

The Priest House: a brief history

Standing in the beautiful surroundings of a traditional cottage garden on the edge of Ashdown Forest, the Priest House is an early 15th century timber-framed hall-house built as an estate office for the Priory of St. Pancras in Lewes to improve the administration of the Manor of the Rectory of West Hoathly.

In 1524 the Priory leased the Rectory Manor to John Browne, a “husbandman” of the parish & The Priest House became a family home.

When Henry VIII seized Lewes Priory’s property the Browne’s Manor was given to Thomas Cromwell. After his disgrace & execution the Manor formed part of the settlement of Anne of Cleves. Following her death, the Brownes paid rent to Queen Mary & then to Elizabeth I. In 1560 the Queen sold the property that had once belonged to Lewes Priory. The Brownes bought the Manor lands & The Priest House & set about modernising the building.

The house was originally an open hall, with a living room & upper chamber on the north end & a service end, with a buttery, pantry & solar, to the south. Large stone chimneys were built to replace the medieval open hearth, which enabled two new rooms to be created upstairs, each with their own fireplace. The original thatched roof was also replaced with Horsham stone.

The house remained in the hands of the Browne family for another hundred years but their fortunes were in decline & in 1695 the house & Manor had to be sold to pay off their debts. The new owner, Mrs. Anna Hooper of Barbados, split the building into two cottages for tenant farmers. For 200 years the house remained in the hands of absentee landlords who did little to maintain it.

In 1905 it was bought by John Godwin King, of Stonelands, West Hoathly. He carefully restored the building & in 1908 opened it to the public, to display his collection of locally gathered artefacts. In 1935 John Godwin King presented The Priest House & its contents to the Sussex Archaeological Society.