



A brief history of Trinity House

Trinity House in Lewes has a long, rich history with law being practised behind its impressive walls since at least 1770.

Trinity House - beginnings

Trinity House was originally the site of the Church of the Holy Trinity which was owned by the Priory of Lewes, but after being ruined by storms and gales, was given up by the Priory in the 14th Century and the land sold. The house was thereafter known as "Church House" for some time.

Trinity House - law and civil war

Renamed Trinity House, the building was in the occupation of the Trayton Family from c.1570 to the mid 17th Century. Walter Budgen, an historian of the period, describes the Traytons as "a well known family of Lewes lawyers". During the Civil War, Thomas Trayton and his son Ambrose were Officers in the Parliamentary Forces of Sussex. Ambrose was also a major dealer in malt.

In 1642 the House of Commons authorised Captain Ambrose Trayton to raise a force of 200 men for the defence of Lewes. He lived in Trinity House which, despite "Georgianisation", is the same property we occupy today. The gable room in the west bay still contains the Armoury with racks for the pikes, hooks for the equipment and rows of ceiling rails for the uniforms which Trayton purchased for his men and preferred to keep safely in his own house.

There is, at the back of the building, a curious narrow single-storey building. Strongly built of flint with ashlar quoins and too small to be habitable it was presumably built by Ambrose Trayton as the town magazine to house his powder and shot. Today, this serves us just as well as our strongroom for storage of clients wills and deeds. Trinity House remained the mustering point for the Lewes Volunteers until at least 1882 and this explains why the Public House opposite the Coach Gates is named "The Volunteer".

Captain Ambrose Trayton died in 1679 aged 86, leaving a grandson Ambrose (1633-1686) who purchased the Manor of Southover. On his death it passed to his brother Nathaniel, and then to Nathaniel's son Edward, the then owner of the Lewes Priory ruins.

Trinity House continued in the ownership of the Trayton family until sold by John Trayton Fuller to David Bayford, Doctor of Law, around 1770. John Hoper Senior was Articled in 1774 for six years; he was an Attorney in his own right by 1780, and living and practising in this house in 1790 when, presumably, he purchased it. It was not until 1947 that the Hoper family sold the house to Lt.Col. Charles Harold Noel Adams, the then Senior Partner of the firm.

During the whole of this period the house has been the focus of a Practice in Law, the occupiers being variously known as Attorneys, Proctors, then once again Attorneys, Notaries and, more recently, Solicitors. Until 1914 it was also the family home of the senior practising lawyer of the firm. The whole of what is now Lewes Bus Station and a substantial part of what is now the adjoining corner shop, was included in the curtilage.

The building today

Exterior

The front elevation is, at first glance, of red brick but is a remodelling of red mathematical tiles over the timber framework of the earlier building. The early 19th century extension at the East end of the building displays the then fashionable yellow mathematical gault tiles.

Passers-by often ask about the flowering tree at the front of the building. This is a Pomegranate tree. The pomegranate was the badge of the local Pelham family.

The dormer windows were also replaced in the 18th century with casement frames.

During WWII, a pill box, disguised as a part of Trinity House, was located on the pavement in front of the building, ready to open fire on Cliffe Bridge in the event of German invasion.

The 18th century was an age of prosperity and Lewes was growing in popularity owing to its theatre, legal and religious centres, and growing number of coaching houses, so owners were keen to show their wealth and status by upgrading and remodelling their properties.

Entrance hall

The elegant Reception hallway with its attractive Regency staircase dates from the early 19th century with, a then fashionable, stone floor. The pillars are modern buttresses installed to support the (comparatively) low ceiling. Generally, the lower the ceiling, the older the room.

Board room

This room has low ceilings and windows, typical of the time. The fireplace dates from c1800-1820 (with possible restoration). Note the Victorian bookshelves with the central cupboard disguising a door into the adjacent room.

This grand room would have been used to meet clients, with the legal clerks busy at work behind the scenes in the room to the rear (see Interview Room).

