

SOUTHOVER GRANGE

History, development and owners

The house you are now in was built in 1572, lived in by the same family for 300 years and little altered until by a new owner in 1872 -74.

The builder was William Newton. He was from an 'old', prosperous, Cheshire family; why he and his brother came to Lewes is not known but soon after he became Steward to Thomas Sackville, Lord of the Manor of Southover, a post he held throughout his life, and in this role his son (also William: one of the seven owners of the house with this first name) succeeded him after his death in 1590. As well as the Grange he owned, and in some cases built, various properties in Sussex and Surrey.

The great Cluniac Priory of Lewes (today the ruins are some 200 metres due South of here) was destroyed by Henry VIII 1537 – 1539 and in 1540 the ruins and grounds were given to Thomas Sackville who built, or rebuilt, a house in and from the ruins called Lord's Place. When it burned down in 1568 Sackville gave to Newton the land where now the Grange stands and some, at least, of the Caen stone from which Newton built Southover Grange seems to have come from those ruins and originally from the Priory which soon became a general quarry as stones are to be found throughout Lewes. The roof was originally all of Horsham slabs and much still is.

There *may* have been a previous house on the site where lived Agnes Morley who founded Lewes Grammar School in 1512. The school was in the SE corner of the present grounds (where the annual Skittles Tournament now takes place) and remained there until moving to its present site on St Anne's Hill in 1714. The then William Newton bought this site in 1808; other areas to the South, between the Winterbourne Stream and Eastport Lane were added over the preceding centuries.

The original grounds included two acres of 'meadow' to the West – across the road from where you came in - and this remained part of the estate, with a carriage drive lined with an avenue of trees, until 1951 when sold to ESCC for the two schools (and their car park) which now occupy the site.

The plaque outside the house on the NW corner records the fact that John Evelyn (nearly, but not quite, as famous diarist as his contemporary, Samuel Pepys) lived with his Grandmother Newton while attending the Grammar School at the other end of the grounds, from 1630 to 1637 when he went to Oxford. He had come to the Cliffe, Lewes, in 1625 – aged five – to live with his paternal grandfather (possibly to keep away from the plague) and after he died and his grandmother re-married a Newton came to the Grange

The William Newton who lived here from 1796 to 1809 was a Lt. Colonel of Dragoons and a close friend of the Colonel of the regiment: the Prince of Wales, later the Prince Regent and in turn King George IV who lived partly in Brighton. He visited Col. Newton several times, sometimes staying two or three nights, accompanied by Mrs Fitzherbert and others. At the bottom of Keere Street is a notice saying that he was said to have driven a coach and four down the hill. It is very likely that he did so as the direct route then from Brighton would have been down Lewes High Street and down Keere 'Hill'.

After the death of the last 'relict' of the Newtons in 1860 the property passed through various owners until bought by a member of a Scottish shipbuilding family, William Laird Macgregor, in 1871. It was he who engaged a London architect to carry out the alterations which make the house as it is today. The two rooms now the Evelyn and Ainsworth rooms were enlarged, the main (oak) staircase installed in a new extension, new chimneys added and the range on the North side extended and now include the offices of the Registrar, the refreshment kiosk and the showrooms of the Sussex Guild.

These changes are apparent from a comparison of the two floor plans.

Macgregor apparently took an instant dislike to the finished product and never lived in the Grange. So more owners followed, some becoming involved in various ways in the life of both Lewes and Southover: as Councillor or Mayor; as officers in the militia or Territorials; as instigator or benefactor of local institutions, churches or charities.

Perhaps the most colourful of later owners was Violet Gordon-Woodhouse (1901- 1907) who was an accomplished harpsichordist and lived in a ménage *a cinq*. Her musical evenings and formal recitals attracted well-known performers.

During World War II the house was requisitioned by the War Office, Canadian troops were billeted there and much damage was done to the interior. After the war Lewes Borough Council at first leased and eventually bought the house and grounds. Initially there were plans to build a public swimming pool in the gardens, a health centre and clinic, with car parking, and a café! After many cramped years in the North wing the ESCC Register Office moved into the main house last year..

