

Visit to ANNE OF CLEVES HOUSE, LEWES, EAST SUSSEX



Illustration showing Lewes Castle and the Priory Grounds by Andy Gammon 2010.



Existing remains of the priory.

The house now known as Anne of Cleves House was originally part of the property of Lewes Priory, built in Lewes between 1078 and 1082, and the first Cluniac Priory in England. The Priory was founded by William and Gundrada de Warenne, a Norman nobleman created 1st Earl of Surrey and Lord of Lewes, whose home was Lewes Castle which he had built in 1069. The Priory was named after St Pancras as was the church which previously stood nearby.

The first Prior came from Cluny in France with three monks, but over the centuries the Priory developed and expanded, at its height in 12th/13th centuries having some 100 priors living there. It came to own extensive estates throughout England, with several daughter Cluniac houses, but by 1537 only twenty-four priors were in residence. Seeing the “writing on the wall” the Prior surrendered the priory and in 1538 it was passed to Thomas Cromwell. During the dissolution of the monasteries destruction of the religious buildings on the site began, with much of the demolition materials used elsewhere around the area. Thomas Cromwell was executed in July 1540 and Henry VIII granted the land and buildings along with nine other properties throughout Sussex as a divorce settlement to Anne of Cleves, including the house known as Anne of Cleves House. Anne lived mainly at Hever Castle and Richmond Palace but it is possible that she travelled to her properties to oversee management.

The actual house was originally a 15th century timber framed house known as Wealden Hall, probably built by a yeoman farmer. There were tenants during Anne’s ownership, but the house reverted to the king upon her death and was sold to a local gentleman. Thereafter it changed hands several times although by the 19th century the house was in disrepair and was let out to various individuals, at one time having up to thirty residents.

With several demolitions, additions and alterations, the house as you see it now is extremely interesting. The grand parlour with the original stone-built fireplace, now with a service area towards the back giving access to a stone vaulted cellar (not open to the public). This cellar is thought to be the only remaining evidence of an earlier property built from 13th/14th century.



The great chamber with private chamber beyond and separate loft/storage space over wagon way.



The bedroom was originally separated into two, with the great chamber possibly being used as a dormitory for visitors and a private chamber for the owners. An 18th century airing cupboard is located next to the fireplace. There is a separate room, probably a loft or storage space, over what is now the wagon way, where more of the history of the house can be seen.

Rear view of the wagon way.

The second floor parlour would have been the domain of the women, where they carried out spinning, embroidery and keeping of the household accounts. There were probably designs and decorations on the walls and ceilings.

The kitchen was improved in the 16th century, having a chimney and fireplace added, which improved safety and made cooking easier. A chimney crane can be seen over the fire with ratchets and hooks to hold cauldrons and pots, together with a bread oven to one side which would have been filled with embers, scraped out when heated and the bread or pies put in with the door sealed with dough. There are also illustrations regarding the preparation and preservation of food.



Kitchen fireplace with locally made ironwork.

There are various pieces of period furniture throughout the house which would have been commonplace at the time and two small galleries of specific exhibitions are housed within what was the Malthouse. One is the Wealden Iron Gallery, displaying items manufactured by the local iron industry for which the area was famous. These items include fire backs and fireplace equipment as well as a display showing the workings of a furnace and how a canon was manufactured together with boring equipment for this process. The last Weald furnace was closed in 1813, but the Lewes based Phoenix Ironworks was in operation until 1986.

Above this room is the Lewes Gallery which has many items of local and social history from 18th to the 19th century paintings, stained glass panels and other artefacts, together with some memorabilia from two local companies, namely Pains Fireworks and Harveys Brewery (the latter still in production).

There is also a small garden to the rear which I would imagine will be very pretty when in bloom, with a fine example of a medlar tree.

The museum has various activities on offer for children throughout its displays and of course, there is a café on site which offers sandwiches, teas and coffees etc, with a small outside seating area for those warmer days.



Rear view of the house with medlar tree.

I paid for a joint ticket for Anne of Cleves House and Lewes Castle which is valid for one year, but the visit to the house took longer than anticipated, so perhaps another day I will get to the Castle. Both are owned and managed by Sussex Archaeological Society. Priory Park (English Heritage) containing the remains of the Priory is across the road from the House and is well worth a visit.

*Mandy Kesby
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