

The Workshop

A Meeting Hall or Market Hall from the Late 16th Century English's Passage, Cliffe, Lewes

When Malcolm Rose and Karin Richter bought this building in 1988, it was in a state of total neglect and dereliction. Local architect David Russell who had expert knowledge due to his involvement with the Weald and Downland Living Museum near Chichester, took on the project of restoring The Workshop. His sons Alasdair and Robert Russell repaired and rebuilt the timber frame in 1990: the frame was dismantled and taken away, repaired and re-assembled in a barn in Bolney. Meanwhile a new sub-structure was installed on site. Then, the completed frame was dismantled again, and re-erected on the new foundations. The work was finished in the autumn of 1990.

English Heritage gave a grant towards the costs of reconstruction, and the Workshop was finally given protected status under a new Grade II listing.

The building has a similar construction to many on the north side of Cliffe High Street, and is therefore likely to be from a similar period, the late 1500s. The crown post structure of the roof is typical of this time and region. Although much of what you see now dates from 1990, since many of the original timbers had not survived or had too far gone to be saved, there was enough remaining to show exactly how the various elements had been put together.

When it was first built, the main hall projected out on its own from the back of No.11 Cliffe High Street, and there may have been a doorway between the two buildings on the first floor. The stairs were probably always in the same position as now.

Above the stairs, now hidden, there was a 17th century window in the back wall of No.11, which would have overlooked an open courtyard. Under the floor downstairs, in front of the pillar drill, is a well built with stone steps, which would have been in the courtyard, and may have served everyone in English's Passage. Although it had likely been covered for centuries, during reconstruction the architect had to prove to the planning authorities that the well had not been in use for at least 25 years, in order to be allowed to lay the new floor. The presence of the well and the rear window in no.11 show that the rooms now fronting English's Passage are later additions, possibly 17th/18th century.

Alasdair and Robert Russell judged from the original numbering of the timbers that the bay at the far end would have been complete, with another whole bay beyond, making the building some 18 feet longer than now. If this was so, the building originally looked astonishingly like the Crawley Hall which is now in the Weald and Downland Living Museum.

The flood of October 2000 did of course affect the building severely; the height to which the water rose is clearly visible on the doors downstairs. Flooding has been a regular hazard in Cliffe; there are records of at least 19 floods between 1734 and the present day.

KNOWN DATES

- Late 1500s: construction of The Workshop, projecting from the back of No.11 Cliffe High Street.
- c. 1789 – 1825: there was a Malt House in English's Passage, possibly adjoining The Workshop.
- 1826: there was an advert for the sale of eight cottages, perhaps on the site of the Malt House. The Workshop was cut shorter.
- 1887: an undertaker, F. Knight, was based in English's Passage, perhaps at The Workshop.
- 20th century: one occupant, perhaps a sign writer, was undertaking lettering in gold leaf, 1919-1934. Other occupants within living memory have been a wig maker – Penny's Wigs -, a greengrocer, and a painter and decorator who cleaned his brushes on the bayposts until the paint was ¼ inch thick.
- in the 1980s Paul Fowler occupied The Workshop making stage scenery, including for Glyndebourne.

THE PRESENT DAY

From October 1990 the building was used by Malcolm and Karin as a harpsichord and clavichord making workshop, and from 2007 until his untimely death at the end of 2022, by Malcolm Rose alone for his harpsichord making, and for his wire making business, producing strings mainly for historical keyboard instruments. Now, their daughters carry on the string making business on the premises.

The Workshop Concert Series, featuring well-established players in the Early Music field, was founded in 1991, and took place in the upper hall – instruments under construction, benches and tools had to be cleared away for each concert, and about 50 chairs set out. After a hiatus, the Workshop Concerts, organised by Alison Bury and Richard Earle (both distinguished musicians who live in Lewes), are continuing in a new venue, Cliffe Church Hall, and occasionally at St Michael's Church. For more information, please go to: <https://theworkshopseries.co.uk>

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