

4.4 Later medieval town (Maps 9 and 10)



Fig. 23. Lewes castle: 14th-century barbican with the 12th-century gateway beyond.

4.4.1 Buildings and monuments

Of later medieval modifications **Lewes castle** preserves two 13th-century angle-towers added to the Norman shell keep of the south-west motte. These have stringcourses, arrow-slits, and heavily battered bases. The barbican is evidence of 14th-century updating of the castle. Like the gatehouse at Battle Abbey, it probably dates from the late 1330s and, if so, was likewise built as a response to increasing French raids that precipitated the Hundred Years' War: Edward III certainly required increased security at the castle for this reason in 1336.³¹¹ With its corbelled-out corner turrets to front and rear, portcullis and its machicolations, it substantially reinforced the simple Norman gatehouse.

The **town wall** at Lewes survives in fragmentary form only. Sections stand east of and parallel to Westgate Street, Keere Street and Southover Road, but have been so repeatedly patched and repaired that little is visibly medieval. The lower parts of the northern bastion of West Gate itself and the adjacent wall survive inside, and below

the floor of, the Freemasons Hall (148 High Street). The remains, and earlier views and a plan,³¹² suggest a 13th-century date.

Of the upstanding parts of the **Lewes priory**, almost nothing of significance post-dates c.1200. An exception is the fragmentary remains of the great gatehouse just north-east of the church of St John the Baptist. Here, the southern respond of the west-facing main arch survives *in situ* next to the gate to the churchyard. To the east of this the capital and lower part of an internal arch on the south wall of the gatehouse also remain. The smaller pedestrian arch of the west wall was rebuilt in the 19th century and, confusingly, now faces northwards nearby at the west end of Priory Crescent. Elaborately decorated with dog-tooth and stiff-leaf foliage, the Sussex marble arches date from the early 13th century.

There are no *in situ* upstanding remains of the second major religious house at Lewes – the Franciscan friary, or **Grey Friars**. However, a 15th-century archway to the nearby churchyard of All Saints is reputed to derive from the friary, apparently relocated in the 19th century during construction of the first railway station at Lewes.³¹³



Fig. 24. Lewes priory: *in situ* remains of the main arch of the early 13th-century gatehouse, adjacent to the present gate to the churchyard of the church of St John the Baptist.



Fig. 25. All Saints, Friars Walk: 15th-century west tower.

The chapel of the **hospital of St James** survives as a private house adjacent to Elm Tree House, Southover High Street. This preserves two cusped ogee-headed windows that, like the east window that is known only through antiquarian record,³¹⁴ are of 14th-century date. This is consistent with Godfrey's suggestion that this hospital replaced the earlier hospital that was converted to the parish church of St John the Baptist. More recently it has been proposed that the hospital of St James existed in the 12th century and that it was its enlargement (rather than the need for a larger parish church) that made the other hospital redundant.³¹⁵ This is implausible, not least since the hall of the hospital of St James was recorded in the late 18th century at 33.5m x 11m,³¹⁶ thus probably making it a little smaller than that of the 12th-century hospital at St John's.³¹⁷ With its wide hall (akin to a church nave) and narrower axial chapel (akin to a church chancel), the hospital of St James was similar in plan to the surviving late 13th-century hospital of St Mary, in Chichester.

Several of the surviving **parish churches** of Lewes are predominantly late medieval. Notwithstanding the possible Norman core to the chancel walls, St Thomas at Cliffe is predominantly of the 14th century, with a short three-bay nave and aisles of this period.

Evidently this replaced an earlier nave and aisles of the same plan, since the west end of the north aisle is of the 13th century. A substantial west tower was added in the 15th century. Another three-bay 14th-century arcade survives at St Michael's church, in this case to the south aisle only. Otherwise the only other medieval remains at St Michael's are the west wall (excluding the window and door) and the western round tower, both dated to the 13th century by Godfrey, but possibly earlier.³¹⁸ All Saints has suffered still greater loss of medieval fabric, with only its 15th-century west tower surviving later rebuilding. St Mary's Westout (St Anne's) saw only minor modification in the later medieval period with its eastern extension to the chancel dating from the 13th century, and the buttressing of the west tower probably dating from the 15th century. The likely former hospital next to the priory gate (St John's church), was almost entirely rebuilt in the later medieval period, with the single-aisled nave (re-using the shortened 12th-century arcade) dating from the 14th century. The west bay (heavily rebuilt) of the chancel, and the crown-post roof of the nave are of the 15th century.



Fig. 26. St Thomas at Cliffe: 14th-century north arcade of nave, with 13th-century west window to north aisle.

An absence of systematic survey of the **townhouses** of Lewes means that current understanding of the survival of medieval buildings is likely to be a considerable underestimate. Nevertheless, the 10 known survivals of pre-1500 houses are significant as they include four examples of townhouses with undercrofts.



