for not liking Constantine, such as the fact he had his own son and wife murdered, or that he instituted a reactionary version of Christianity as the Imperial Religion and set the scene for the colonisation of the world by Europe (carrying the faith with it), which involved much more than just slavery.

Here in Norwich, we have statues and images of a variety of people, who have positive and negative aspects to their stories. Admiral Lord Nelson looks down upon visitors and Norwich School pupils in the Cathedral Close. A great war commander, perhaps, but no opponent of slavery and very much part of the tit-for-tat piracy that characterised the Early-Modern wars between rival European empires.

Outside the Close, in Tombland, is a memorial bust of Edith Cavell. She was running a hospital in Brussels when the German army invaded Belgium in 1914. As well as treating wounded soldiers of both sides, she organised a covert operation to get Allied servicemen caught behind German lines (where they would have been shot on sight) to freedom. She was arrested by the occupying forces and executed by firing squad in 1915. There is evidence to suggest that her captors might have let her go had she denied her involvement, but her Christian morality would not allow her to lie, so she accepted martyrdom. Were the Anglican Church still Catholic, she would surely have been canonised by now.



Edith Cavell, Norwich J. G. Gordon Munn, bronze and stone, erected 1918 Picture: Chris Wood.

Sir Thomas Browne sits on a plinth in the Haymarket, contemplating a fragment of a cremation urn. That refers to his book, Hydriotaphia, Urne Buriall, which is a meditation on death and return to the womb of the Earth. This is not just a memento mori; having gone down into the Earth reduced to ashes, the subject matter springs into new life and order in *The Garden of Cyrus*, published together with the former book to make an alchemical pair. As well as writing some very important books that reflect the intellectual atmosphere of the 17th century, as Renaissance scholarship began to give way to Enlightenment science, Browne was himself an experimenter (even if some of his experiments would have failed modern standards of health and safety, never mind animal welfare) and, it appears, an alchemist, friend of Dr. John Dee's son, Arthur, and correspondent with Elias Ashmole on his legacy. Modern opinion is generally divided between those who see the alchemist and mystic and those who see the proto-scientist. He actually stood in the middle, a bridge between worldviews. However, he also testified as an 'expert witness' at the trial of the socalled Lowestoft Witches in 1662, a trial that, 30 years later, was used as a precedent in the famous prosecution in Salem, Massachusetts. Browne seemed uninterested in the human impact of his testimony, as a doctor, that the reported symptoms of the allegedly bewitched could be explained by natural causes, but that it would be typical of the Devil to make evil look like natural causes. Amy Denny and Rose Cullender were hanged.



Sir Thomas Browne, Norwich. Henry Pegram, bronze, erected 1905 Picture: Chris Wood

A plaque indicates a house on Willow Lane where George Borrow once lived (and was once a museum dedicated to him). One of Norfolk's most famous 19th-century authors, he is perhaps best known for *Romany Rye* and *Lavengro*. Both of these books celebrated and raised perceptions of the Roma people. Unfortunately, his writings also perpetuated anti-Semitic prejudices.

Other writers have been controversial for other reasons. John Bunyan, whose statue stands in the centre of Bedford, was not popular with the establishment of his time, and was imprisoned for his preaching. Yet, he gave religious expression and hope to many, in a way that went beyond the prescriptions of standard Protestantism to allow a genuine inner seeking. He also gave us the hymn, *To Be a Pilgrim*, which became a favourite of Christian school assemblies, but actually speaks of the spiritual quest in language accessible to any faith (the original version has no specifically Christian references).

Then there is royalty. Few monarchs have been perfect. Elizabeth I tried to hold a religiously divided country together, but was not afraid to persecute Catholics. She also set the English overseas colonial machine in motion. In that, she was urged on by John Dee: not perhaps the most favourable aspect of someone who is a hero ancestor in the magical community! Another strong woman was Queen Victoria, whose statue is found across the country. Ironically, the age named after her was perhaps the epitome of patriarchy and of dissociation from Nature. She presided over an expanding Empire and domestic poverty (although she does seem genuinely to have tried to do something about the latter).

