

# NORWICH SCENES

## The Lazar House



One of the most feared diseases to afflict mankind has been leprosy, and we read of it on several occasions in the Bible, although it is not certain that the leprosy of Bible times was the same disease as what is known as leprosy today. Two long chapters in the book of Leviticus are devoted to laws concerning leprosy, and lepers were strictly commanded to live apart from their fellows, to make their appearance distinctive and to cry warnings of their uncleanness (13:45,46). The Medieval church took this teaching of the Law seriously, and placed similar restrictions on lepers. In order to care for their needs they built residences for them, calling them 'lazar houses', after the Lazarus of the parable of Luke 16:19-31, though he is not stated to have had leprosy. Indeed, the term 'lazar house' is to be found in the RV as the marginal alternative to 'several house' in 2 Chronicles 26:21, as the place where the leprous-stricken Uzziah ended his days.

Our picture shows one of the first lazarus houses to be built in England, in the early twelfth century. It was built a mile outside the city walls, isolated from houses but near to a main road so that the lepers could beg for alms by the roadside. The building that exists today served as a chapel for the regular services that the lepers were expected to participate in, with the lepers being accommodated in dormitories in the galleries. They were strictly forbidden to approach close to people, wore a distinctive cloak and hood, and a bell which they had to sound to warn people of their presence. There was no treatment for the condition, just food, shelter and spiritual care until the inevitable death overtook them. The Lazar House was closed in 1547 following the reformation, but remained intact, being swallowed up by the advancing houses of the growing city in more recent times.—*Tony Benson*