The interior

In 2017 the whole of the ground floor was completely refurbished including new chandeliers, carpets, and wall cupboards in the principal rooms as well as much renewal of the services.

The main hall

The three doors leading out of the hall have marquetry panels which are almost certainly Italian or French, date from the 16th century and were probably in Lord's Place and therefore rescued from the fire in 1568.

The fireplace is original and is 50+ years older than the house so *may* have come from Agnes Morley's house. The marble surround and the grate are later – probably 19th century.

The floor and the ceiling are of polished oak and the walls are also panelled in oak.

The Newton Room

The stone fireplace is original as shown by the date and the initials WN (the n backwards).

But the wooden pillars and mantel are much later – but date unknown: possibly as late as the panels reading 'Ye Old Welsh Parliament House Dolgelly' which were acquired by an early 20th century owner and installed there.

Under the paint the wall panelling is oak

The ceiling is this room and the other two ground floor rooms are of plaster in an Elizabethan style but not from that time. All the windows in these rooms have stone mullions.

The Evelyn Room

Formerly the library. The fireplace though smaller than that in the Main Hall is very similar and may therefore be of the same possible origin. There is now a window immediately above the fireplace – presumably put in as part of the 1872 – 1874 major alterations

The Ainsworth Room

Formerly the Drawing Room and much enlarged in 1872 – 1874.

Now the main room for wedding ceremonies

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The Gardens

The gardens have 'evolved' over time but the overall layout as seen now seems to have occurred during the 19th century, William Macgregor having played a major role.

The garden is bisected by the Winterbourne stream (as the name suggests unlikely to flow in Summer even when it is not as dry as in 2018), The 'canalisation' of the stream was carried out some years ago as part of the inevitable 'municipalisation' of the garden.

Throughout the garden there are benches and other momentos of local people including a splendid row of espaliered trees along the North wall of the charming knot garden.

From the SE corner of the terrace a stone wall (also containing many erstwhile Priory stones) runs East for about 40 metres before turning SE for a few feet, then S to the edge of the Winterbourne. From the terrace an arched gateway leads through to the beds and lawns beyond. To the right of this gateway (on the S side) is a disused well with the date 1789 and the initials of the then Wm. Newton and his wife Anne on the leaden pump head. Probably put here to commemorate their wedding.

Where the wall turns SE are two 'windows' consisting of former Priory carved stones built into the wall by yet another 'W N' in 1729.

Above the gateway (on the W side) is a carved stone boss of a face – again almost certainly from the Priory.

On the W side of the final section – hiding behind a garden seat – is a gravestone which somehow got here after 1865 and was that of a Newton daughter who died in 1636 and on the other (E) side of the same section of wall are two more gravestones which have apparently been there since 1729. All three are scarcely legible.

Back on the main lawn is a Mulberry tree (in late July 2018 with a fine crop of mulberries) at least 300 years old. King James I urged the planting of these trees, hoping to establish a silk producing industry in England – silk worms eat mulberry leaves.

Until a few years ago – when it was taken down diseased - there was also what was probably the oldest and largest North American Tulip tree in England dating from around 1670. Among the many fine 'specimen' trees is a magnificent copper beech and, on the terrace, a Foxglove tree.

There are in the garden three modern sculptures:

- on the terrace 'Janus' by the Sussex sculptor John Skelton, given by local residents (now Sir) Richard and Alison Jolly in 1997
- against the W – E wall 'The Madrigal Comes to England' by Austin Bennett. Nicholas Yonge, was born in Lewes in 1560 and published in 1588, in English, a book of Italian madrigals which proved hugely popular. He was also a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral. The chamber music society in Lewes is named after him and in 2000 it commissioned this sculpture.
- on the main lawn is 'Lewes Group' by Jon Edgar 2010