Queen Victoria Memorial, Scarborough Charles Bell Birch, bronze, erected 1903 Picture: Chris Wood.

John Bunyan, Bedford Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm, bronze, erected 1874 Picture: Chris Wood.





Change, decay and iconoclasm

Whatever their good or bad points, monarchs and other historical figures, whether or not we consider them heroes, are markers of history. Their statues are real superstitions: they 'stand over' from the past. Sometimes, they are all we have, or at least part of limited archaeological evidence for the past. There are many debates about the meaning of the Sphinx at Giza, for instance, let alone the pyramids. A part of one enormous Egyptian statue, known as 'the Younger Memnon', but actually of Pharaoh Ramesses II, carved in granite in around 1270 BCE and removed from Thebes by 'The Great' Giovanni Battista Belzoni in 1815-16, now stands in the British Museum. This acquisition inspired Percy Bysshe Shelley to write his poem,

Ozymandias (1818), which concludes:

"And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

The ancient Egyptians themselves were no strangers to iconoclasm. After the death of Akhenaten, the 'heretic' pharaoh who tried to replace polytheism with the monotheist worship of the Aten (the Disc of the Sun), his images were defaced in many places, to deprive his spirit of breath and life.

'The Younger Memnon' Ramesses II, British Museum Granite, 19th Dynasty (1292-1189 BCE), Thebes Picture: Chris Wood.



Much of Europe saw its own programme of iconoclasm and the destruction of images following the Reformation. In England, church statues were removed and images destroyed, covered or defaced in the 16th and 17th centuries. Not even crosses and deterrent allegories of sin were immune! Pre-Reformation churches were full of pictures: their walls were covered in brightly coloured murals telling religious stories and images of saints were available for intercession. The Protestants took exception to this 'idolatry'. Of course, none of it was strictly speaking, by Christian definitions, idolatry. Many images allowed communication with the divine and were considered portals to it, which is part of the concept of 'idols' for those of us who do not hold with the monotheist definition, but the systematic vandalism sought to replace the language of image, accessible to everyone, with the primacy of the Word, accessible only to the literate elite.

In the Church of St. Margaret of Antioch, in Cley-next-the-Sea, North Norfolk, there are many beautifully carved, 15th-century bench end 'poppy' heads. One depicts a mermaid with very striking features. I had gone there to see her one time with Val Thomas and Alice Crick, and it was Alice who spotted what proved to be a revelation. There is a cut line around her head. Not only that, but the wood of her face looks different, and doesn't have the old woodworm holes that speckle the rest of the figure. A perusal of other 'poppy' heads solved the mystery: many had been defaced. This proved to be a common phenomenon. Some carvings had their missing parts replaced in Victorian restoration programmes, although the restorers cannot have known what the originals looked like after at least two centuries.



Bench ends, Church of St. Margaret of Antioch, Cley-next-the-Sea Pictures: Chris Wood.

Gods and heroes

Despite the Protestant objection to idols, the production of statues and images did not die out. The industrial revolution allowed easier manufacture of statues and indeed new materials to be used. The Classical world, in particular, had not lost its appeal either, and pre-Christian deities are found amongst the Christian saints, military heroes and royalty commemorated in wood, bronze, lead, stone and new materials, like Coade stone. Ceres spreads Her bounty over Swaffham Market Place; Sabrina, goddess of the River Severn, rests in The Dingle in Shrewsbury; Father Thames and Isis adorn Henley bridge.



Ceres, Butter Cross, Swaffham Unknown French artist, lead, 1784 Picture: Chris Wood.

Heroes are also commemorated, not all military. At John Clare Cottage in Helpston, Northamptonshire, the 19th-century 'peasant' poet is portrayed as a young man in a bronze statue, replete with images from his story: nature and music, lock and chain.



