



Battle Arts Festival

1066 July 18th – 31st 1966

The annual Battle Festival is properly well-known, thanks to the recent efforts of David Furness and his colleagues. But it had a predecessor series from 1961, the last of which was in 2006. This article tries to explain why it started, how it went on and why it finally ended.

Pictures of people are of Festival artistes.



Humphrey Lyttleton, 1963

One of the deficiencies of Battle up to 1960 was the absence of any large meeting house not associated with a church. Villages had village halls, which are prominent everywhere, but Battle had nothing of the kind; at this point it didn't even have a hall dedicated to town council use. For the interwar period and much later the Drill Hall (where the telephone exchange now stands, on North Trade Road) had housed events of up to 300 people but either it was not regarded as appropriate or it was in any case likely to be demolished in the near future – as indeed it was.

The idea for a memorial hall had emerged at the end of the First World War as a tribute to those who had died, but it was derailed partly by preference for a nursing home (for which funding attempts failed) and partly, for most people, because after three years or so the cross in St Mary's churchyard seemed sufficient. Understandably, after the Second World War the idea was revived but, again, where – and again how was it to be paid for?

A separate memorial seemed to be out of the question. A cenotaph had been mooted after 1918 but from 1945 the notion of a memorial became inextricably linked with that of a community centre of some kind. After all, it was only too obvious that Battle still had no such centre, unlike many much smaller places nearby.

At the end of the 1950s things changed rapidly. The owner of Langton House on Abbey Green, David Shephard (a Catsfield farmer closely involved in Battle societies), bought Langton House at the end of 1957, with the intention of it being a local cultural centre. He worked closely with the town council to establish a trust for the northern part of the house to run it as a kind of village hall. Money was raised from a number of sources, including the town council, for the major changes needed, which began in August 1958.¹ In due course, in April 1960, the Memorial Hall opened there and has since been an enormously valuable asset to the town.

¹ From the Hastings and St Leonards Observer and the Sussex Express.



Local artists now had somewhere to exhibit their paintings, sculptures and ceramics where previously there had been nowhere suitable; events and meetings could take place; films, concerts and plays could happen. An obvious thing to do in 1960 was to have an exhibition in the new amenity, to celebrate its opening and to show off local artists' work, and the Festival Society was founded, though with the same committee membership as the Battle Arts Group. The chair of the Arts Group, and now of the Festival Society too, was Harry Alexander (1905-94) of Le Rette farm. It was to him that Battle owed (and perhaps still owes) its festival. Apart from a period of three years (1963-1965) when he served as Treasurer and then as Secretary, he was chairman of the two societies from their inception to his retirement from the chair of the Festival Society at the end of 1978. His wife Hazel (1914-2004) was a hardworking secretary of both groups; without them it is hard to see that the festival would have survived its early days. In 1972 he set out some of its history:

This is the thirtieth anniversary of the Festival but it is also the very same for the hall itself, and this came about for the sole reason that a suitable site had at last been found for a Memorial Hall. Money for this had been slowly collected since the end of the 1914 war but no suitable site was ever available. At last, after the Second World War the chance came. I think about £15,000 was available – not a lot but just about enough. About this time the newly formed Rotary Club in Battle took an interest in getting the Hall on the map. By chance Langton House came on the market and a Rotarian, David Sheppard [sic], bought the property with the club backing the deal. He sold back part of the premises for £1000 to be converted into what is now the Memorial Hall.

For a period the Hall, like the Festival, had a fairly precarious existence but it was to become without a single doubt an amenity of which any town could be immensely proud. This was to a great extent due to the unceasing work done for many years by the phenomenal George Moyes.



He was at once the Trusty Servant and the exacting Master of the Memorial Hall. His death brought great sorrow to the town and he will be missed. But his great days are gone and the future welfare of the Hall will be well placed in the capable hands of John Newick.

Thea King, 1967

Now we come to the Arts Group. When the building was finished and it was to be opened by the Marquis of Exeter it was realised just before the event that the new Hall was very blank with its large spaces of unadorned wall. Some local artists, both amateur and professional, were persuaded at very short notice to provide some decoration. The result was a good exhibition of pictures. On top of this the artists agreed to give 50 percent of any sales to the Hall funds and quite a nice sum was handed over at the finish. This nucleus turned out in fact to be the founding members of the Battle Arts Group which thereafter regularly had two shows a year in the Hall. The momentum of the Arts Group quickly generated the idea that here was a stage and an auditorium which could surely be exploited by attracting professional musicians and entertainers to perform in Battle.