Fig. 27. 70-2 High Street: undercroft looking northwards, with blocked doorway on the left to adjacent undercroft (no. 73).

At 70-2 High Street, there is an undercroft of c.1300 with a pointed barrel-vault of chalk, and two primary cupboards in the front wall. The undercroft is set directly on, and oriented at right-angles to, the street-front. The only primary doorway is in the side (west) wall, so that the undercroft formed a pair with that at no. 73. The latter is now clad and has no vault, but a large 19th-century window to a lightwell in the front wall appears to reuse the original doorway to the street. The combination of (possibly) timber-ceiled undercroft with a less accessible vaulted undercroft beyond is found elsewhere and has been linked to use as a tavern.³¹⁹



Fig. 28. Staircase to street at the undercroft below the town hall, High Street.

At 66 High Street a timber-ceiled sandstone undercroft is again oriented at right-angles to the street. In the front (north) wall a 1.43m-wide central doorway is now blocked but led directly to the street, and the adjacent window opened into a lightwell. Both features date the undercroft to the early 14th century.

At the town hall a more substantial barrel-vaulted undercroft (6.17m x 12.6m) lies parallel to the High Street, with both doorway and steps to street intact. Additionally, there is a small spiral stair at the rear of the undercroft, providing internal access. The architectural features date from the 14th century. Although all these undercrofts are now entirely below ground level (that at the town hall with its floor 3.76m below the pavement), the details of the external face of the doorway at the town hall and at 66 High Street suggest a substantial rise in the external ground level since their construction, perhaps in the order of 1-1.5m. This would have left such undercrofts only partly subterranean and the present ground floor slightly above street level. This type of townhouse dominated the high streets of the larger towns of England from the early 13th to the mid-14th centuries, with its combination of large commercial space (undercrofts) and smaller upper-level shops (maximizing the valuable street frontage, and confining the domestic parts of the house to the rear.³²⁰ It must be suspected, as Godfrey pointed out as long ago as 1940, that undercrofts (and thus such split-level townhouses) were the norm, or at least common, along the market place in Lewes.³²¹ The possibility that the town hall undercroft was part of the house of Robert Spicer, MP for Lewes in 1322-4, is at least consistent with the type of substantial merchants that would have used such undercrofts.³²²

Of the more intact medieval townhouses, 74-5 High Street is perhaps the earliest example, with its corner site allowing jettying on two sides (with dragon beam), and, on the first-floor elevation to St Martin's Lane, remarkably well-preserved tracery combining trefoils and quatrefoils dating from the 14th century. To the east, 67 High Street is a heavily restored timber-framed townhouse, with its 15th-century crown-post visible from the exterior in its diminutive gable. More substantial 15th-century timber-framed houses are found elsewhere in the High Street at nos. 92 (Bull House) and 99/100, both of which have gables to the street, jetties on adjacent sides, and close-studding. In Southover, Anne of Cleves House has a 14th-century cellar beneath the hall of the later house above.



Fig. 29. Anne of Cleves House, Southover High Street.

12/13 Cliffe High Street is a Wealden house, with a near contemporary rear range: both have crown-post roofs.³²³



Fig. 30. 74-5 High Street: 14th-century timber framing.

4.4.2 Excavations (Map 5)

While the chief value of many of the excavations in Lewes lies in the Late Anglo-Saxon and Norman periods, they have produced important evidence for the later medieval town. For dates of the excavations and their publications, refer to sections 4.1.2 and 4.2.2, above.

The most important later medieval site excavated is that of the Franciscan friary (**Grey Friars**). The site of the friary buildings has seen extensive reuse since dissolution in 1538, with the most recent redevelopment of part of the site as a magistrates court being preceded by archaeological excavation (1985-6 and 1988-9). This followed earlier trial trenches in 1967 and 1981. The excavations revealed the stone footings of parts of the church (chancel and part of nave), sacristy, chapter house, dorter undercroft, cloister, a small courtyard, refectory, kitchen, garderobe, a culvert (which probably flushed the rere-dorter) and what is likely to have been the cellarer's stores. These buildings could not be accurately dated, but the earliest seem to relate to the initial construction of the friary in the early 13th century, on reclaimed land in the floodplain. This was followed by a major programme of rebuilding, probably in the late 13th or early 14th centuries. This rebuilding and an intermediary phase of more minor works were marked by the raising of floor levels in response to a continuing problem with dampness. Large buttresses on the east side of the complex also appear to have been built in response to the proximity of the River Ouse, and the buildings are located at the extreme west of the site (i.e. as far from the river as possible).³²⁴

The Grey Friars church was smaller than at many other Franciscan monasteries, with an unaisled nave and a chancel of identical width. The part-surviving late 13th-century Grey Friars church at Priory Park, Chichester, is arguably the best parallel for the plan of the Lewes example, although there is insufficient evidence from the excavation at Lewes to reconstruct the elevation of the church.