Clare was a gifted poet, feted and used by the London *literati*, who was both inspired by and undone by the plight of the countryside in which he lived and worked, driven to madness by the enclosure and exclusion by which his ancestral land was taken from him by the rich.



John Clare as a Young Man, John Clare Cottage, Helpston Peter Edwards & Gay Galsworthy, bronze Pictures: Chris Wood. Another sad and poignant tale is that of Rebecca Rolfe, a.k.a. Pocahontas, commemorated in a statue in Gravesend, where she died in 1617, aged about 20. It is a copy of the statue erected at Jamestown, Tsenacomoco (Virginia). With her marriage to John Rolfe, she became a bridge between indigenous and settler communities, initiating the 'Peace of Pocahontas', which did not last beyond five years of her death. Her sad story has been misrepresented tragically over the centuries, but at best it carries a message of hope and honour.



Pocahontas, St. George's churchyard, Gravesend W.A. Partridge, bronze, 1957, cast from the 1922 original in Jamestown, Virginia Picture: Chris Wood.

Misrepresentation is seen in a fictitious statue, erected in the TV sci-fi series *Firefly*. In the episode, *Jaynestown*, the crew arrive on a planet that its least reputable member, Jayne, has visited before. Then he was involved in a heist that went wrong. In order to escape, he had to jettison the booty and betray his partner in crime. On his return, he hides his face, until confronted with the statue that the poor inhabitants have erected in his honour. Immortalised in ballad, his story to them is one of Robin-Hood-style robbing from the rich to give to the poor. It is a tale of growth for the main protagonist, but also one of how people take what is meaningful to them from events, even if that does not represent the 'true reason' behind them. What is a hero?

One hero we actually know very little about as a person, and of what she did principally from her enemies, is one of Norfolk's and Britain's most important, Boudica. She stands in warrior splendour in her chariot, her daughters beside her, on London's Embankment. In Cardiff City Hall, she is the aggrieved mother, steeling herself for the fight for justice. Her revolt was not afraid to return to the Romans the punishment meted out to the Iceni, although for the worst atrocities we only have the word of Cassius Dio, a sensationalist writing a century after the event. Statues were doubtless fair game and a bronze head, from a statue of either Claudius or Nero, was found in the River Alde in 1907. It is assumed to have been ransacked from Camulodunum during the sacking of the *colonia*. (If so, it suggests that not everyone carried on to Londinium.)



Boadicea and Her Daughters, London. Thomas Thornycroft, bronze, erected 1902 Picture: Aldaron CC-BY-SA. A millennium and a half later, another rebellion arose in Norfolk, actually the largest in the summer of 1549, after the Western Rebellion in Devon and Cornwall that spring. It was led by Robert Kett and was sparked by the pulling down of fences erected to enclose common land near Wymondham. The grievances were much wider, however, with the fences being a symbol of the loss experienced by ordinary people as the effects of the Reformation and the rise of capitalism bit deep (not unlike the experiences that turned John Clare in on himself three centuries later). Following the

Kett's Oak, Hethersett Picture: Chris Wood.



defeat of the rebellion, it took until the 20th century for the justice of its cause to be recognised and Kett's appellation to change from 'traitor' to 'hero'. The City of Norwich went so far as to put a commemorative stone in the wall of the Castle in



1949... Another stone is in the wall opposite (ironically) the city's court building on Bishopgate, commemorating the death of Lord Sheffield in one of the skirmishes in the city's streets. He was unhorsed and took off his helmet assuming he would be taken prisoner and ransomed. He was killed instead; these peasants didn't play by the rules!

Kett's Oak (or perhaps a descendent) still stands near Hethersett to mark the place where the rebels gathered to march on Norwich. The other oak tree associated with Kett's Rebellion, the Oak of Reformation, at which the camp leaders met and debated strategy, stood above the city to the east, in that area known both as Mousehold and Thorpe Woods, now Thorpe Hamlet (approximately where the water tower now stands on Telegraph Lane). Here was the place from which Matthew Parker, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, beat a hasty retreat after preaching against rebellion. His experience led him to propose John Aldrich, who as mayor of Norwich in 1570 developed poor relief to keep malcontents at bay in the city, as the architect of England's first Poor Law.