The first fruits of this idea came about in 1961 and was called the Battle Arts Fortnight. An ambitious and portentous title which had, I rather think, the effect of scaring off more people than it attracted, but in the end enough patrons turned out to have another go. And so it became a more robust affair from year to year. The Arts Fortnight was then condensed into the more practical series that became the Festival.



Logo for the 1974 Festival.

The Arts Group, which up to then had been responsible, formed a registered Charity known as the Battle Festival Society with its own constitution and with Lord Longford as its founder President. By some quirk of circumstance it turned out that the same group of people were then running the Arts Group and the Festival in double harness and continued to do so for a great many more years.

It must be said that the question of finance looms very large in the life of any festival organiser apart, of course, from the will to provide high-grade professional entertainment and the need for a flow of suitable ideas related to the facilities available and also to the potential audience.



Cyril Ray, wine expert, 1977

We realised from the start that if any indebtedness had to be carried over from one year to the next it would soon become a lethal handicap. Battle Festival must have been born under a lucky star and we managed to avoid Mr Micawber's dreaded fate of one farthing on the wrong side. As a result, Battle Festival, and I am sure many another too, survived by each one being organised as a one-off self-financing series of yearly events. We were lucky to have got in the first place modest support from Marks and Spencer and Stork margarine and later on the Arts Council began to take an interest with a guarantee against debt of £150.

This is a two-sided facility. I often thought that a small cash grant would have been more useful because if one is given a guarantee and, happily, does not have to call on it, sadly it is apt to be withdrawn as unnecessary. It was a good umbrella but a long way from being a waterproof suit. But all thanks are due for the care that august body took of its little chick. From the very first, businesses in Battle contributed generously to our funds through advertisements in the Festival programme and so things began to grow.

In theory, the advertisements paid for printing and design: the Box Office hopefully covered professional fees and the various back-ups covered general expenses. Like many theories it was interesting but hardly axiomatic! As far as I remember there was only one moment of real financial panic. It followed the second visit of Harry Blech and the London Mozart Players, who gave a concert in the church for a fee previously agreed and which we thought was



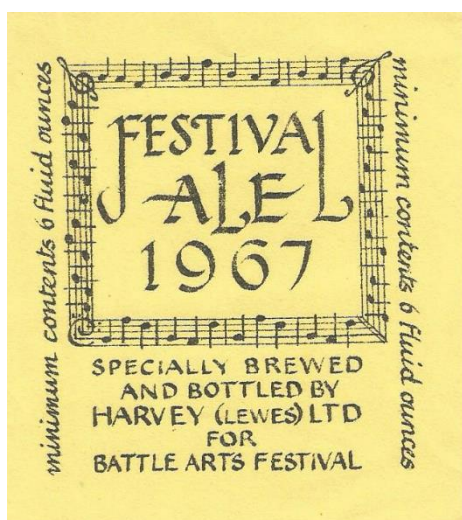
comprehensive. It was an excellent concert, but as they were packing up to go home Mr Blech demanded an extra £80 for travelling expenses. We had to pay and somehow or other we lived to fight again. It all happened quite a long time ago and the powers of recall of an antiquated brain are very limited. However hard one fishes in the pool of memory I seem to catch very little but tiddlers.

Another example of the costs involved comes from the King's Singers. The first time they came we paid them £60. A few years later when they sang in the church their fee was £500 and, as I recall, over 400 people came to hear them.

It isn't clear whether it was Harry or his wife Hazel, who was Honorary Secretary of the Festival until 1976, who wrote a 1982 article or speech called *Not That Kind of Festival*:

Battle Festival is well-established – it has been going for 20 years – but it has no national name; it is not an Edinburgh, an Aldeburgh or a Glyndebourne. Why does it exist and whom does it serve? Well, it exists because a few enthusiasts in 1960 thought that Battle people wanted and deserved something better than the cinema and the disco. Mostly unable to afford trips to London, why not bring in a bit of London's music, art, drama – the lot to them at Battle, at least for ten July days in the year?

So, it began modestly with a mixture of imported artistes and the best of the home-brew with an emphasis on young and up-and-coming talent. For example, last year the London Bach Society played and the Steinitz Bach Players sang in the Church; two days later the Town Band performed on the Green, hand-bells were rung, local artists showed their work and you could do your own chalking on the pavement if you wished; later on came Colin Horsley, an international celebrity, to play Beethoven, Brahms and Chopin; then, the Battle Players put on *The Ketchup and Red Wellie Show* to a full house of children, as background senior students of the Royal College of Art exhibited their impressions of Battle – and so it goes on every year – a real feast for everyone.



