

The Lewes Town Hall Complex

A brief history



From the High Street, a 14th Century stairway and mutilated doorway lead down to a fine medieval barrel-vaulted undercroft, also approached internally by a spiral stair. This undercroft was part of a large freehold owned by Southover Priory. In 1554, just after the Dissolution, this freehold was the site of the Star Inn, hosted by Simon Michell. So, like the Star at Alfriston owned by Battle Abbey, the Lewes hostelry had probably sheltered pilgrims destined for the shrine of St Thomas at Canterbury or of St Richard at Chichester.



In 1555-7, under Queen Mary, seventeen pioneer Protestants from mid-Sussex were burned at the stake in the county town. Tradition affirms they were imprisoned in the Star undercroft (not in the castle, the official gaol), and taken up the stairway to execution. Indeed, a plaque, in “loving memory”, is on the façade nearby. A curious iron framework, allegedly a Tudor implement of torture, was once displayed in the undercroft, and in the Parlour hangs a mid-17th century painting of eleven Protestant heroes, vanquishing a Pope, a Jesuit and a devil.

Until 1890 the Star remained Lewes’ leading hostelry. John Taylor, the Water Poet, praised it:

At the terrestrial Star (a glist’ring Sign)

I lodg’d and found good Diet, and good Wine

Soon after, in 1664, the Archdeacon feasted there with the local clergy. Lord Ashburnham praised its cuisine in 1687. By 1732 it housed each winter a monthly supper and ball for the local gentry and their ladies; the Lewes coffee-house lay just across the High Street.

But from 1732 a Tory landowner, Thomas Sergison of Cuckfield, challenged the Whig Duke of Newcastle’s political control of Lewes Borough. He made the Star, and the coffee-house, his campaign head-quarters, and from a dismantled mansion of his, Slaugham Place, he brought the Renaissance staircase, dating from about 1600, and

equal in splendour to those at Blickling and Hatfield. Continents, Virtues and Greek Gods adorn the high newel posts. He also gave the inn a smart brick Georgian façade, and a well-proportioned assembly-room (the present Council Chamber). Meanwhile, the Lewes monthly ball broke in two, because the Whigs chose to dance in Newcastle House along the High Street.

But when Sergison and the Duke were reconciled, the gentry re-united to revel alternately at the Star and Newcastle House, 'till the latter closed down in 1780, and the Star became the only venue. During the next 25 years the monthly assemblies, and the balls held during the summer races, reached a climax of fashion and glitter. In October 1790, Mrs Fitzherbert came over from Brighton, and in January 1795 a glittering throng admired the robe of white satin adorning Lady Sheffield

In 1804 Jane Austen also used an October assembly at Lewes in Sussex to set the scene for her unfinished novel, *The Watsons*. She described the broad entrance-passage, the wide staircase, the gallery, and the assembly room "brilliant in lights". When the dancing warms up, an impulsive but generous action by Emma Watson catches the eye of Lord Osborne, aloof, single and thirty. So the plot rapidly thickens.



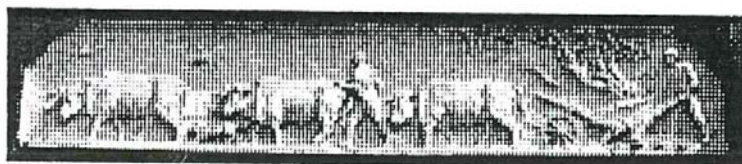
George, Prince of Wales, also came over from Brighton. During raceweek in 1784 he dined at the Star with a French Prince, the Duc de Chartres. In 1805, with fellow members of the Sussex Agricultural Society, he watched Mr Lester from Piccadilly demonstrate a newfangled threshing machine. About this time the landlord's wife, Sarah Dunn (1793-1817), was reckoned among "the first cooks of her day"



The Star had a more prosaic side. 'Till 1762 it serviced the passengers using James Batchelor's stage-coach which monopolised the London-Lewes-Brighton route. But then Messrs Brawne and Tubb launched a rival machine, calling at the White Hart. Eventually, the firms coalesced and used both hostelries. By the 1790s the farmers of mid-Sussex had deserted the ancient corn market cross in the High Street for the greater comfort of the Star's assembly-room, where, amid famine conditions in 1800, an anonymous letter from Uckfield was read, threatening them with an armed insurrection if they kept up the price of bread-corn.

During the early 19th century, the Star ceased to be a resort of fashion, but it remained a focus for local farmers. Indeed, a capacious new Corn Exchange was built adjacent to it in the 1840s, heated from two ornate fireplaces

Lewes received its Charter of Incorporation in June 1881 but lacked adequate municipal premises. In 1883, the ratepayers blocked a plan to buy the Star, yet by 1890 opinion had changed and the inn, with the Corn Exchange, were purchased for £4,100



By 1893, Samuel Denman of Brighton had converted it into a Town Hall. Sir Nicholas Pevsner disliked his new "very red" façade, which romps from Romanesque to Renaissance, from terracotta window boxes to keenly-cut keystones. The kitchens and the stable-yard were demolished to make way for a new Assembly Room, boldly Imperial in style, which presents a gabled façade to Fisher Street. Finally, in 1913 Council Offices were added in Arts-and-Crafts style, decorated with pretty plaster friezes of Sussex oxen drawing a plough and a harvest wagon