In 2005, the Thorpe Hamlet Ward Community
Forum funded a village sign, which was made by
Norfolk blacksmith, David Capes. It
incorporates the view of the Cathedral from the
hills, a foliate lion-head to represent Lion
Wood, and broken fences for Kett's Rebellion. It
is interesting that, whilst those fences are seen
by most as an imposition justly removed, Dave
saw their destruction as a negative symbol of
rebellion. The same thing can be seen in
different ways by artist and commissioner!

Thorpe Hamlet Village Sign, Norwich David Capes, steel, 2005. Picture: Chris Wood.





St. George and the Dragon, Anglesey Abbey, Cambridgeshire Coade's Artificial Stone Manufactory Co., Coade stone, c.1780-1820 Picture: Chris Wood.

One figure who is seen in many different, indeed conflicting ways is St. George. To some, He is the archetype of jingoism, or at best a representative of conversion by the sword. For such a 'patriotic' saint, He is patron of many different places, from England to Ethiopia, Moscow to Beirut. Across eastern Europe, He is Green George, bringer of agricultural prosperity, and He is linked closely to the Islamic Trickster and culture hero, Al-Khidr ('The Green One'). It is telling that George is usually portrayed, not having killed the dragon, but in the act of pinning it. The dragon is the wild power of Nature, inhabitant of the sea, great rivers or the desert; a power we need to survive, but which can overwhelm. George is a culture hero, rather like Thor or Indra, in that He controls the raging power and allows civilisation and agriculture to flourish. He is also usually seen on horseback. Perhaps the horse is the dragon tamed? And at times, civilisation's grip on the reins becomes too tight and we need Green George to slacken the harness and give the dragon its freedom. Such is the import of the St. George panel of the *Trinity Reredos*, by Mark Cazalet, in the Fraser Chapel of Manchester Cathedral, where a suitably Middle-Eastern-looking St. George is releasing the dragon from its shackles to regenerate the city.

If St. George is conflicted, he has nothing on Baphomet, who, as conceived by Éliphas Lévi as the Sabbatic Goat, combines the opposites (male:female, light:dark, human:animal:angel, above:below, etc.) to be the very quintessence of polarity. A version of this figure has been adopted by the Satanic Temple in Salem, Massachusetts. A copy of its statue turned up as a central element in the TV series, The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, and the Temple sued for copyright infringement. Now, it came as a surprise to me that there were few objections to the series from the Wiccan and broader Pagan community, as its premise is that witches are a race apart, whose god is 'The Dark Lord'. Without getting into the whole history and symbolism of the supposed Mediaeval Satanic Witchcraft cult, suffice to say that the TV show is actually very well done and, with appropriate suspension of disbelief, works extremely well, does no harm to the imagine of actual Witchcraft, and even presents Satanism in a fairly favourable light. That last point might suggest a certain churlishness on the part of the Satanic Temple (especially as it got the idea from Éliphas Lévi in the first place)!



Sekhmet, British Museum Black granite, 18th Dynasty (*c.*1350 BCE), Thebes Picture: Chris Wood.

Of course, it is monotheism that has created the stark dichotomy between Good and Evil, with a little help from dualistic Zoroastrianism. Pagan gods can't be separated out into Good and Evil groups; they all encompass the spectrum. Some are more obviously ambivalent than others, but they can all do things we don't like. Sekhmet goes on a rampage and is only calmed by either being enticed into the flooding Nile or into a lake of beer (both being blood-red), at Thoth's suggestion, and later emerging as the beneficent Hathor. Odin definitely has a dark side. Loki definitely cannot be classed as 'Good', but we need Him as the Trickster spark of life.