The people of Battle and the surrounding countryside lapped it all up and some 1800 people attended last year's "do". Ticket prices are very "reasonable" so that all can afford to come.

How is it managed? A small but not self-perpetuating voluntary committee sees to it – thinks out the programmes, engages the artistes, mans the box-office, provides home-cooked food, shows you to your seats and clears up afterwards. How very English you may think and how much we like it so!

Of course, it doesn't pay for itself, and for many years there have been sponsors putting up from £100 to £600 to put their name to an event. It isn't entirely a one-sided gesture, 17,000 leaflets, posters and programmes go out mentioning the sponsors by name.

But, just short of "coming of age" this Festival and others like it are about to die from financial leukaemia. The Government are axing their contributions through the Arts Associations, the artistes' fees and expenses are rising, and sponsors are becoming more enamoured of the big national events. To be small is to be no longer beautiful.



What a pity if so much richness, built up with loving-care were to perish! It would go unregarded, no headlines would be made, for “Battle” is not that kind of Festival, it has no national name. Only in our hearts would we feel the pain of its passing as we did so many things – the maypole, home-made cherry-wood pipes and the town crier.

Of course the Alexanders were right to fear closure, though it was nearly a quarter of a century before it happened. They were also right to point to the organisational skills and imagination that had to lie behind such a wide-ranging annual event, to the early emphasis on Baroque and classical music and to the need to interest children so that when they grew up they would always return to the festival.

The first festival programme, for 1961, opened by Lord Longford (who lived at Hurst Green), opened with films on art and artists – Matisse, Alexander Calder, Graham Sutherland and Grandma Moses and went on with

- a discussion on theatre,
- a piano recital (the youngest being a paraphrase of Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (first staged in 1851),
- an open forum to discuss the pictures being shown,
- the Orpheus Quartet playing eighteenth-century music,
- a dramatic recital of Shakespeare’s poetry,
- four more films on art and artists – *Artists must live*, *le Cubisme*, *Henry Moore* and *Guernica*,
- and another piano recital of serious music up to Liszt but also including some twentieth-century Russian and Spanish music.

Records of the modest few who were on the Festival Committee are scarce. As far as we know at present, in 1978 they were the Alexanders (Harry, farmer, 1905-94, and Hazel, 1914-2005), Diana Boyd, Ian Cox (farmer and hotelier), Sidney Drage (1909-2004), Harold Dawson (1913-2000), Bryan Drew (1928-2005), Robert Field (1910-99, District Council Surveyor), Mrs J D B Griffin, Stanley Hodgson (1918-2001), Harry Pring, Anthony Shillingford (1903-1883, British Council officer) and Laura Tilling (teacher). All were from the Battle area and all were enthusiastic about introducing and promoting the arts in the area. There was a distribution of jobs among them; the daughter of Mrs Field, Robert’s wife (Esmé, 1912-2009) and formerly treasurer, recalls that she and her father used to offer accommodation to visiting performers.



Katherine Whitehorn, journalist

It was in the same year, 1978, that Harry Alexander retired from chairing the Festival Committee. His going prompted appreciative farewell letters from Lord Longford, Lady



Rupert Nevill and others, and a subscription from members. Before coming to Battle in 1942 he had worked in West Africa, Canada and London, taking up farming in Gloucestershire in the 1930. He started painting before 1960 and his works were exhibited in several Sussex places. After he died the Festival named one of its events *The Harry Alexander Memorial Concert*.

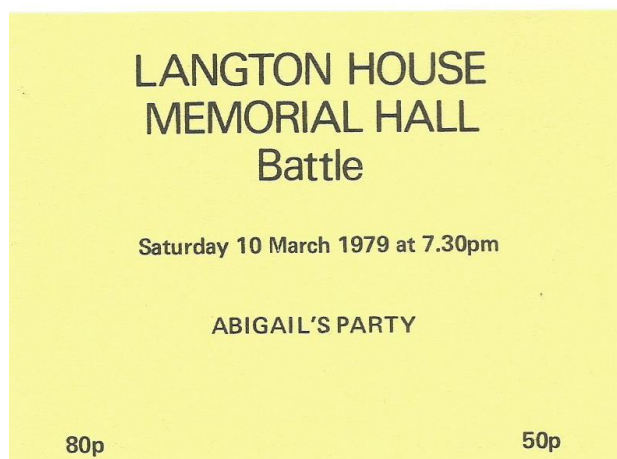
In 1972 most of Lord Longford's family took part as a *Pen of Pakenhams*. The 4th earl had been a senior member of Harold Wilson's Government, resigning on principle when raising the school leaving age was delayed; he was a strong campaigner for prison reform and against pornography. He and his wife had eight children, all in some way distinguished – five of them were writers, two of them historians.



