

Exploring LEWES TOWN HALL:

With medieval cellars dating to the early 14th century, Lewes Town Hall was originally the Star Inn, owned by the Prior of Lewes and providing accommodation to merchants and travellers on the road between Southampton and Canterbury. In 1890 it was bought by Lewes Borough Council to provide a civic centre for the mayor and council and for major town events, for which the Assembly Room was added between 1890 and 1893 when the building reopened as Lewes Town Hall. It is still the home of the Town Council and Mayor of Lewes today.

Front entrance foyer and staircase

Visitors entering the Town Hall from the High Street are immediately drawn to the Renaissance staircase, brought from Slaugham Place in the 1730s. To its right is the portrait of George Holman, 7 times Mayor of Lewes and a major benefactor of the town. Just beyond him on the far wall is a portrait of the radical philosopher Thomas Paine. Other items of interest include the Golden Jubilee bust of Queen Victoria (1887) and print of the celebratory reception held at Buckingham Palace attended by all the Mayors and Provosts of Great Britain. Other portraits include the Duke and Duchess of Newcastle. The Duke was political master of the Borough in the early 18th Century. On either side of the front doors are portraits of Nehemiah Wimble and his wife who entertained William IV and Queen Adelaide on their visit to Lewes in 1830. Note also the plaques to the Royal Sussex Regiment in which several hundred Lewes men served and to the Lewes men who died in the Boer War.

The room to the left is the Yarrow Room, named after another past Mayor of Lewes, which contains several historic prints and landscape paintings.

As you climb the Renaissance staircase look at the upright newel posts which are carved on all 4 sides with images of classical gods, the senses, the virtues, the hu-



At the top of the stairs stop and look at the official colour print of Queen Victoria in her coronation robes by George Baxter (1838) and the stained glass panels depicting William de Warenne who built Lewes Castle and Lewes Priory after the Norman Conquest and Simon de Montfort, victor of the Battle of Lewes in 1264. Go straight ahead.

Baxter Corridor

So named after the prints by George Baxter who invented colour lithography. Invited by Queen Victoria to depict her Coronation, he was given a special position to view the ceremony in Westminster Abbey. The subjects of the prints along the walls of the corridor include the Cliffe Avalanche in 1836, after which the Snowdrop in South Street is named, various studies of plants, faces, topographical and military scenes and an anatomical dissection of the human head. At the far end are portraits of George Baxter (1804-1867) and his parents. Straight ahead is the Assembly Room for which this corridor was designed as a grand entrance when the Star Inn was remodelled as the Town Hall between 1890-93, enabling the Mayor to receive guests ceremonially on their way into the Assembly Hall.

Assembly Room

Constructed in 1893, this is the grandest room in the Town Hall. It was built to provide a proper venue for major County and Borough events, when the room comes alive as in the photograph overleaf, which shows the First World War Centenary Music Hall held in the Town Hall in 2017. Its sprung floor was designed for balls and dances. It is used today for exhibitions, fairs, concerts and musical shows, and for blood donors as well as for civic events such as Mayormaking. The stage, under the proscenium arch was designed to accommodate a small orchestra. The right hand wall is dominated by the enormous painting of the visit of King William IV and Queen Adelaide to Lewes on 22nd October 1830 by John Archer RA, who did individual portraits of over 80 of the townspeople present, including members of the Town Band. It was the first royal visit to the borough in almost 300 years and was an occasion of much local celebration.

The mayoral portrait on the same wall is of Wynne Edwin Baxter, first Mayor of the Borough 1881-2, following the grant of a royal charter of incorporation by Queen Victoria. It is by virtue of that charter that Mayors are entitled to wear red robes and a mayoral chain, be preceded by a mace topped by a royal crown and be called "*the worshipful, the Mayor of Lewes*". Baxter left Lewes in 1887 when he became coroner for East London where he presided over the Jack-the-Ripper inquests.

On the left hand wall as you enter the Assembly Room are



two paintings by the Belgian painter Nicaise de Keyser depicting Syrian chiefs dated 1843 and 1846. From the royal collection of King Wilhelm II of Belgium, they were acquired by Montague S Blaker, Town Clerk of Lewes 1865-1915, who presented them to the Borough council in 1896. Note how the eyes of the Arab chiefs seem to follow you and the hands poised ready above their daggers. The double doors by the portrait of the Mayor lead into the Corn Exchange.

Corn Exchange

Less highly decorated, the Corn Exchange was built in the 1840s in the yard of the Star Inn, using an industrial cast iron frame and wooden and glass panels as the local market for trading grain. It was incorporated into the Town Hall in the early 1890s. It is used for fairs, produce shows, weekly markets, real ale festivals and on major events as a supplement to the Assembly Room. Note the paintings of the bonfire celebrations and of members of the Abergavenny (Nevill) family who were the manorial lords of the borough. The panels describing the evolution of Parliamentary democracy came from an exhibition at the British Library. The *democracy to come* banner came from the 750th Anniversary of Parliament exhibition in Westminster Hall in 2015. Above the bar is the original sign of the White Lion in Westgate Street, where a copy now hangs.

Council Chamber

Before entering the Council Chamber pause to look at the panels listing the Constables and Headboroughs of Lewes from 1544 to 1881 when the town received its royal charter. Also look at the dramatic mid-19th century painting of the Battle of Lewes, another gift by George Holman.

The Council Chamber was originally the Assembly Room of the Star Inn, used for balls and select social gatherings. Plaques built into the walls at either end commemorate the opening of the Town Hall in 1893 and Mayors of Lewes to 1958. The silver spades were used in planting a tree on the Coronation of Edward VII and by Princess Elizabeth in Southover Grange Gardens in 1951. Later Mayors and Freemen of the Borough are listed on wooden boards on the wall opposite the windows. Below the plaques are truncheons dating from 1830 when arson and agricultural disturbances led to nightly patrols of the Borough.

The much larger staves belong to the 2 Headboroughs whose names are on metal plaques dating from the late 17th Century. The glass cabinet contains sets of weights and measures and other Borough memorabilia. See also the photograph of the last Town Crier of the Borough and, opposite, his bell and staff of office. The Mayoral Chair was adapted from a much earlier piece of furniture in 1881. The plaster busts are of Nelson and Wellington. The signed photographs of the Queen and Prince Philip were given following the Royal Visit to the Town Hall in 1962.

Mayor's parlour

Used by the Mayor during his term of office, on its walls hang photographs of his immediate predecessors. The current mayor's picture is over the fireplace. Opposite is the late 17th Century painting of the Protestant Reformers which formerly hung in the Star Inn. Note the sheen on the Geneva caps of the 3 unnamed figures on the right identifying them as Archbishop Cranmer and Bishops Latimer and Ridley, burnt under Queen Mary. The furniture, including the glass cabinet was given by Alderman J H Every and the three candelabra by W E Baxter Ltd to mark their 150th Anniversary.

The oldest items of civic plate are the 15th Century bronze borough seals and the silver-gilt loving cup with steeple cap given by Thomas Blunt in 1611. Note the renaissance sea monsters. The large mace dates from 1882, the silver mace from 1851. Other items include the 1830 silver commemoration cup, the Senior Constable's 19th Century chain of office and regimental plate from the Royal Sussex Regiment and Sussex Yeomanry who were granted the Freedom of the County Town.