



heritage open days



A view of the Maltings over the Bowling Green, around 1930. The cowl structures (similar to those on oast-houses used for drying hops) were then still in place above the kilns at the far end

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MALTINGS

The Maltings was built between 1854 and 1856, when printed particulars of sale of the Castle Brewery described it as newly built; two years later, it was sold to the brewer Edward Beard of Lewes. There was an earlier (18th century) malthouse in the town, near the bottom of St Mary's Lane (now Station Street - traces remain behind the shop front of No 16), which had formerly been used by Beards.

Ownership of this site can be traced back in the Lewes Borough Court Books to 1723, when it was granted out of the manorial waste¹ to Benjamin Court, who ran an ironmonger's shop at 181-183 High Street (later Newcastle House), the gardens of which stretched back right across this site (including the present-day car park) as far as Brack Mount.

In the mid-18th century, Lewes was a prosperous town and the area around and between the castle ruins and Brack Mount were fashionable pleasure grounds. These included the bowling green and the White Horse Inn (located on the High Street at the southern end of the castle's Gun Garden), while Benjamin Court's shop was turned into an assembly rooms and coffee house by the Duke of Newcastle. There was also a theatre, opened in 1774, perhaps² on the site where the Maltings would later be built, making use of the fall of the ground for raked seating. In *Georgian Lewes*, Colin Brent writes of a new theatre 'with entrances into Castle Ditch Lane. Its stout oak uprights supported a spacious gallery at the rear of the pit, and boxes along each side. It could seat 600 playgoers and Charles Carver came from Covent Garden to paint the scenery.' The first season included *Romeo and Juliet* and 'a recent smash-hit, *She Stoops to Conquer*'. However, the theatre closed in 1787, as the castle's precincts became less popular with fashionable society, and in 1808 the site was still described as a garden.

The site's first link with brewing is from an earlier date: in 1770, Robert Chester is reported as having owned the site at his death, together with a property described as 'one stable, now the Castle Inn'. The Castle Inn began trading about 1760, but was demolished about 1856 to make way for the house now known as Castle Lodge, near the Barbican.

In 1823 ownership of the site passed to the brewers Benjamin Cooper Langford and John Langford, who appear in an 1828 directory as owners of the Castle Brewery. After the death of Langford's nephew Frederick, his executor sold the Maltings to Beards in 1858. The nearby Star Lane Brewery in Castle Ditch Lane (now the Star Brewery studios and Hop Gallery) had been acquired by Beards in 1845, and they perhaps bought this malthouse because it was conveniently close to their brewery.

At the time of the sale to Beards, the site was described as follows: 'a piece of land lying within the Precincts of the Castle of Lewes. Late Langfords, containing

¹ Manorial waste was land such as commons and roadside waste, the soil of which was owned by the lord of the manor. In Lewes, residual elements of the town's defences, such as the east sides of Westgate and Keere Street, and the north side of Castle Ditch Lane, were all regarded as waste and granted out at various points from the 16th century onwards

² This is suggested by John Farrant in *A garden in a desert place and a palace among the ruins: Lewes Castle transformed, 1600-1850* (Sussex Archaeological Collections 134 (1996))

in length from East to West 218ft or thereabouts, and in breadth near the East end from the garden wall to the road towards the North 50ft or thereabouts, and running to a point at the West and paying yearly 12 pence, together with the Malthouse erected on part of the said piece of land... heretofore described as all that one piece of land lying in the Parish of St John under the Castle of Lewes, late Langford, before Mary Pockney's, before Thomas Pockney's, sometime since Coopers, before Chesters, and formerly part of the waste of the borough...'

The malthouse remained in the Beard family until 1947, although, as the diary extracts below indicate, it was commandeered during World War II as a food store. It was then sold to the builders' merchants H & C Davis & Co Ltd of Clapham Common. When George Beard died in 1958 it was agreed that Harveys would brew beer for Beards and the Star Lane brewery closed, although Beards kept their tied-house pubs until 1998, when they were sold to Greene King. The nearby Lewes Arms still has its Beards sign.

H & C Davis sold the building to the County Council in 1967, though records show that the Council had tried to buy the property from Beards as early as 1928, possibly as an overflow building for County Hall. The building was first used as a store for school furniture, and then to house the East Sussex County Record Office until 2013. Since 2014 it has been leased to Darcy Clothing by Lewes District Council. It is built of flint with brick banding, and is listed Grade II. Note the fox weather-vane above the entrance.

MALTHOUSES

A malthouse, or maltings, is a building where barley grain is converted into malt by soaking it in water, allowing it to sprout and then drying it to stop further growth. Malt is used in brewing beer, and also making whisky and some foods.

The upper floors of this building were significantly altered in the 20th century after it ceased to be a malthouse, and it is no longer obvious where all the stages took place, although the drying floors and kilns are relatively intact. The circular bases for the kiln chimneys shown in the photo above can still be seen today from the car park.

The building would have included:

- A storage area for the sacks of dry barley that had come into the building.
- A rectangular 'steep' or cistern, built of brick or stone, often lined with lead, in which the grain was soaked in water for several days, causing it to swell.

