

Rye: a quaint historic town in East Sussex



A street in Rye

Rye is a quaint historic town in East Sussex ideal for a pleasant day out or a weekend break. Among the major attractions are the Rye Museum, Ypres Tower, Lamb House, the Rye Parish Church of St Mary, the town hall, the Rye Heritage and Information Centre. After a stroll round town there is a variety of restaurants to chose from: Italian, traditional seafood, Thai and steakhouses.

The name of Rye is believed to come from Norman French "la Rie" meaning a bank. Medieval maps show that Rye was originally located on a huge embayment of the English Channel called the Rye Camber, which provided a safe anchorage and harbour. Probably as early as Roman times, Rye was important as a place of shipment and storage of iron from the Wealden Iron Industry. The Mermaid Inn originally dates to 1156.

Rye, as part of the Saxon Manor of Rameslie, was given to the Benedictine Abbey of Fécamp in Normandy by King Æthelred; it was to remain in Norman hands until 1247.

As one of the two "Antient Townes" (Winchelsea being the other), Rye was to become a limb of the Cinque Ports Confederation by 1189, and subsequently a full member. The protection of the town as one of the Cinque Ports was very important, due to the

Lamb House



commerce that trading brought. One of the oldest buildings in Rye is Ypres Tower, which was built in 1249 as "Baddings Tower", to defend the town from the French, and was later named after its owner John de Ypres. It is now part of the Rye Museum. Rye received its charter from King Edward I in 1289, and acquired privileges and tax exemptions in return for ship-service for the crown. The "Landgate" (the only surviving one of four original

fortified entrances to Rye) dates from 1329 in the early years of the reign of King Edward III. It is still the only vehicular route into the medieval centre of Rye and is suitable only for light vehicles.

Rye was considered one of the finest of the Cinque Ports even though constant work had to be done to stop the gradual silting-up of the river and the harbour. There was also a conflict of interest between the maritime interests and the landowners, who gradually

"inned" or reclaimed land from the sea on Romney and Walland Marsh and thus reduced the tidal-flows that were supposed to keep the harbour free of silt. Acts of Parliament had to be passed to enable the Rother to be kept navigable at all.

With the coming of bigger ships and larger deepwater ports, Rye's economy began to decline, and fishing and particularly smuggling (including owling, the smuggling of wool) became more important. Imposition of taxes on goods had encouraged smuggling since 1301, but by the end of the 17th century it became widespread

throughout Kent and Sussex, with wool being the largest commodity. When luxury goods were also added, smuggling became a criminal pursuit, and groups - such as the Hawkhurst Gang who met in the Mermaid Inn in Rye - turned to murder and were subsequently hanged.

This rich historical legacy has provided many tourist attractions. The Rye Museum has two sites, the Ypres Tower (early 14th century) and the East Street site.

The Tower has had many roles in its history from a fortification to protect the town, to a private

River Haven Hotel and Restaurant



dwelling, a prison and a mortuary. It is the oldest building--except for St Mary's church--open to the public in Rye. The balcony offers wonderful views of Romney Marsh, and the surrounding countryside.

The newest prize exhibit in the building is the Rye Tower Embroidery which manages to encapsulate the history of the Tower through some 600 years with great skill and humour.

The basement has much to appeal

to children of all ages: prisoners cells, armour and helmets to try, a Captain Pugwash Treasure Hunt.

An attractive garden, a reconstruction of a 15th century pleasure garden, lies hidden behind the Ypres Castle. The garden features important herbs of both culinary and medical importance to the period. It is complemented by a Stillroom within the Tower.

Lamb House was built in 1723 by James Lamb. Henry James leased the property and later purchased it in 1899. It was here he wrote the *Awkward Age*, *The Wing of a Dove*, *the Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*. In the Summer months James liked to use the Garden Room to dictate to his secretary. Sadly the Garden Room was destroyed by a bomb during World War II. After the death of Henry James, Lamb house became the home of A C Benson (who wrote the words to *Land of Hope and Glory*) and E F Benson.

Rye and its surrounding area were the inspiration for E F Benson's *Mapp and Lucia* novels.

Lamb House was presented to the National Trust in 1950. Some of Henry James possessions are on display. The walled garden has a rich variety of plants including roses.

For almost 900 years the Parish Church of Rye, dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, has dominated the hill on which the old town stands. It has stood through good

Rye Heritage and
Information Centre



Rye parish church



times and bad. In 1377 when the town was looted and set on fire by French invaders the church was extensively damaged. The roof fell in and the bells were carried off to France. They were recovered the next year when men from Rye and Winchelsea sailed to Normandy and took them back!

In 1742 a murder took place in the churchyard when Allen Grebell was killed by John Breeds who mistook him for the Mayor. John Breeds was hung and his remains

placed in an iron cage on Gibbets Marsh. Later this was moved to the church and later still to the Town Hall where it is to this day. The grave of Allen Grebell can be seen in the Clare Chapel.

There are several interesting stained glass windows in the church, although none are very old. The most beautiful is by Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1891) in memory of Mary Tiltman and can be seen in the North Aisle.

Today St Mary's is a popular destination for tourists who come to see the oldest church turret clock in the country which is still functioning. It dates from 15612- and has an 18ft long pendulum (a much later addition) which can be seen swinging in the body of the church. The present exterior clock face and the original 'Quarter Boys' (so called because they strike the quarters but not the hours) were added in 1760.

The Town Hall, which was built in 1741, was designed by Andrew Jelfe. The building is surmounted

by a cupola, which housed Jurats' Bell which was used in Quarter Sessions; a replacement bell was hung in 1981 to mark the wedding of Lady Diana to Prince Charles. The Doric doorway opens to a stair that leads to the court room, where the walls are inscribed with the names of the mayors since 1289, when Rye was incorporated. Today, the Rye Town Council meets in the court room on a regular basis.

The Rye Heritage and Information Centre provides an ideal introduction to the town bringing





The Cinque Ports



together the story of Rye set within the famous Rye Town Model sound and light show. Historic and Ghost Audio Walking Tours are available for hire, with guided ghost tours taking place on selected dates during the winter months.

The Heritage Centre is also host to a fantastic working collection of Old Pier amusement machines,

and has a variety of gifts, books and maps.

Almost suspended in time Rye is the sort of place that dreams are made of. The tranquil welcoming atmosphere, the enchanting streets, a variety of craft shops, galleries and restaurants draw visitors from all over the world.