Loki with a fishing net From the 16th-century Icelandic manuscript *Stofnun* Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi 66.



Odin, The Wanderer Georg von Rosen, 1886



How are gods and heroes represented and why?

There are probably two groups of reasons for representing a god or a hero. The first is a spectrum involving politics, adulation, worship and meaning. 'Worship' has only recently come to mean primarily religious supplication; it used to have a broader sense of honour and respect, which continues in such uses as 'the worshipful the mayor of...', 'worshipful' livery companies, *etc.* Whether a statue is erected for personal aggrandisement, civic pride or religious devotion, there is always some meaning to be perceived in the representation or iconography. This may be obvious; often it is more subtle, as two Christian examples may show.



Outside Salisbury Cathedral, there is a life-size bronze statue of Mary, Mother of God, striding towards the north gate of the Close. She is setting out from the holy place, taking Her blessing into the community of the city. Outside Norwich Anglican Cathedral, there is an area of Life's Green, at the south-west corner of the chancel, focused on the grave of Edith Cavell. It was remodelled cleverly in 2016, with the original grave superstructure placed to one side and a new, monolithic headstone placed in a paved circle. Stand there with a group of people and the natural tendency is to fan out around the circle, looking at the headstone. I for one feel like I am in the firing squad.

Walking Madonna, Salisbury Cathedral Elisabeth Frink, bronze, 1981. Picture: Chris Wood.



Edith Cavell's Grave, Norwich Cathedral Remodelled 2016 Picture: Chris Wood.

Venus/Aphrodite Surprised at Her Bath, British Museum

1st-2nd century CE Roman copy of earlier Greek original, marble.

Picture: Chris Wood.

The second group of reasons is related to entertainment and even titillation. An example perhaps is the genre of statues known as *Venus/Aphrodite Surprised at Her Bath*. This does seem an odd genre. Both Venus to the Romans, and Aphrodite to the Greeks were associated with fertility and sexuality, which was reflected in their cults, but to show the goddess nude when She does not wish to be seen seems to be inviting trouble. Diana turned Acteon into a stag, to be torn to pieces by his own hounds, when he happened upon Her bathing. Now, Diana does not have



the same erotic imagery as Venus, but the latter is just as powerful and She can still smite if She chooses. Whatever the reasoning of the Roman sculptors and owners of these statues, and of their Greek originals, the response of more recent collectors may be clearer. The so-called 'Lely's Venus' crouches on a plinth in the middle of a 'white cube' gallery at the British Museum. The location, the wandering visitors, and the peripheral trappings of a modern gallery add to the sense of voyeurism. She is beautiful, and beautifully sculpted, but one feels uncomfortable. She was amongst the possessions of King Charles I when he was executed in 1649 and was acquired by Sir Peter Lely, returning to the Royal Collection at some later point. Sir Peter's motivations were probably not spiritual!

Who decides? Who owns art? Who displays it?

The display of statues requires money and, in the public realm, civic approval or planning consent. Money tends to follow conservative celebration, *i.e.* what is deemed to be supported by the majority, as perceived by the establishment. Kings, queens, statesmen and so on fall into this category.

Another reason for public or institutional money supporting the erection of a statue in the public realm is civic or societal guilt. Alan Turing is honoured with a statue in Sackville Gardens, Manchester, sitting on a bench holding the apple with which he is generally believed to have committed suicide (although the cyanide found in his system may well have come from his experiments in electroplating, and the apple remains were never tested, so that the suicide verdict is now strongly disputed). That he committed suicide was assumed because he was under threat of imprisonment and loss of his career for his homosexuality, despite his wartime code-breaking activities. Today we think differently and Manchester has done much to atone for that ingratitude, with the statue being a focus for Pride vigils.

