

Heritage Open Days 2017: Fitzroy House

History

Fitzroy House was built in 1862 at the corner of the former grounds of The Friars, a large mansion pulled down in 1846. It was commissioned by Hannah Fitzroy (nee Rothschild) as a Memorial Library in honour of her deceased husband Sir Henry Fitzroy, MP for Lewes from 1837-60. Hannah was the second daughter of Nathan Rothschild, of the wealthy banking family.

Hannah chose Sir George Gilbert Scott to design what has been described as one of the best small Gothic buildings in the country. Scott was chosen by Queen Victoria to design the Albert Memorial in London in memory of her own husband, who died in 1861. Scott's most famous 'Victorian Gothic' building is probably the Midland Hotel at St Pancras, London (1865), but among many others he designed the principal buildings at Brighton College (completed 1866).

In 1897 Fitzroy Memorial Library was adopted as the town's first public library, and remained so until 1956, when the town library moved to Albany Street (now the MacKellar Schwerdt offices). The Fitzroy is said to have been frequented by Virginia Woolf, who lived at Monk's House in Rodmell from 1919 until her death in 1941.

In the 1950s it became offices for local estate agents and surveyors Clifford Dann. Victorian Gothic buildings were by then very out of fashion, and the building was due to be demolished - in 1970 much of the roof was destroyed, leaving the interior open to the elements, just before it was listed Grade II. The building was then derelict for several years, and the original clock was stolen from the clock tower during this period.

The mood changed in 1976 after Fitzroy House was opened to the public as the venue for an exhibition on building conservation, and a group was formed to acquire and restore the building for public use. But the County Council (which by now owned the building) was unwilling to take this on, and instead sold it to Jim Franks and family, who restored it over the next two years, mainly by their own labour with the help of friends and volunteers. It would be their family home for the next 40 years.

In 2016 it was bought by Alison Grant, who says: 'I want to create an exciting space for the arts to be displayed, performed, created and discussed. This is in the early stages at the moment, but I hope to bring the building back into public life while retaining and honouring its architecture and ambience.'

The building

The building is described in the East Sussex volume of the Pevsner 'Buildings of England' guide as follows:

Red brick with some decorative black brick and stone and polished marble dressings. Steep roof with prominent chimney stack and clock turret and a tall

fleche. Symmetrical facade to High Street with grand gabled centrepiece, a bracketed balcony forming an entrance porch. Two tiers of windows, paired lancets below, circular above, set within a Gothic arcade of polychrome arches on pilasters with carved capitals.

Inside, galleried reading room lit by an octagonal lantern [now lost]. Main staircase with Gothic balustrade.

Around Fitzroy House

Until the closure of the railway line to Uckfield in 1969, a railway viaduct ran across the high street just east of the crossroads. Its former path is marked by slightly darker bands of brickwork across the pedestrianised area of the new shopping precinct which was developed in the late 1980s.

Looking along Friars Walk, Lewes's first railway station - an elegant building of 1846 with grand classical columns - stood where the Premier Inn is now. Although closed in 1857 when the first of two replacement stations was built on the current Lewes station site, the 1846 booking hall was not demolished until the 1960s. A new Magistrates Court built on the site (1986) was in turn closed and then demolished in 2015 to be replaced by the Premier Inn.

See also:

Jim Franks' book: Building and Saving Fitzroy Library, Lewes. Pomegranate Press, 2012