Longford and his family in June 1972

A later President was Sir Neville Mariner, a remarkable violinist who founded the Academic of St Martin in the Fields and was one of the best known musicians of his time, largely through the large number of records made with him conducting the Academy.

The Festival scope widened a little as the sixties continued, to include some jazz and folk music, and performances (in English) by *Opera for All*. Except for some use of St Mary's Church all indoor performances were held in the Memorial Hall.



By the turn of the century, as the 2002 programme demonstrates, the scope had widened much further and the festival was a much bigger event:

- The Elevators, a blues band,
- a gathering on the Green, with a celebrity attending and outdoor eating and drinking,
- *The Book Club*, at Battle Abbey School: eight women with the experiences of reading groups,
- Harry Alexander Memorial Concert, a cabaret,
- two talks on writing, in the Church Hall,
- Battle Town Band and Battle Youth Band playing in the Market Square,
- former royal reporter telling stories from her new book,
- double string quartet and jazz bass,
- two performances for children aged 3-8, one at Netherfield Primary School,
- play *Me and Mrs Beeton* at Catsfield Village Hall,
- organ recital at St Mary's,
- two contemporary poets, at Battle Library,
- a summer wildlife walk, ending at Powder Mills Hotel,
- Battle Abbey School concert, at the Abbey: jazz to rock to classical,
- a comedy play at Claverham College hall,
- classical guitar concert at Pyke House, Upper Lake,
- jazz night at The Pilgrim's Rest, Abbey Green,
- silent film classics at the former cinema, Lower Lake, and later a French film,
- Battle periphery walk from the Market Square,
- Primary schools' show – dance, drumming, singing, on Abbey Green,
- Hanover Band: Mozart concert, at St Mary's,
- firework finale in Lake Field.

And two weeks later there were two outdoor performances of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, at Battle Abbey School. It may be noted that the Memorial Hall was used for only four of the events; some were away from the town centre and one away from Battle altogether. As early as 1972 Harry Alexander had written:



Although Langton House Memorial Hall is a useful and essential venue for events and the lighting has been much improved over the years the limited seating capacity and poor stage facilities make the organisation of concerts and plays a somewhat hazardous undertaking financially. There is no wing area on stage and no proper dressing room accommodation. Storage space for painting and exhibition equipment is also a problem. On the other hand the town of Battle is extremely fortunate to have such a potentially useful complex of public rooms.

Improvements continued but these drawbacks remain today, though all of us would continue to praise the Memorial Hall for the events and meetings that it continues to house.

The Festival was always financially on the edge. Accounts for most years are unclear but for the 1970s and some of the 1960s the deficits appear to have been:

	<i>Deficit</i>	<i>Recovery SEAA = South East Arts Association</i>
1965-66	£274.11.10	
1966-67	£310.14.2	£350 from Arts Council, £10 Rural District Council, £150 from East Sussex County Council.
1967-68	£288.19.4	Donations from RDC, ESCC.
1968-69	£182.15.9	£59 from Battle Charities. £100 from ESCC.
1969-70	£311.19.2	ESCC application Mar 1970. £125 donations, including from RDC, ESCC.
1970-71	£359.17	Arts Council guarantee. ESCC application Feb 1971. Grant £100.
1971-72	£404.29	Arts Council guarantee.
1972-73	£253.91	SEAA guarantee. Tickets sales up, also artistes' fees, expenses. Application for grant from ESCC Further Education Committee.
1973-74	£308.68	SEAA guarantee. Ticket sales well up but also artistes' fees.
1974-75	£490.41	SEAA guarantee.
1975-76	£637.42	SEAA guarantee. Fees, expenses up.
1976-77	£1196.50	SEAA guarantee. Problem was big rise in printing and publicity costs.
1977-78	£568.65	SEAA guarantee. Subs up. Artistes' fees down.
1978-79	£311.93	SEAA guarantee. Sale of tickets up.
1979-80	£204.66	SEAA guarantee. Sales of tickets, subscriptions up.