- Another vessel, called a ‘couch’, in which the drained grain was piled, where it began to generate heat and germinate.
- The growing floor, where the grain was then spread. It was turned at intervals to achieve even growth over the next fourteen days, and gradually moved towards the kilns.
- The small windows spaced along the sides of the building are typical of a malthouse, and were used to control the temperature of the grain by adjusting the ventilation. As the germination proceeded, the grain was spread more thinly on the floor. The process was halted before the stem burst the husk, by which time much of the starch in the grain had been converted to a sweet-tasting maltose, and the grain was left on the floor to dry. Maltsters varied in their manner of working, and needed skill to adapt to changes in local temperature and humidity.
- The barley was then moved into the kilns for between two and four days, depending on whether a light or dark malt was required, after which it was sieved to remove the shoots.
- A further storage area, where the grain was stored for a few months to develop its flavour before being used for brewing.

Traditional maltings like this one were mostly phased out during the 20th century in favour of more mechanised production. Many malthouses have (like this one) been converted to other uses: for example, Snape Maltings in Suffolk is now a well-known concert hall.

MRS DUDENEY’S DIARY

Alice Dudeney (1866-1945) was in the early decades of the 20th century a well-known novelist and short story writer using her married name Mrs Henry Dudeney. Her sometimes scandalous diaries of Lewes life, kept over the years 1916 to 1944, were bequeathed to the Sussex Archaeological Society and not published until 1998.

In 1940, Mrs Dudeney is living at Castle Precincts House (now Brack Mound House) opposite the Maltings (or the Malt House, as she generally calls it). Following the outbreak of war the previous September, among the things she writes about in her diary are the government’s strategies for food rationing...

18 January 1940: The government has evidently commandeered the Malt House. Tons of bacon going in and the young man told Winnie [Winnie Sinnock, Mrs Dudeney’s live-in servant] it is being done in case London is Bombed!

7 February 1940: meat rationing is to start on March 11th

6 July 1940: Great excitement: just when Winnie was giving the order to the grocer's young man, three of our Spitfires flew over, very low, chasing a German bomber. They all looked up and ran out (although we've been warned not to), Winnie, the grocer's boy, and the young men from the Malt House...

2 December 1940: The High Street is quite changed and most dispiriting. Half the shops to let and those that are not with very little for sale... I'm always hungry and as weak as a rat. Got yesterday by luck a bit of cheese... also the nice 'bacon' man at the Malt House said he had told my maid that he could let us have half a dozen eggs a week.

10 August 1942: [after bad air raids the previous night] Winnie said she nearly came to me... thought I might want 'company'! Got some herself by putting her head out of her bedroom window and talking to 'Bert' at the Malt House, he being on night watch there!

20 October 1943: Bad Air Raid in the night which frightens me to death... Like a fool, [Winnie] gets up, puts her head out of the window and talks to the men at the Malt House opposite. Pinyoun [owner of a baker's shop] from 10 Castle Banks comes up too... [Winnie] quite enjoys herself and is as tired as possible and as Black as Thunder next day.

20 January 1944: To Winnie I gave no tea [as a present at Christmas] and shall not in future... since I found she has been taking tea to the men at the Malt House. I hope she accepts this omission as a delicate reproof.

3 March 1944: Winnie... has had a chat with 'Smiler' (one of the four Georges at the Malt House)... Bert (surname Skinner) was seen by a policeman selling bacon in a local shop... Gander, the greengrocer from Fisher Street, mixed up in it. The whole town a buzz.

8 March 1944: After tea Mrs Adams came, full of what the town calls the 'bacon ramp'... [apparently] about 100 people are involved for receiving stolen property: three town councillors, one called Pate, a little grocer in Lansdowne Place... one Bank Manager and an official 'in a very high position'.

15 March 1944: Been all over the town trying to get a Sussex Daily News with a report of our 'Bacon' trial. Not one to be had. But Bert Skinner the thief has only been put on probation for a year, and Gander... fined £50. He... said he had no idea the bacon was stolen property or he wouldn't have touched it! Meanwhile, those who bought it, including the 'official in a high position', are not even

mentioned and get off scot free. The whole thing a crying scandal and the townspeople indignant.

16 March 1944: Met the Manager, Mr Mills, of the Bacon Shop (Malt House)... he said he was amazed at the leniency of the sentences and scandalised at no mention being made of the people who bought the bacon, hundreds of pounds worth going on for months. Said it should have been tried by the Judge (the Assizes now on) and not by local magistrates. He, Mills, doesn't know, as I do, the 'graft' that goes on in this town, riddled as it is by Freemasonry.

22 November 1944: Frightful bang at 5.30am. Doors and windows shook. Winnie has been told by the bacon men at the Malt House that it was a V2 bomb. Hit Newhaven Harbour, has done great damage there. Here, windows in the High Street broken, especially down Cliffe...

Early in January 1945, Mrs Dudeney had a stroke, and the diary ends. She was cared for at home by Winnie until she died on 21 November. The war in Europe ended in May, and Japan surrendered on 14 August.

Extracted from A Lewes Diary 1916-1944 by Mrs Henry Dudeney, edited by Diana Crook (2nd edition, Dale House Press, 2012), reproduced by kind permission of the Sussex Archaeological Society.

Many thanks to Christopher Whittick and the East Sussex Records Office. See also Maltings in England (English Heritage, 2004).