Meeting room

This room was remodelled in the 18th and 19th century. The fireplace surround is characteristic of many in Lewes dating from early 19th century - a square with round feature under each end under the mantel shelf. The fireplace itself is Victorian - probably produced by one of the local Lewes iron industries. This room would initially have functioned as a downstairs drawing room for the family.

Until the 1880s, Trinity House was the HQ of the Lewes militia and this room - which led to the dining room - would then have been re-designed to entertain officers and VIP guests including The Earl of Chichester.

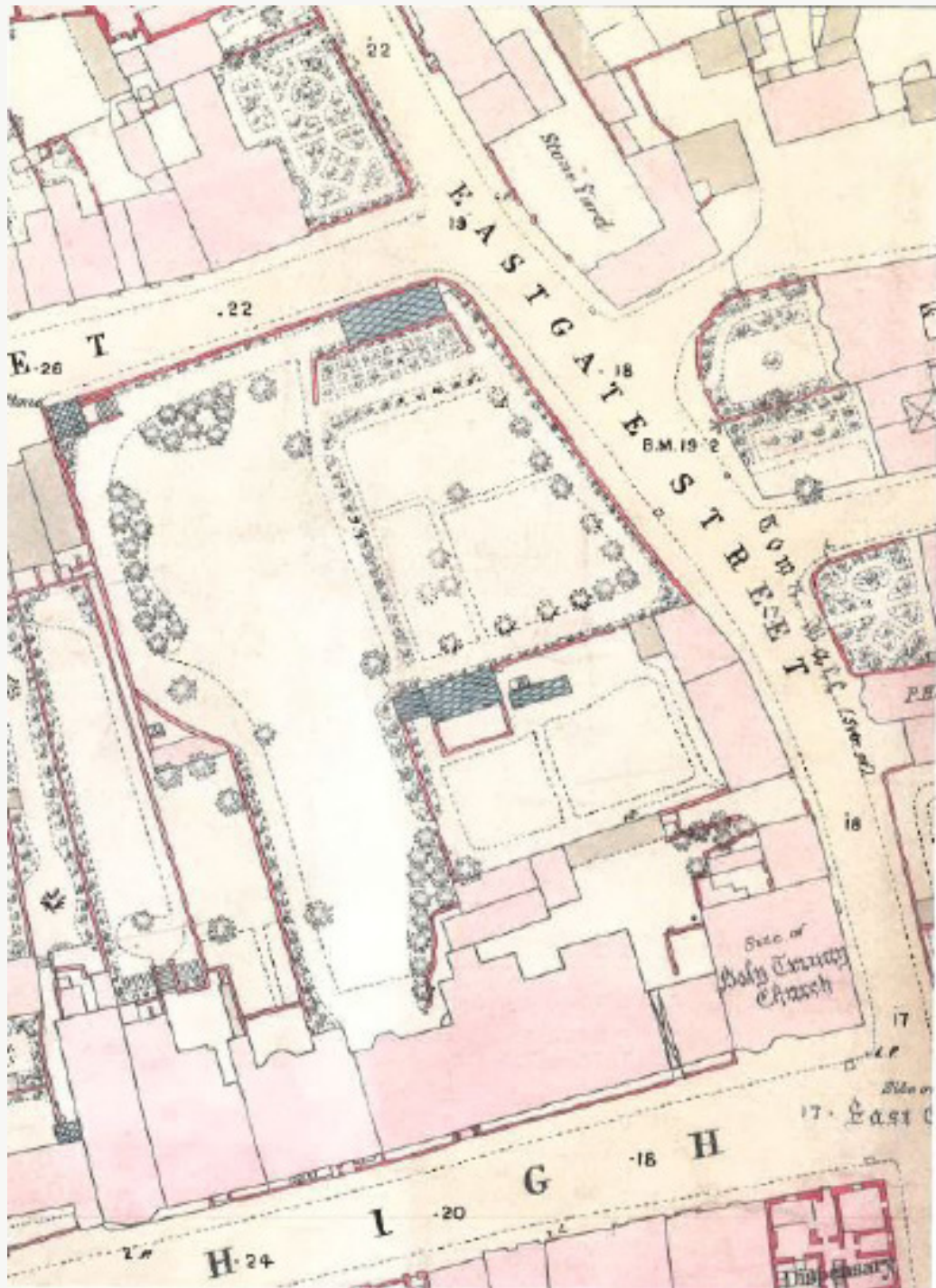
On the walls, two framed examples of 19th century letters patent from the College of Heralds. On a side table, sits the staff carried by the local 19th century constabulary in the Ringmer/Cliffe Hundred, to demonstrate authority. The last name painted on is Hoey, 1870. Former holders of the position have metal plaques on the staff.



