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Eastbourne's Story

There has been continuous settlement in Eastbourne since the early Iron Age. Neolithic man mined flint in the area, using it for his weapons and tools. Flint also became widely used as a building material, and it can still be seen in traditional Sussex walls.

Celts settled in the present Green Street area of Old Town in about 500 BC. Farming on the Downs was important, continuing under the Roman occupation, and evidence of the Iron Age and Roman fields can still be found. In 1851 the huge foundations of an impressive villa were uncovered near the entrance to the Pier and the site is believed to have been the home of a Roman overlord living during the First Century.

In AD 410 Saxon invaders arrived creating a base around the stream or burne, which still rises in Motcombe Gardens and which was destined to give Eastbourne its name.

King Alfred and Edward the Confessor owned the Royal Manor of Burne and its continuous recorded history begins in the late Saxon period.

After the Norman Conquest, Eastbourne became a farming village, while land nearby was given to King William's half-brother, Robert, Count of Mortain, who built the castle at Pevensey. It was during compilation of the Domesday Book that Burne became Bourne. During the 12th Century, a Saxon parish church near the rise of the stream was rebuilt at the crossing of the only two real thoroughfares which existed in Eastbourne until the 19th Century.

In the 13th Century, the Lamb Inn (as popular now as it ever was) was built facing the church. Business was conducted in the cellar and the resident merchant lived in a flat above. On the other side of what is now one of Eastbourne's busiest roads, is the timbered house, Pilgrims, which has mediaeval origins and is thought to be one of the oldest inhabited private homes in the British Isles. By 1555 the Manor (estate) was called East Bourne and was purchased by three Sussex families. A hundred years later there were just 130 houses in the parish and the population of 800-900 was grouped in four areas: in Bourne, near the church; in the area which is now around South Street; at Sea Houses – some of which still stand on Marine Parade; and in Meads.

Resort - Eastbourne's fortunes as a seaside resort began to flourish with the publication in 1752 of 'Dissertation on the Use of Sea-Water' by Dr Richard Russell of Lewes. At first seawater was seen as more of a benefit than a pleasure – prescriptions often consisted of 25-gallon cures to be taken in one-pint doses. Bathing, meanwhile, was only recommended in winter when the pores were closed. In 1780 some of George III's children spent the summer at Sea Houses, even though Eastbourne was still hardly more than a fishing village. As late as 1801 there were only 243 houses and fewer than 1700 inhabitants.

In fact, Eastbourne was a comparative late developer as a seaside resort, becoming more accessible, however, with the coming of the railway in 1849. At this time there were two principal landowners: William Cavendish, who became the seventh Duke of Devonshire, and

John Davies Gilbert. Both young men set out to develop the natural beauties of Eastbourne regardless of the expense – hence the early description of the town as one ‘planned by gentlemen for gentlemen’.

The charm and elegance engendered by that concept is still very evident today in Eastbourne’s wide boulevards and tree-lined streets, while the three-tiered promenade to Holywell under Beachy Head was built at the Duke of Devonshire’s own expense. Almost two-thirds of the town belonged to the Cavendish family and from 1860 development was extensive.

The architect, Henry Currey, was commissioned to produce plans for Eastbourne, the first with Devonshire Place as the main thoroughfare (the Duke’s statue is at its seafront entrance). Later, in 1872, came the plan for Meads, the ‘Belgravia of Eastbourne’. Eastbourne’s drainage and water system, churches, parades and Devonshire Park also owe much to the Duke, and his edict that no shops were to be built on the seafront still stands. In 1875 the Winter Garden opened. Originally an extension to a roller-skating rink and conservatory, it quickly became known as a mini Crystal Palace. The Pier had opened shortly beforehand, offering ‘sea breezes without sea-sickness’. Today it is one of the best-preserved piers in the country.

Civic Eastbourne - Eastbourne was incorporated as a municipal borough in 1883. The construction of a Town Hall soon followed and it was opened in 1886, with fixtures and fittings of the very highest quality, including extensive oak panelling, marble mosaic floors and stained glass. In the cloakrooms and lavatories, meanwhile, Minton tiles were installed. For all its splendour, however, the Town Hall had no clock in its clock tower until 1891.

In the same year a local police force was established – for less than £3,000 the town had the benefit of a chief constable, two inspectors, six sergeants and no fewer than 29 constables. The people of Eastbourne have always been great music-lovers and in 1899 the Borough formed a municipal orchestra which played mainly at the Winter Garden. In 1903, Eastbourne became the first local authority in the world to create a municipal bus company. Another milestone of that year was the opening of the Technical Institute and Public Library, made possible by a donation of £10,000 from Andrew Carnegie. (The building, on the site of the current Central Library, was destroyed by bombing during World War II.)

During the 1914/18 War, the Corporation Transport Department filled a new role, as manufacturer of munitions. Towards the end of the war the buses were driven by gas because of the petrol shortage. Eastbourne’s buses made news again in 1922, when a matter of huge controversy, ‘the three B’s issue’ was finally resolved with permission being granted for buses, bands and bathing on Sundays.

Eastbourne acquired its delightful Towner Art Gallery in 1924. Now recognised as one of the country’s most interesting provincial galleries. It was created thanks to the generosity of J C Towner, a former member of the Town Council, who bequeathed £6,000 and 20 pictures. The Local History Museum was opened on the lower floor of the building during Eastbourne’s Centenary Year, 1983.

A remarkably forward-looking decision was taken by the Council in 1926, when it purchased 4,100 acres of Downland around Beachy Head in order to protect the area from indiscriminate building. Today the Council has four farms on the Downs, which are designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Conservation of the Downs remains a firm priority of the Council.

During World War II, Eastbourne began by welcoming evacuees into the town. Later, however, Eastbourne itself had to be evacuated. Nearly 700 high explosive and 4,000

incendiary bombs fell on the town and the pride of our seafront – the magnificent Carpet Gardens – was given over to the production of onions.

Contemporary Eastbourne is a thriving holiday resort, with modern attractions which fit in well with the town's more traditional appeal. For those who live and work here it is a flourishing business centre, while conferences make an important contribution to Eastbourne's economy.

The fascinating story of Eastbourne is told in full at the Local History Museum in Old Town.