



Heritage Open Days

Sussex House, 212 High Street, Lewes

Sussex House, 212 High Street, is a substantial Georgian five-bay house of three storeys and a basement, built in grey headers with red brick dressing. It has a wooden moulded bracketed cornice, stuccoed rusticated quoins, and a flat-headed porch supported on Doric columns. In other words, it is a house designed to appeal the 'gentlemen', professional men and 'eminent' tradesmen of good taste in the mid-eighteenth century. Daniel Defoe thought early Georgian Lewes a 'fine' town 'well built, agreeably situated'.

Sussex House together with what are now 211 and 210 on the up-hill side, probably formed part of a single medieval freehold. The first owner about whom there are written records was Ambrose Compert, one of a clutch of affluent 'gentlemen' active in what we would now call local government. He owned the whole property from 1598 to 1610. However, by 1624 it was being taxed as three separate properties with 212 being owned by Thomas Trayton, Ambrose Compert's brother-in-law. Thomas Trayton had a lucrative career serving the Sackville family and also owned the next door house, Trinity House, now the offices of Adams & Remers.

No record has been found of who rebuilt the house in the mid-eighteenth century but it was quite possibly Thomas Sergison (1701–67), who was the owner from 1738. He owned Cuckfield Park, was a prominent local Tory, and eventually a supporter of the Duke of Newcastle. Sergison began in the early 1730s as a deadly Tory foe of the Whig Duke, but they made a truce in the mid 1740s, probably to avoid further expense. Sergison rebuilt the Star Inn (now the Town Hall) to better entertain local Tories, where he inserted a fine early-seventeenth century carved staircase from his disused mansion at Slaugham. He also built houses in Lansdown Place to accommodate Tory tenants. When he died in 1767 he owned 51 houses in Lewes.

Edward Medley, the owner of Coneyborough Park near Barcombe and a political supporter of Thomas Sergison is recorded as the occupier in 1746–8, and his wife as the occupier again in 1760. The gentlemen of mid-Sussex and their wives patronized Lewes for the winter 'season' of assemblies, concerts and plays, and to avoid the sodden countryside. John Hoper, an attorney and another prominent Tory owned the house between 1796 and 1812.

The whist-loving Archdeacon Raines, who was tenant 1788-9, was one of the "Rookery" of absentee clergy who rode out each Sunday in their black habits to their neglected rural parishes – in his case Firle and Beddingham. He sanctified a dinner-party on Ash Wednesday by adding pancakes to the menu.

The 1881 census shows that the house was occupied by a family called Nicholson with eight family members (two parents and six children) and four servants. The 1891 Census shows Janet Lyell as the head of a household comprising her son, a brewer, and her sister as well as a number of boarders and servants. In the 1901 census, the house was occupied by a family called Cobbett with four family members and two servants. At this time the house is referred to as Hansler House. In 1904 an advert in the Sussex Agricultural Express provided details of furniture and effects to be sold on behalf of Martin Cobbett Esq., referring to items from the reception rooms and bedrooms.

In 1907 the house was occupied by a Mrs Mead. In March 1909 an exhibition of Modern Art was held in the house under the patronage of the Mayor and Mayoress, Viscount and Lady Gage, the Earl and Countess of Chichester, and Lord Monk Bretton. From at least 1924 until the early 1950s it was Braughton Ladies school. There is a prospectus from the 1930s in The Keep which describes it as a home school for girls, taking boarders and day pupils, giving special attention to backward and delicate children. There was also a preparatory class for boys. Miss M E Way seems to have been the headmistress throughout its existence.

An advert for the sale of the house by auction appeared in the Sussex Agricultural Express in April 1954. The sales particulars describe it as “Highly suitable for scholastic purposes (its former use) or professional offices, showrooms, or conversion into flats (subject to planning consent).” A planning application for conversion into offices was made later in the year.

The house was bought by the Sussex Rural Community Council (SRCC) in 1956 with a donation of approximately £8000 from a benefactor who had been a Trustee in the early days of the charity. It is thought that the SRCC moved there in 1958, and the name of the house was changed to Sussex House. SRCC, now generally known as Action in Rural Sussex (AirS), remained in the house until the end of February 2018. In April 2016 planning permission had been given for the conversion of the house back to residential.

Over more than 250 years since the house was rebuilt there have been many alterations. The back staircase was probably removed by the school. Sussex Rural Community Council carried out structural repairs and conservation work as well as introducing air conditioning and a lift. The floor of the basement was badly damaged in the flood of 2000 and was lowered throughout. Inevitably, changes to make a building suitable for one purpose are changed again to adapt it for a new purpose.

The conversion of the house back into a single family home has now been completed. The overall aim in the conversion has been to create a thoroughly up-to-date home whilst respecting the mid-eighteenth century character of the building.

These notes are based on *Pre-Georgian Lewes* and *Georgian Lewes* by Colin Brent; *Lewes House Histories: Part One – Lewes High Street* by Colin Brent (2014) which can be accessed via the Sussex Archaeological Society library catalogue; *Heritage Statement: Sussex House, 212 High Street, Lewes* by Murphy Associates (2018); and the East Sussex Record Office catalogue description *Prospectus for Braughton School, 212 High Street, Lewes*. Thanks are also owed to Colin Brent, and to both Jeremy Leggett, the former Chief Executive, and Simon Kiley of Sussex Rural Community Council, for additional information.

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