

SECRET HISTORY OF BATTLE

This tour of Battle High Street aims to take you behind appearances to find out about some of Battle's "secret history".

Coming out of the Museum you will see immediately to the right, the **Almonry building**. It was never actually an almonry; the land was put aside for the use of the Almoner of Battle Abbey and for many years it would have been the farmhouse for Almonry Farm. There has been a house on this site since 1090; the current building we think dates from the 15th century, probably with an open hall. It was extended in the 16th century, being converted into a courtyard townhouse. The house was sold in the 1980s to Battle Town Council who use it for Council offices and meetings. Our photo shows "Mimi" Holloway, the last resident, proposing a toast in the 1970's in what is now the meeting room:



Now we walk down the High Street on the right hand side, towards Battle Abbey, noticing the apparently innocuous **Nationwide building** a few yards down. This was the town guildhall in medieval times for merchants and traders, and regulation of measures and standards. It has a huge vaulted cellar decorated with gargoyles- one can only imagine the deals done there over the wine!



Down the little driveway by the Nationwide is **Vicary's Garage**; in the 1930's one of the mechanics was John Shore, who became an ace bomber pilot in the Second World War , receiving the Military Cross for his 1941 "home run". He worked on experimental aircraft and defences and was killed in a flying accident in 1950. His unique account of his escape is in **Battle at War 1939-45** (see below).

A bit further down the High Street is the **Bull Inn**, run by Kerry and Alan Deeprise, with a friendly welcome, excellent local beers and tasty meals. It was built in 1688 from ashlar stone salvaged from the kitchen of Battle Abbey- after the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1538 the Abbey went into private ownership and the stone of the outbuildings was periodically pillaged or sold off for other purposes. The leaded lights are seventeenth century. Look very carefully at the No Entry sign on the right. Carved into the concrete you will see "RCE 1940", left by the Royal Canadian Engineers, stationed here in the Second World War. "**Battle at War 1939-45**" (Price £8.50) can be purchased from the Museum or from Rother Books on the other side of the road.



The Bull Inn

A little further down is the **George Hotel** (pictured below) – don't let *Simply Italian* fool you, this building has history. It's mentioned in William Cobbett's 1822 *Rural Rides*- he gave a speech there about rural poverty, especially bad in East Sussex due to Government attempts to hold the price of corn high. In 1830, only some 40 years after the French Revolution, the Government of the day thought that there was a real threat of revolution here, sparked by a speech William Cobbett made at the Battle Watch Oak on 16 October 1830. He talked about rural poverty and remarked that the violent protests that were happening were having a beneficial effect on employer behaviour- he was unsuccessfully prosecuted for that. The corner of the building is corbelled out to make it easier for horses and carriages to pass down the passage to the ostlers behind, now a Thai restaurant.



Keeping on the right hand side of the High Street you will reach the **Pilgrims' Rest**, on the Abbey Green immediately opposite to the Abbey. It's a 1420 half-timbered hall house in the Wealden style, upgraded in the sixteenth century (the studded door is original) and is on the site of an earlier building which was a hostel for travellers and pilgrims coming to the Abbey. Note the covered eaves and pointed arch over the door. English Heritage only open it now for weddings and other special occasions. Inside it has a full height central hall and two storeys either side, with a good example of a king post.



Going over the pelican crossing to the other side of the High Street, look out for the **Battle Memorial Hall** a little to your right. This used to be Langton House and dates from the sixteenth century- the ceiling in the foyer is of that age. It used to be inhabited by wealthy families, doctors and was even a workhouse in the eighteenth century. Its most unusual inhabitant, in the seventeenth century, was Edmund Langdon who was Battle's astrologer and astronomer. "**Edmund Langdon and his World**" may be purchased priced £10 from Rother Books in the High Street. The building is now the town's community centre, for entertainment, exhibitions and sales.

Walking back up the High Street you'll come across **Martins Newsagents**, which used to be Tickners, bombed in the Second World War. Mr and Mrs Giles were killed there on 2 February 1943. It is a legend in the town that their daughter Peggy was so determined to keep the business going that she delivered papers the next day.



It's probably now time for a coffee in **Bonneys** , just up the road from Martins, and run by local family firm Kate and Rob Parker. The coffee is their own special blend and when available, the Victoria Sponge is famous locally!

As you walk a few yards up the High Street from Bonneys, look out for the **Newbery Preserves** sign above the turning off where the butchers is.



Newberys began in the late nineteenth century, making jam, marmalade and pickles. Some residents of Battle still remember being able as children to tell what day of the week it was by the smell. Newberys closed down in the 1980's, unable to compete with rivals' mass production methods.

On up the High Street is **Rother Books**, which used to be an art gallery and before that a clockmakers (pictured below in 1965). A wide range of history books is stocked by owner Ian Cawley and there is an overnight ordering service.



For more on Battle's history, visit www.battlehistory.btck.co.uk and look through the 100+ and varied Collectanea articles on local history by the Battle and District Historical Society.

Adrian and Sarah Hall
Battle Museum of Local History
March 2019