The excavation of the friary produced tantalizing evidence for the **waterfront** before the 13th century. An apparently extensive and certainly artificial deposit of flint gravel has been interpreted as a hard for access to the river and for beaching ships. This was subsequently covered with alluvium and dumped rubbish in the 12th century, perhaps behind a new timber-revetted waterfront.³²⁵ During widening of the bridge in 1931 a layer of flint and ashes was found beneath the bridge and just beneath the river bed, extending across the river, and this

could represent more of the surface of the pre-12th-century hard rather than evidence of an early pre-bridge crossing of the River Ouse.³²⁶

The friary excavation also demonstrated that the Grey Friars infilled and built over the **town ditch**, 10.5m east of, and parallel to, the east side of Friars Walk. Although no evidence of a town wall was found, only part of the ditch fell within the excavation area and, thus, any wall would have stood further to the west. The infilling of the ditch and construction of a wall over it is documented by a grant of 1244. There was no archaeological evidence for the date of the ditch.³²⁷

The borough continued to be occupied west of the town ditch at this time, since mid-12th to 14th-century pottery was excavated at the site to the rear of **Lewes House** (High Street), from rubbish-pits to properties fronting Broomans Lane or Friars Walk.³²⁸ More substantial excavations at **Lewes Library** (Friars Walk) located numerous cess and rubbish-pits, again predominantly of 12th to 14th-century date.³²⁹ On the northern side of the medieval town the **Edward Street** excavations revealed 13th and 14th-century pottery associated with a copper furnace, perhaps indicative of an industrial zone.³³⁰ To the north of this at **St John Street**,³³¹ **Brook Street**,³³² and **Lancaster Street**³³³ there was no evidence of late medieval occupation. Similar evidence came from the excavations in **North Street** and together, these suggest abandonment of much of the area between Brack Mount and the church of St John-sub-Castro by the 14th century.³³⁴

Excavations to the north of the church of St Thomas at **Cliffe** revealed deposits of compacted chalk dating to the 13th or 14th centuries. This confirms that Cliffe is built on made ground and that this was late in date even this far east, though the church itself has 13th-century fabric and, possibly, even a 12th-century chancel (section 4.3.1). No burials were found, which is consistent with the recorded practice of burials from Cliffe at South Malling and elsewhere, and the open space north of the church may have been the 'Fair Place' used for the two annual fairs from 1410.³³⁵

4.4.3 Topography (Maps 9 and 10)

While the street pattern of the historic core of Lewes was largely in place in the preceding period, it is only from the later medieval period that finer topographic details are discernible. These include tenement, or burgage plot, boundaries, along the High Street from the bottom of School Hill to the Westgate. Those within the area of the gridded streets (i.e. west of

the war memorial) have little depth (those on the south side showing no continuity of boundaries beyond Stewards Inn Lane) and, thus, are largely preserved as the boundaries between medieval and post-medieval buildings. This not only accounts for the lack of archaeological excavations of such boundaries, but also precludes the identification of larger plots and their subdivision. Thus, John Houghton's proposed 20ft-width for burgages in Lewes is based on the disposition of the grid of lanes rather than on the size (or antiquity) of individual plots. His argument that such 20ft-wide burgage plots continued uninterrupted down School Hill undermines the case for early (i.e. pre-Conquest) origins, for no allowance is made for the interruption of the eastern defences of the burh.³³⁶ In noting this, Brent's suggestion of wider burgage plots on School Hill (perhaps 25ft) is equally unsupported by any identifiable early plot boundaries.³³⁷ In short, the absence of long plots and the ambiguity as to the dating and primacy of the numerous building boundaries limit the potential for study of burgage plots in Lewes, though it is probable that many property boundaries along High Street/School Hill were in existence by the Conquest and that these were likely to have been subdivided by the mid-14th century. Similar plots developed along other the continuations of the high street at this period at the suburbs of Westout and, to a greater degree, at Cliffe.

At Southover, the suburb adjacent to the priory had developed two centres by the 13th century. Westport was concentrated on Southover High Street west of Cockshut Lane, but also included houses on the rectangle of roads to the north formed by St Pancras Lane, The Course and Potters Lane. To the east of the hospital of St James, a second concentration called Eastport also had a rectangular street pattern, in this case formed by Southover High Street (here on a north-south alignment), Priory Street, Garden Street and Eastport Lane. The latter had tenements with plots stretching northwards to the Winterbourne.³³⁸

The medieval market place of the borough of Lewes is identifiable from this period in the length of the High Street broadly between Castlegate and the war memorial.³³⁹ The advancement of the southern street frontage east of Station Street suggests encroachment of c.12m eastwards of the church of St Mary-in-Foro, most likely dating from the pre-Black Death commercial zenith of the town. That 16th-century 42, 43, and 49 High Street were built on this line certainly precludes later encroachment, and it