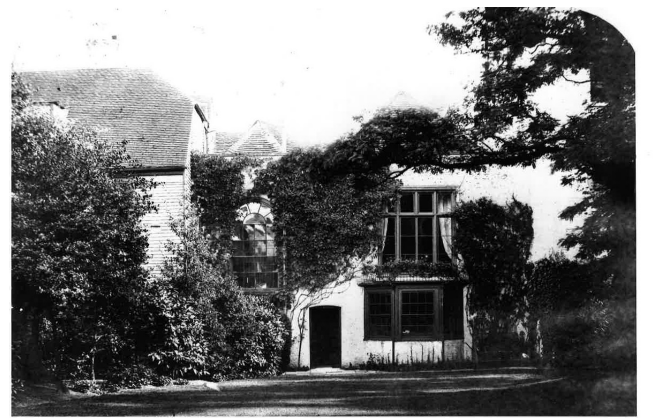
The Garden

In its heyday, the garden of Trinity House was a spectacular sight. In addition to the house, there was a Brew House, Laundry, Grooms Cottage, Stables, Coach House, outbuildings, walled kitchen garden, orchard, tennis court, rose garden and lawns.

The plan below from 1874 shows the full extent of the garden, which extended from High Steet to East Street. Now, only a small part of this garden area is part of Trinity House and is used as a car park. The remainder of the garden area is now Lewes Bus Station.



Trinity House and Garden as they were...



These undated photographs are taken from a collection made by EA Nicholson whose family lived at Trinity House from 1865. They are held at the East Sussex Records Office.

They show the walled garden of Trinity House from different aspects and bring to life the house and garden as they were in the later part of the 1800s.

Interview Room

This lovely room with its late 18th century bow window overlooks the former garden. This room feels more homely and comfortable than the other, grander, meeting rooms. A restored fireplace, with original early 19th century panelling is visible at the back of the cupboards on either side. These cupboards would have stored the papers and files used by the legal clerks as they serviced the clients meeting with the lawyers in the adjacent room.

Staircase

The staircase is 1800 to 1820 and is similar in style to the one in the Brighton Pavilion. The 'back stairs' are just beyond the main staircase.

The large window on the half landing overlooks the garden which originally extended to the surrounding East Street and Eastgate streets, and, until the 1980s, contained a tennis court for staff use. The space is now taken over for car parking.

Landing

This window would have given a view of the whole garden area which included stables, a brewhouse and a well. The Volunteer pub is very close to Trinity House.

Office with garden view

This room, with its view of the garden, would have functioned as an upstairs drawing room.

The corridors beyond the landing would have housed a series of bedrooms and dressing rooms.

Armoury

As noted in the introduction, Trinity House's 'Armoury' contains evidence of the activities of the Lewes Volunteers. Dating back to the 14th century, this room still includes the ceiling racks that held 12ft pikes. A significant weapon during the civil war, pikes kept cavalry at bay and guarded the musketeers while they reloaded their weapons. Thin ropes would have hung along these racks to hold the pikes securely in place.

Swords and other armaments would also have been stored in this room.

There are also pegs where leather jerkins and other uniform items would be hung.



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