

## A Potted History of Malling House, Lewes

Malling House is believed to stand on the site of an earlier dwelling that served as a resting place for Archbishops of Canterbury. Legend has it that the four knights who slew Thomas a Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 stayed at this house on their journey back from Canterbury. It was pulled down during the dissolution of the monasteries in Henry VIII's reign.

The present house is now thought to have been built around 1660, but it was totally refronted in its present style in 1720.

For a century or more, it remained in the ownership of the Spence family. One of the local roads, formerly the lane leading from South Malling village to Malling House, still bears the name Spence Lane.

There is a record of land at South Malling being purchased by William Spence, barrister-at-law, in May 1671. He died in July that year and possession passed to his brother John. John Spence, who became a Deputy Lieutenant for the County in 1688, died in 1691.

William Spence's remains were removed to a vault at South Malling Church in 1775. John and his wife Ruth were buried at South Malling.

The house was rebuilt in the lifetime of another John Spence, who was the son of John and Ruth, and who died in 1741 at the age of 57.

Ownership then passed to successive generations of Spences, during which the house appears to have been occupied at times by tenants, including the Dowager Countess of Chichester, and then a Mr William Baldock in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

For some years during the Victorian era, Malling House was the home of the Crofts family. Electoral registers record first a Henry Peter Crofts, later a Reverend Peter Gearing Crofts and then an Elizabeth Crofts. The electoral roll of 1861 shows the head of the household as Elizabeth Crofts, aged 66, living there with a butler, coachman, lady's maid, cook, housemaid and kitchen maid.

An advertisement offering the house for sale in The Times in 1878 describes "an exceedingly attractive Freehold Residential Property...It comprises a substantial, old-fashioned brick-built residence, containing noble entrance hall, three reception rooms, housekeeper's room, servants' hall, large kitchen, six bedrooms, two dressing rooms, eight servants' bedrooms, the usual domestic offices and excellent dry underground cellarage."

Much of the sales 'pitch' – describing the approach "by broad carriage sweep, with two pairs of entrance gates, surrounded by extensive lawns" – could apply just as well were Malling House for sale today!

About the turn of 1900, the occupier was Philip Horace Molineaux, believed to have been a local banker. Later, it was owned by Reginald Henry Powell from whom it was purchased in 1923 by Sir George Boughey.

The house has been used as a country residence for more than two centuries until it was bought by East Sussex County Council in 1947 for the then East Sussex Constabulary. In 1968, it became headquarters for the new Sussex Police upon amalgamation of the five police forces in East and West Sussex.

Malling House has been fully restored in the style of an eighteenth century country house, following a serious fire in October 1990.

This restoration, which cost more than a million pounds and took almost a year to complete, provided the opportunity to remove the partition walls, false ceilings and general clutter that inevitably goes with the piecemeal adaptation of an elderly building for office accommodation. In their place, the original large rooms have been restored, with their elegant fireplaces.

But historic Malling House is no sterile museum piece. It remains the vital hub of a busy Police, and more recently East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, headquarters and contains the offices of the Chief Constable and Chief Officers. The opportunity was therefore taken during refurbishment to install trunking for modern communications equipment as well as a state-of-the-art fire detection system.

Sealed fireplaces were uncovered for the first time in a generation to reveal valuable historical detail. The most striking can be seen in two first floor offices, where Delft hand painted tiles depict children at play.

It also emerged that an original 17<sup>th</sup> Century building had been over clad in the early eighteenth century when the familiar Queen Anne frontage took shape, it was in the void between these two buildings that the 1990 fire, started by a decorator's blow torch during routine maintenance work, spread with such damaging effect.

It was also found that when the building was extended at its southern end to complete its symmetry at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, less durable pine was used instead of oak. This newer roof section was the most severely damaged in the fire and has now been replaced with Sussex oak. Eight tonnes of Horsham stone slates, no longer generally available, were found to restore the roof as original.

In 2016/17, the house was completely redecorated in a 17<sup>th</sup> century Palladian colour scheme in preparation for East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service to move in.

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