

THE BATTLE ALMONRY



EARLY HISTORY

The Almonry is one of the more striking buildings in Battle, and behind it is a quiet and beautiful garden. It is now (2018) the home of Battle Town Council and various small businesses.



With some gaps its early history can be traced from the Abbey Rentals, which listed the dues to be paid on each building. The first Rental, dated about 1107, is in the Battle Abbey Chronicle, an account of the battle and the founding of the Abbey that was written by monks. The manuscript is now in the British Library.

From the 1859/60 tithe map. Almonry arrowed.

There has been a house on the site of what is now known as the Almonry since at least 1107, as it has probably always been one of the principal dwellings in the town. A building may well have been there since the 1090s when Battle was first laid out by the monks – and their town plan remains almost entirely in place today. What we now know as the Almonry was never the Abbey almonry. Almost certainly it owes its name to the Almonry farm area, assigned to the almoner, one of the monks of the Abbey. No-one knows when the name was first used for the building. The Cresy report of 1850 refers to the present Pilgrims' Rest as the Almonry; the first known use of the title for the building in this article is to be found in the tithe records of 1859/60.

Few houses of its age that still exist will have escaped comprehensive rebuilding over the centuries, and the Almonry is no exception to this general rule. Early developments are unclear, and there are survivals from the fifteenth, sixteenth and and seventeenth centuries:

Historic England describes the building thus, in connection with its status as a listed building:

Formerly house, now offices, shop and restaurant. Probably C15 5 bay structure of which 2 bays were an open hall, extended in the C16 to form a courtyard town house with internal alterations of 1661, restored and refenestrated in C20. Timber framed building. Ground floor refronted in sandstone on sandstone plinth. First floor tile hung. Hipped old tiled roof with central clustered brick stack and 2 other brick chimneystacks at ends. East elevation to High Street is of 2 storeys with 3 early C20 mullioned windows with leaded lights. Ground floor has 2 earlier window openings blocked in. C20 porch to north front. Internally the end jetty in the southern bay survives, but more features of the C16 survive. These include a ground floor eastern room with 2 late C16 doorcases with moulded bases, one with quatrefoil motifs and one with 3 leaves in circle. Western room with roll-moulded cross beams. On the first floor of the southern wall of the western chamber survives a 3-pane glazed window having mullions with cyma and ovolo mouldings. Roof of northern range is of side purlin queen post type. Ground floor eastern room has early C17 axial beam with lambs tongue stops with fleur de lys

and open fireplace with wooden bressumer. Early C17 stone fireplace to first floor. c1661 well staircase with twisted balusters, panelling to ground floor eastern room with pilaster and first floor door with diamond panels (possibly a reused pulpit).



The Almonry being one of the very few stone-built properties in the centre of Battle, the date of 1661 raises the question whether, like the Bull a few doors south, it was built with stone from the Abbey. However, it could not have been part of the same consignment because the Bull was built with stone from the Abbey kitchen demolished in 1685.

A recent photograph taken from the rear garden

On the instruction of the new owner, Percy Holloway, the Brasted firm of Durtnells made further modifications in 1930, most obviously to the windows. The property now occupied by the Battle Museum of Local History was this owner's garage.

The house belonged to the Abbey and then to the Abbey's successors: the Brownes, Websters, Clevelands and Websters again. It was sold privately on the sale of almost all the Webster properties after the death of the last baronet in 1923. In the 1970s it passed to the East Sussex County Council, which was preparing the major development now known as Market Square, and in 1987 having mercifully been excluded from that development it passed to the Battle Town Council in whose hands it remains. For some 600 years after the first house was erected on the site the rent remained at 6d per dwelling, or 12d for the two combined. This would appear to mean the house alone rather than the farms, and the list of occupants below has been constructed on that basis.

For most of this period we can establish from the Abbey Rentals who held the lease. Unfortunately it is all too often unclear whether the lease covers the whole of the Almonry area or simply the house.

In her very thorough investigation (in 1986) Ann Moore wrote:

In the 1107 Rental there are two possibilities: the house of Brembel, who paid 6d, or, more likely Robert Barate – who also paid 6d, as well as the duty to help bring in hay from the great meadow at Bodiam, which most tenants shared. It may have been both, as we shall see later. The next Rental, of 1240, is unfortunately not in "walk order", the house may have been that held by Nicholas le Tanner, though more likely it was "Robert son of Peter" (no further details), once again, they may both have occupied the present site, which twice the size of the "standard" medieval site in the High Street.