A different sort of guilt perhaps applied to the statue of Sir Thomas Browne in Norwich. The story goes that, in 1840, works going on at the Church of St. Peter Mancroft, where he is buried, 'accidently' broke into his coffin. His skull was removed by the sexton and later sold to a prominent local surgeon, who left it to the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, which displayed it in its museum. Repeated calls from the Church for the return of the skull for reburial were ignored until 1922, when it was restored, a series of casts having been taken. The leading light in the project to commission the statue from Henry Pegram was Sir Peter Eade, who was chief physician at the hospital and host of the meetings which refused to return the skull.



Draped Reclining Woman, Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich

Henry Moore, bronze, 1957-8, acquired 1960 Picture: Chris Wood.

The constant dilemma of art is that it is the rich that can afford to support artists, at any rate those who produce large works in small numbers.

Rich collectors sometimes give or endow their collections to museums and galleries, sometimes paying for the institutions themselves to be set up around their collections and therefore reflect their tastes. This was how the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia started, on the basis of the generosity of Robert and Lisa Sainsbury. Otherwise museums often cannot afford to acquire important works, perhaps settling for un-representative examples from an artist's *oevre*.



There are of course occasions when an institution or city is there at the right time. Jacob Epstein's Lucifer was offered by A.W. Lawrence (brother of T.E. Lawrence 'of Arabia') as a gift to the Fitzwilliam Museum, then the Victoria & Albert, then the Tate – all of whom rejected the offer! After press coverage of this remarkable state of affairs, a number of provincial galleries expressed an interest, and the Lord Mayor of Birmingham, along with the Director of its Art Gallery, took the trouble to visit Epstein, who was so impressed by their enthusiasm to give the statue a home that he recommended their suit to Lawrence. Lucifer now stands in Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Lucifer, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Jacob Epstein, bronze, 1945 Picture: Chris Wood.

Lions, dragons and conclusions

Heraldic Lion, Norwich City Hall

Alfred Hardiman, bronze, 1938 Picture: Chris Wood.

Not all statues are of humans. In Norwich, we have lions, particularly those outside City Hall (but there's a prominent one outside the Red Lion pub by Bishop Bridge).



The lion began as the symbol of the King and three lions in a shield denoted the royal control of the Mediaeval Castle Fee. Within the Fee, different rules applied and it was outside the legal jurisdiction of the City. It was also where the Jewish community could expect sanctuary. Small roundels set on posts marked the boundary of the Fee until 1345, when the area was restored to the City. The roundels featured the shield with its lions, encircled by three wyverns. Modern roundels have been set in the pavement around the boundary of the Fee to commemorate its existence. Here, the wyverns have been replaced by dragons. In the mean time, the lion has become the symbol of the City.

The dragon pops up all over Norwich, historically in Dragon Hall, with its dragon spandrels, the St. George and the Dragon mural in the Church of St. Gregory, and the processional Snap, who, come the Reformation, survived his adversary St. George to now lead the annual Lord Mayor's Procession. Today, dragons feature in public art works and an occasional Dragon Festival. Norwich needs its dragons; it needs their



wild energy for the city to prosper. The lion might bluster and set itself up on a pompous civic pedestal, but it couldn't do it without the dragon.

Modern representation of the Mediaeval roundels marking the Norwich Castle Fee

Picture: Chris Wood.

So, perhaps it's O.K. to have statues of people, some of whose aspects we find difficult, especially if we have others to present different characteristics, not just to provide a balance, but a dynamic creative tension.

Personally, I think Edward Colston's time had come (he had neither redeeming features nor historic interest beyond being a symbol of capitalist inhumanity to other people). Bristol Museum plans to display the statue, still with the paint and rope used by the protestors, to tell a new story.

But most of our statues are not in the same category. Most people commemorated actually had good and bad points. What we need to do is *talk* about these people, their stories and what they stood for. Then perhaps we will be better able to understand our history and the meaning of the images we display. That is actually so much easier if the statue is in plain sight!



Dragon mural looking out over the junction of Red Lion Street and Rampant Horse Street, Norwich

Malca Shotten
Picture: Chris Wood.