



## **The Croft, the Every family and the Phoenix Ironworks in Lewes**

The Croft was built in 1898 for John Henry Every (1857-1941), the third in a line of 'John Everys' associated with the iron industry in Lewes.

### **Early years**

The first John Every (1796-1887) was born in Hampshire, where he served an apprenticeship in an iron foundry. In 1818 he married Ann Davies, and they had two children, one of whom was John William Every (b 1819). About 1830, John senior moved to Lewes with his young family to work at Ebenezer Morris's foundry in Foundry Street, Cliffe.

In 1835 he started his own business at what he named the 'Phoenix Foundry' in North Street. An advertisement in the *Sussex Advertiser* shows that typical products were ornamental railings, domestic stoves, agricultural equipment and builder's items. In 1839 the foundry moved to the High Street, on a site behind where the Superdrug store is now.

In 1844 this foundry was destroyed by a serious fire. Although the pattern store (the models from which the different products were cast) was saved, the after-effects were such that John senior went bankrupt in 1848. However, when the firm's assets were advertised for sale by auction, they were bought by his son John W Every, who had been working with his father since 1835. The business then prospered again, and by 1856 the workforce had risen to 30 men.

JWE married in 1844 and in 1857 a son, John Henry Every, was born.

### **The Phoenix Works**

In 1861 the business moved to a large new foundry and iron works on the wharf near North Street. Eventually this would extend south from the river as far as what is now Phoenix Place (on the site of the proposed North Street Quarter development).

JWE continued to build up the business, opening a warehouse in Brighton and expanding the works in the 1870s and 80s. His son John H Every joined his father

and grandfather in the business in 1872. John senior died in 1887 – his gravestone can be seen in the churchyard of St John sub Castro.

### **John H Every's involvement**

With JHE's involvement the business continued to thrive. In 1896 the Phoenix Institute was opened, a recreational club for foundry workers which included a hall seating 200. In 1900 the firm began to produce constructional steel for the first time. It was in this context that JHE commissioned this ambitious house in 1898 from the architect Samuel Denman of Brighton. (Denman's other notable achievement in Lewes is the conversion of the old Star Hotel into the Town Hall in 1893.)

When JWE died in 1900, JHE took over the business and continued its expansion into the 1930s. Apart from the iron and steel business, he was a prominent Lewesian. He served on the borough council from 1901 to 1934. He was mayor from 1903-05, and made a freeman of the borough in 1926. A non-conformist Unitarian and a pacifist, he paid for the remodelling of Westgate Chapel in 1912 and the restoration of Bull House in 1922. Until later house-building, The Croft's garden extended as far as Rotten Row, and was often opened to the public for fetes and similar events.

When he died in 1941, JHE left his impressive collection of Wealden fire-backs and other ironwork to the Sussex Archaeology Society, and some of them are on display at Anne of Cleves House.

### **World War II and after**

On his death, the business passed to his son John Morris Every (1886-1964) who had for some time helped to manage it. As well as its more usual products, the company made parts for mines during the war, and for prefab housing afterwards. JME went to Oxford and was musically gifted; he was perhaps less suited to managing a foundry than his father, but the industrial climate was also much less favourable by his time. In 1948 there was another serious fire, from which the business never recovered. It was bought out of liquidation in 1951 and – renamed the East Sussex Engineering Co Ltd – prospered again for a time. But by the 1970s most of the assets had been sold off and most of the employees had lost their jobs, although the non-ferrous metal side continued on a small scale until 1986.

Many of the iron products manufactured by the company over the years can still be seen today, including lamp posts in several Sussex towns, Brighton and Eastbourne piers, other decorative ironwork in Brighton and Hove, and at Lewes and other railway stations. Railings, manhole covers, fire grates, window-frames and boot-scrapers can also still be identified.

After World War II, The Croft was taken over by East Sussex County Council's Public Health Department, and it was used as council legal offices until 2002. It was then sold to Andrew and Heather Davies, who began the lengthy process of converting it back into a private home. There are still signs of council occupancy:

marks where fluorescent lights hung from ceilings, and a box with 20 phone lines connected to the main council building. There is now a small indoor swimming pool where the boiler-room once stood, but the innovative underfloor heating system installed by JHE still works. The house was bought by its current occupants in 2017.

### **An architectural heritage**

In 2006 The Croft was listed Grade II by English Heritage (now Historic England). It noted the special architectural interest of the exterior, with its brick and tile-hanging, timber-framed gables and elaborate two-storey wooden verandah; and also the 'unusually complete interior of the period', including elaborate stained glass, fireplaces, plastered ceilings and door fingerboards.

The adjacent single-storey 'motor house' (built in 1905) was listed at the same time as the house. JHE was one of the first people in Lewes to own a car. He and his wife were also keen cyclists, and the building had a bay for bicycles. There are signs of earlier modes of transport in the curbing stones at the sides of the main entrance and the nearby stone mounting-block (which is also listed).

This early colour photograph shows John H Every in the garden of The Croft in the 1920s (East Sussex Records Office)



For a detailed history of the Phoenix Ironworks see *Sussex Industrial History* no 45 (2015)