In 1305 it can probably be identified as held by Daniel le Tayllor, "formerly held by John Baret", and paying 3d at the four quarter days – possibly two sixpenny rents? As we shall see, the annual rent remained at 12d for the next 600 years. In 1367 we can be quite certain. It was held by John Coc, formerly by Walter Blake, and is described as "next the lane which leads to

Beche and is called the "Shytebourne Lane". This is Western Avenue (you can understand why the name was changed), and would indeed have been the most direct approach to "Beche" – Great Beech Farm by Squirrel Corner – if you remember that the North Trade Road did not exist in its present form. It was also probably not much more than an open sewer, with a convenient fall down to the stream, hence its name.

In 1433 it was held "by the heirs of Robert Knyght", described as a messuage and garden, formerly John Cok's, paying 6d twice a year. This is an indication that two 1107 houses – Brembel's and Barate's – each paying 6d a year – may have been united. The great and powerful Pesshoner family had been now succeeded by the equally powerful Pesemarsch family, who owned a good deal of other land. The three great houses were still described as "opposite the Market Shoppes".

We know from the court records that in 1520 the tenant of Knights, one Thomas Pulton (who had also owned a barn "next Caldebek") died and was succeeded by his daughter Joan, wife of John Adams. However, she too died the next year, and her husband held it on behalf of their son Benignus, then 13. It is interesting to see the inheritance passed through the female line.

1569 is the date of the next Rental, produced by Lord Montague's steward, and the first written in English. By now the market has moved, probably to the Green, where the new Court House had been built beside the Great Gate, replacing the one in Mount St. John Barker, or Baker, held Knights, paying 6d twice a year. The old market site at the junction of the High Street and Mount Street was being built over. The present Market Square (also to be built over) consisted of fields, crofts and barns (one with the ancient name of 'Buzard' after a man who had held a house there in 1240.

In 1651, nearly 100 years later, the house was still held by the Baker family, even though the Civil War had intervened. They paid 12d, as did John Newington in 1708 and Francis Weller in 1729. The latter occupied the house until at least 1751.

It evidently reverted to the Abbey at his death, and in 1800 is recorded as being held by Lady Webster – still at 12d. Thereafter it was let on a series of short leases, with 130-140 acres of land which was once the Almoner's, as "Almonry Farm". In 1840 the tenant was J Coverley of Whittingham near Malton, though probably only of the farm.

OCCUPANTS AFTER 1800

After 1840 there were references in the decennial census returns, though not always very clearly, and in the occasional newspaper report. It is not possible to decipher from the censuses for 1841 and 1851 who if anyone was occupying the Almonry house, let alone between 1801 and 1840. Nor are the electoral records of any help.

According to Ann Moore:

... it was let on a series of short leases, with 130-140 acres of land which was once the Almoner's, as "Almonry Farm". In 1840 the tenant was J Coverley of Whittingham near Malton.

In 1841 J Coverley is not mentioned, but the electoral roll for 1842 includes John Coverley, a farmer of Catsfield rather than of Yorkshire, living at Park Farm. The 1861 census is hard to decipher but it can be established that William Saxby, a farmer, was living there. In 1851 he had been in Hastings Road and one cannot reliably identify the occupant in that year. In 1859/60 the Almonry was occupied by Joseph Saxby. He was in his twenties, and one can only speculate as to the reasons why he and not his father William was at the Almonry.

William Saxby was still there in 1871, aged 60, a farmer with 100 acres employing six men, born at Battle. He is joined by his wife Martha, 59, born at Bexhill; Stephen, his unmarried brother described as a farmer and partner of his brother; Elizabeth, 24, and Flora, 16, William's daughters; two boarders and three servants. Martha died soon, in 1872. The Saxbys, however, ran into financial difficulties and went bankrupt late in 1877. Almost certainly he would have had to leave the Almonry. In 1881 William was living at Crowhurst; born about 1810, he lived to 1888. Stephen, born about 1817, was living next to the grammar school (where the fire station now stands); he died in 1881.

It would be possible to suggest that the house was at this point shared with the Martin family. Houses were un-numbered so there is a difficulty. But the Martins ran a legal practice that in 1882 passed to William Cruttenden, who died in 1895; in 1891 the house number is given as 36. This is not the Almonry but Martin's Oak, now a surgery. His widow Charlotte was clearly living there in 1901 (where it is numbered 35) and again in 1911. The inference is that in 1871 Saxby was the sole occupant of the Almonry. The name Martin's Oak for 35 High Street is unlikely to be accidental.

