

Strangers who made our great city what it is

PETER TRUDGILL

email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk



In the last 10 years or so, the population of Norwich has increased rapidly and enormously. Amazingly, there are now about 60pc more people than there used to be.

This sudden dramatic increase hasn't been the result of exceptionally high fertility on the part of young Norwich couples. And it isn't due to a sudden influx of people from rural areas around the city either. It's all down to immigration.

Some 40pc of the population of the city are now refugees and asylum seekers who have arrived from overseas. These immigrants don't look very different from Norfolk people and they are Protestant Christians. But they don't speak English. If you walk down St Benedicts or St Giles, you're almost as likely to hear people speaking Flemish or French as you are Norfolk English.

The immigrants have arrived in their hundreds from places like Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges and Lille, escaping from their Spanish Catholic persecutors, executioners and torturers. They are all foreigners – or “strangers” as they are called in 16th century English – for this is the late 1500s we're talking about.

It's interesting to try to imagine what it must have been like here in the city after the arrival of the Strangers. Overcrowded certainly. And multilingual. How did people



CULTURAL MIX: Historically, Norwich is a city influenced by immigration.

communicate? Did the Strangers already know some English? Were the Walloon French speakers able to speak Dutch to the Flemings? Could the Flemish people speak French? Did the indigenous Norwich people pick up any Dutch?

Norwich stayed a trilingual city for at least 200 years. French and Dutch were used in the city well into the 1700s. And many of us must have ancestors who came from the Low Countries. So surely this must have had some effect on our local dialect? “Dwile” – dishcloth, floorcloth, an English word used only in East Anglia – is certainly the same as the Dutch word

“dweil”. And “lucam” – a long weavers’ attic window – is from French “lucarne”. What else?

Visitors to our city often wonder why – when London has Leicester Square, Grosvenor Square and Langham Place – Norwich has Palace Plain, St Andrew's Plain, Bank Plain, St George's Plain.

I was recently invited to go to Belgium, to the Royal Flemish Academy in Ghent, to talk about the influence of Dutch on East Anglian English. Around the corner from my hotel was an open area called Sint Veerleplein – Saint Veerle's Plain. You can be sure I mentioned that.