

The Old Poor House, 7 Castle Banks, Lewes, BN7 1UZ

The Old Poor House is a Grade II listed property divided into the Old Poor House, no 7 Castle Banks and no 8 Castle Banks within a conservation area in the South Downs National Park. The building is dated 1734 in the listed description, but other sources, including the Lewes Conservation Area Character Appraisal, places the date of the poor house for the parish of St John-Sub-Castro as 1633, when an area in the castle precinct was allocated for the use of the poor (Lewes Extensive Urban Survey). Mrs Henry Dudeney reports in her article on the Old Poor House of 1928 (The Sussex County Magazine) that a John Rowe notes *'the Lords of Barony granted a parcel of land lately part of the Lord's waste, called Castle Banks, for the use of the poor'* in 1633. Limited records remain from this period of the property's history, and parish documents are reported to have been lost in a period just predating Mrs Dudeney's article. A survey completed by Historic Buildings Consultant Alan Dickinson MRICS GradDiplCons (AA) noted that the roof over no 7 & 8 is consistent with a 17th century date consisting of a paired 75mm wide rafters without a ridge board supported by side purlins on collars pegged to principal rafters notched to accommodate the purlins.

The Old Poor House (list entry number 1353010) was listed on 29th October 1985 as:

House pair. 1734. Plastered with plain tiled roof. End stacks and single stack on slope in centre towards eaves. 2 dormers, to the left flat-headed, to the right gabled. 2 storeys and basements; slight irregular window front, casements, some sliding, with one glazed bar dash on ground floor to extreme right. Recessed front door to the right, up three steps, with fluted pilasters and entablature hood. Boarded door to the left under left-hand ground-floor window.

The property also includes chalk block walls which were used in several properties in Lewes and the Old Poor House in Castle Banks is noted for this feature alongside these other examples within the Lewes Conservation Area Character Appraisal (p.22). It has been suggested that the chalk blocks at Castle Banks may have originated from the castle. The largely exposed timber structure includes unusually long cross-beams, with intermediate post support and joists spanning from side to side. The rear wall is of flint construction incorporating thin brick quoins around the openings and shallow elliptical one-ring brick arches, the bricks measuring approximately 57mm deep. Other internal features include low ceilings and irregular floors, and fireplaces in the basement (north wall) and ground floor (east wall).

In 1839 land including the poor house was purchased by Robert Willard who then built neighbouring properties to the southern boundary. In 1848 the property was purchased by Charles French a beer retailer and became an inn, 'The Traveller's Rest'. Mr French went on to divide the Poor House into two properties and construct properties to the northern edge of the poor house thus substantially reducing the scale of the grounds. During his ownership of the property the remaining garden was *'cemented over and divided into two grim backyards with cluttered outbuildings'* (Dudeney 1928 Sussex County Magazine).

The property changed hands on several occasions as an inn before it was sold to Carmine Deljudice and became a lodging house. In 1904 the property was sold to Rosario Jannece who remained in residence until it was purchased by the author, Mrs (Alice) Henry Dudeney in 1927.

The Old Poor House was refurbished in 1928 by Mrs Henry Dudeney and published reports of an event to mark the completion of works were to be found in the Sussex County Herald, and her own article in the Sussex County Magazine from 1928. According to her own article, Mrs Dudeney's work in the garden included removing the outbuildings, cutting beds into the cement yard to plant trees and planting roses to the external boundary wall to the South. An accompanying illustration to this article (which can be found within the documentation provided) shows an undulating rear yard (presumably cement covered as in the written description) so the current brick paved surface would therefore appear to post-date 1928.

Subsequently to Mrs Dudeney's ownership, the Old Poor House has changed hands on several more occasions and has remained a private dwelling house. The current owners purchased the property in 2002.

Garden

The garden is within the curtilage of the Old Poor House. There is no mention of the garden or anything within the garden in the listing of the property.

The garden of the Old Poor House is to be found at the rear of the property (the garden is approx. 8M from the front of the property) and can be accessed from the house itself or via a door at the front of the property, which takes you into an enclosed side passage that runs to the side of the Old Poor House/beneath no 6 Castle Banks into the garden. Only the owners of the Old Poor House has access to this covered passage. The garden is not overlooked and cannot be seen from the road.

A brick and flint wall runs the entire length of the boundary wall to the north between no 6 and The Old Poor House. A wooden fence runs the length of the boundary wall between the two gardens of The Old Poor House and no 8. The flint wall that forms that back wall of the garden is part of the retaining wall of Brack Mount, a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

Currently there is a 'lean to' which rests up against and on Brack Mount retaining wall. The 'lean to' consists of 3 walls - brick wall to the left and a flint wall remnant to the right with a wooden front wall. It has a very steep tiled roof, the line of which goes above the retaining wall. The 'lean to' was in place when the current owners purchased the property in 2002.

The owners believe the 'lean to' is becoming increasingly unstable and wish to take it down. The brick wall to the left is beginning to bow out and to come away from the retaining wall at the back where it butts up against it. The ridge tiles are coming loose & cracked due to the vegetation that grows down from Brack Mount – the vegetation grows under the ridge tiles and lifts them & it has been known to grow down the internal 'back wall'/Brack Mount retaining wall. When Brack Mount is in full foliage, the vegetation (because of the sloop of the roof) continues to grow down the roof of the 'lean to' dislodging roof tiles and adding weight to an already fragile roof structure and the supporting left hand side wall.

Of further concern is that potential damage the 'lean to' may be doing to the retaining wall of Brack Mount upon which it rests. Maintenance of the 'lean to' itself is challenging. The owners cannot access the roof from the top without climbing on to Brack Mount and there is no access nor right of

access from their garden on to the Mount. Attempts to tackle this problem from ground level - to pull down the vegetation – is very difficult as this dislodges roof & ridge tiles further; and climbing on the roof itself is highly inadvisable as the structure is not safe. The site and size of the 'lean to' prevents the owners from fully maintaining the back retaining wall

The owners would like to deconstruct the 'lean to' – that is, to remove the tiled roof, wooden front, and the brick wall to the left – keeping the flint wall remnant to the right as it is. It is thought that this flint wall (unlike the brick wall) may be of some age and may have associations with an earlier garden, although no evidence has been found to support this and it is not mentioned in the property's listing.

The owners have spoken with Sussex Archaeological Society (SAS) who conducted a site visit and are also of the view that it is best for the integrity & maintenance of this section of the Brack Mount retaining wall for the 'lean to' to come down; leaving the flint wall remnant intact.

The open space would then be turned over to planting, designed to be easily maintained and planted in such a way as to not adversely affect the material of the retaining wall in any way (i.e., nothing attached to it or grown on it). The materials of the 'lean to' would be re-used within the garden so there will be zero waste and any new materials & crafts would be sourced locally and be sustainable. The planting in the garden is designed to be natural and informal and to encourage and support the existing bird and other wildlife already found living on and around Brack Mount.

Importantly, by deconstructing the 'lean to' the owners will also be able see and maintain their entire section of the retaining wall to Brack Mount thus fulfilling their obligations to maintain their boundaries as well as protect/preserve the retaining wall of a Scheduled Ancient Monument of which they have the pleasure to live up against.

Further, the elements of the 'lean to' intended for deconstruction have no heritage value, and in fact their removal will only enhance the special architectural or historic interest of the building.

Janet & Michael Kyriacou