The 1881 census (which has Horace Martin, a retired solicitor, living in the house that became Cruttenden's) the Almonry was leased to:

Irvine K Anderson, 32, of no occupation, with his wife Emily, 31, and daughter also Emily, 3, and his father and mother George and Sarah Wood (actually his parents-in-law). Irvine had been born at Woolwich in 1849, Emily at Crayford and his parents-in-law at Kingston on Thames. There were three servants. Irvine Kempt Anderson took holy orders in 1883, dying as rector of Marytavy in Devon on 21 November 1923 where he had been incumbent since 1892.

Ann Moore's research suggests that In 1885 William Mallett of Staplefield had it for seven years at £160 per annum (described now as "Upper Almonry Farm"). He appears in neither a census return for Sussex nor a directory for the period in question. One wonders whether this is an understandable misreading of a hand-written *Hallett*. If so we can confidently place Halletts on the farmland rather than in the house, and although anomalies and gaps exist in our knowledge of them they are not of relevance to the house.

The 1859 directory and the 1861 census confirm William Hallett's residence, farming 135 acres at the latter point, but with an anomaly: 'Upper Almonry Farm' is not listed as being in the High Street but in the North Trade Road area south and west of the police station. An 1866 directory again has him there. It also gives his birth as at Wadhurst not at Staplefield, which is between Cuckfield and Crawley. The William of Wadhurst was back there, not at Battle, in 1871 and 1881 and died in 1896. The tithe record for 1859/60 has a John Taylor Hallett occupying 'Little Almonry Farm', which seems to be Lower Almonry. John Hallett died in 1861, shortly before the census was taken. This all rather confusing, but it is clear that neither Hallett occupied the Almonry itself.

In 1891 we have Benjamin Christmas, a farmer born in 1861 and destined to die in October 1936. The Sussex Agricultural Express has many reports of his being involved in the annual fatstock shows. He was also a butcher. Ann Moore states that in 1902 the tenants were Messrs Christmas (sic) and Thwaites.

She continues by saying that:

In 1897 it was held by Oliver Watts at only £110 p a (possibly reflecting the agricultural depression, or maybe with less land), and in 1902 the tenants were Messrs Christmas and Thwaites, who are remembered by some Battle residents today (1986) at £115 p a.

The Watts reference is at odds with the census evidence. This, again, must refer to lands below the Almonry.

In 1901 the house is given as Almonry House, 36 High Street, in Christmas's occupation. This number strictly refers to Martin's Oak, where Cruttenden's widow still lived, so is clearly a mistake. Newspaper reports suggest that in 1905 the occupant was G Basil Bond, succeeded that year by W H Rudd, and in 1907 James Percy Askew, secretary to the Rye Conservative Association. In 1908 a similar report states that the house had been occupied by the Saxbys. By now it appears that the Almonry was detached from the farm until 1918. Askew (1879-1919) was well-known locally because from 1907 he was the Conservative agent for the Rye constituency. He went on to serve as a Lieutenant in the Army Service Corps in World War One.

In 1911 it was occupied by Arthur Cecil Burton (1879-1928), a veterinary surgeon born at Torquay who did not resume his Battle practice when he returned from the war late in 1919; he had been a Lieutenant in the Army Veterinary Corps. In 1912 he divorced his first wife in a case that excited the usual prurient local interest; he remarried in 1913 and he and his new wife later moved to Epsom.

As to later events, Ann Moore again:

In 1918 Alfred Holland, butcher, had it for £82...10s, whose family only gave up their High St butcher's shop in the 1970's. In 1926 the Almonry was sold by the Websters of Battle Abbey. It was the first time it had been out of the Abbey's hands since the first house was built on the site nearly 900 years before.

The agent's brochure describes it as "Upper Almonry Farm ... with 35 acres and a farmhouse ... in all probability the Ancient Almoners' ... a reputed underground passage connecting it with the Abbey." (Even if it was not "The Almonry", the underground passage almost certainly exists.)

Mr Holland, the sitting tenant, bought it for £3000 together with the Wellington Stores. In 1930 he sold the house, for £2390, to Mr, Mrs and Miss Holloway, though he kept the land and the effluent from his pigs went on giving the Health Officer's medieval-type problems until well after the war. [The pigs were kept in the garden until he sold the house.]

