

The Workshop, English's Passage

A Meeting Hall or Market Hall from the Late 1500s

Heritage Open Days
12-13 September 2015

This timber framed building has a similar construction to many on the north side of Cliffe High Street, and is therefore likely to be from a similar period, the late 1500s. The crown post structure of the roof is typical of this time and region. Although much of what you now see dates from 1990, as original timbers had not survived, there was enough remaining to show exactly how the various elements had been put together.

Alasdair and Robert Russell repaired and rebuilt the frame in 1990, with their father David as architect; David worked with the local firm John Schwerdt. They judged that from the numbering of the timbers, the bay at the far end would have been complete, with another whole bay beyond, making the building some 18 feet longer than now. If this was so, the building originally looked astonishingly like the Crawley Hall which is now in Singleton Open Air Museum.

The original use of The Workshop is not yet known, but one possibility is that it was some kind of market hall, perhaps for leather. Many farms tanned their own leather and needed a central place to sell it.

At first the main hall projected on its own from the back of No.11 Cliffe High Street, and there may have been a doorway between the two buildings on the first floor. The stairs were probably always in the same position as now. Now hidden above the stairs, there is a 17th century window in the back wall of No. 11, which would have overlooked an open courtyard. In the floor downstairs, in the front of the pillar drill, is a well built with stone steps, which perhaps served everyone in English's Passage. This and the window show that the rooms now fronting the Passage are later additions.

KNOWN DATES

- Late 1500s: construction of The Workshop, projecting from the back of No. 11 Cliffe High Street.
- c. 1789 – 1825: there was a Malt House in English's Passage, perhaps adjoining The Workshop.
- 1826: there is an advert for the sale of eight cottages, perhaps on the site of the Malt House. The Workshop was cut shorter.

- 1887: an undertaker, F. Knight, was based in English's Passage, perhaps at The Workshop.
- 20th century: one occupant, perhaps a sign writer, was undertaking lettering in gold leaf, 1919-1934. Other occupants within living memory have been a wig maker, a greengrocer, and a painter and decorator who cleaned his brushes on the bayposts until the paint was ¼ inch thick.
- In the 1980s Paul Fowler occupied The Workshop making stage scenery, including for Glyndebourne.

The Workshop was bought by Malcolm Rose in 1988 in a state of total neglect and dereliction. The timber frame was dismantled and taken away; it was repaired and re-assembled in a barn in Bolney, and meanwhile a new sub-structure was installed on site. The completed frame was dismantled again, and re-erected on the new foundations. The work was finished in the autumn of 1990. The Workshop was at last listed, Grade II, and English Heritage gave a grant towards the costs of reconstruction.

The flood of 2000 of course affected the building severely; the height the water rose to is clearly visible on the doors downstairs. Flooding has been a regular hazard in Cliffe; there are records of at least 19 floods between 1734 and the present day.

THE PRESENT DAY

Since 1990 we have been making harpsichords and clavichords which are in use by musicians worldwide. We also produce wire which is used to string the majority of keyboard instruments throughout Europe, the Americas and the Far East.

Our concert series, featuring well-established players in the early music field, was founded in 1991, and is now organised by Alison Bury and Dick Earle, both distinguished musicians who live in Lewes.

Many thanks to Marietta van Dyck for contributing much about the history of English's Passage.