There was serious inflation in the seventies, and the figures should be read in that context (the value of the Pound was to decline again very sharply in the early nineties). Nevertheless the Festival continued, being covered not only by the guarantees above but by sponsorship and advertising. As to tickets, in 1961 entry to a showing of four films cost 3s (2s to Friends) – but in 2004 the income value of those figures would be £6.25 and £4.17; a talk in 1961 would cost 7/6d (5s to Friends), in 2004 representing £15.63 and £10.42. These were high prices, and the Festival was concerned that they would discourage audiences. They kept them as low as they could.



ART EXHIBITION
 BY BATTLE & DISTRICT ARTS GROUP

BATTLE TOWN BAND
 CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL CHOIR

RICHARD BAKER - THE BEST OF BRITISH
 THE SNEEZE AND OTHER PLAYS BY CHEKOV

FARNABY BRASS ENSEMBLE
 ALL ELECTRIC PUPPET THEATRE

JAZZ
 LEE GIBSON • JIMMY HASTINGS

PITZ SWING BAND
 PRIMAVERA CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

FESTIVAL FINALE - PETER MORRELL - STAFFORDSHIRE FIGURES
 CHRIS O'BRIEN - GUIDED WALK



30th BATTLE FESTIVAL

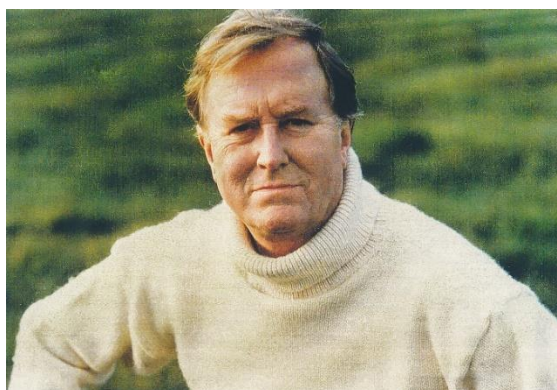
MAY 11-20 1990

BOX OFFICE

The Memorial Hall, Langton house, Battle, Tel. Battle 2044
 Open from Friday 27 April; Monday to Saturday 10am - 1pm
 (Closed 7 May)
 During festival week 10am - 4pm, and 45 minutes preceding
 each performance.

Chris O'Brien

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Robert Hardy

For two of the early years of the new century there was a total grant of £30,000 from the Arts Council, which allowed the appointment of a paid organiser, Marie Stansford – but it was the last period to benefit from Government grants. When the instalments stopped the organiser had to leave, and thereafter it was back to the extraordinarily hard work needed for an event of this size and to the real risk of financial failure.

The other and perhaps fundamental problem was the inherent nature of the Festival itself. The Alexanders had said that it was not an Edinburgh, an Aldeburgh or a Glyndebourne. They were right. It lacked the facilities and enormous charm of the Scottish capital, and the greater space of the other festivals; moreover it lacked what marketers call a USP – a unique selling proposition. Aldeburgh had its association with Benjamin Britten, Glyndebourne with opera. Both had appropriately large theatres. Battle was known, if at all, for 1066, hardly a relevant factor in these circumstances. Perhaps tastes had changed too: the music was always serious, even the jazz. Battle would never be a Glastonbury.



Logo for the final years.

After the Arts Council grant ended the Committee struggled on under its joint chairmen Simon Alexander (son of Harry and Hazel) and Peter Mills. But in 2006 the inevitable decision was made: that year's Festival was to be the last.

The last festivals seem to have demonstrated a slight move away from an emphasis on classical music and sometimes a touch of nostalgia. There were as always serious matters: in 2003 a debate on joining the Euro, with distinguished proposers and opposers; and in 2004 a talk by Charlotte Moore on autism. The last organiser was Judith Warrington, a former chairman.

Later in 2006 the Charity Commission was informed that it the Society had closed – but did nothing about it until September 2009. It seemed reluctant to die.

George Kiloh
2021

This article is derived almost entirely from records kept by Battle Town Council and recovered by Simon Alexander, son of Harry and stepson of Hazel; he and Peter Mills were joint chairmen of the Committee in the Festival's last years. The photographs and the two logos are by Chris O'Brien, attended to where necessary by Peter Greene. Some data on individuals is from ancestry.co.uk.