The Holloways are well remembered in the town, especially Miss Holloway, who lived there until her death in 1974. The house was then sold, for £35,000, to Mr and Mrs Phillips, from Hastings, and was later sold to the East Sussex County Council, for a reputed £75,000, in connection with Market Site redevelopment scheme. Which is where the Battle Town Council came in, to secure the ancient house, as part of the town's heritage.

Holland was a member of the urban district council and as a farmer he did well. Having only 30 acres according to one newspaper report, he managed to produce prize-winning stock. His shop was at 20 High Street.



'Miss Holloway' was Gwyneth Enid Esmé Holloway, born at Tonbridge in 1898. She was one of two children: her elder brother died of typhoid late in 1919, having served throughout the war and being then still in the Army.

This photograph is of what is now the meeting room in the Almonry. The names of those shown are unknown but at dates from the later Holloway period. With thanks to Derek Ellwood.

Gwyneth never married. Their father was Percy Marseille Holloway, a man of some property born at Brompton in Middlesex in 1867, and their mother Millicent (Abrey). He died in 1939 and she in 1944. In March 1934 he put his name forward for election, unsuccessfully, to the new Rural District Council of Battle. He was an active member of the Conservative Association.

The earlier Holloway family is today remembered in one context: Percy's grandfather was Marseille Middleton Holloway (1809-97), a leading printer and publisher of art works during the mid-nineteenth century. The firm practised in the Covent Garden area and Percy's father was briefly a partner. Marseille Middleton's background is unclear other than his father was named Charles. Presumably it was largely his success that allowed Percy and his father (also) Marseille to live comfortable lives on the proceeds of rents and dividends; but Percy described himself as a brewer in the 1901 census and a company secretary in 1911. It is not yet known how the name of the French city came into the family but it may be that Charles introduced it.

From photographs it would seem that the Holloways spent much of their time in the warm room now (2018) occupied by staff of Battle Town Council. In 1961 the Almonry became a listed building, currently listed as grade 2*.

Finally, Ann Moore again:

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Timeline

	<i>Actions and occupants</i>
1090s	First house built on the Almonry site, part of Abbey estate
1107	Probably shared by Brembel and Barate. Rent 12d p a, until 20th century
1240	Probably shared by Nicholas le Tanner and Robert son of Peter
1305	Daniel le Tayllor
1367	John Coc, taken over from Walter Blake
1433	Heirs of Robert Knyght
1520	Thomas Pulton, tenant, died
1521	John Adams
1538	Abbey dissolved; lands pass to Crown and then to the Browne family
1569	John Baker, or Barker
1661c	Major alterations to house
1708	John Newington
1721	Lands sold by Brownes to the Webster family
1729	Francis Weller
1800	Lady Webster
1841	John Coverley
1857	Lands sold to Lord Harry Vane, later Duke of Cleveland
1859	Joseph Saxby
1861	William Saxby
1871	William Saxby
1881	Irvine Kempt Anderson
1891	Lands pass to Catherine, Duchess of Cleveland who died in 1901
1891	Benjamin Christmas, cattle dealer and butcher
1901	Benjamin Christmas, cattle dealer and butcher
1902	Lands bought by Sir Augustus Webster and put into family trust
1905c	G Basil Bond
1905	W H Rudd
1907	James Percy Askew, political agent
1911	Arthur Cecil Burton, veterinary surgeon
1918	Alfred Holland, farmer
1926	Auctions of Webster lands: Holland buys the freehold
1930	Percy Holloway buys the house and carries out alterations
1939	Millicent Holloway, widow
1944	Gwyneth Holloway, daughter
1961	A listed building
1974	Phillips family
1970s	East Sussex County Council
1987	Battle Town Council

Sources

Ann Moore: *The history of the Almonry* (about 1989; typescript in the possession of the Battle and District Historical Society)

David and Barbara Martin and Christopher Whittick, with Jane Briscoe: *Building Battle town* (domtom publishing Ltd, 2-16)

The Kent & Sussex Courier, Friday 26 December 1919

The Sussex Agricultural Express, various dates

Records held by the Sussex Family History Group

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/term_details.aspx?bioid=120814

ESRO: DR/A 3/3/17 for the reference to Durtnells and various occupancies

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1044222>

www.ancestry.co.uk

Lecture by Tony Emelaus, 1991

and thanks to Gina Doherty for her work, particularly on the Saxby family, and to Keith Foord.

George Kiloh, June 2018

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