

RS Summer School

Tuesdays 11 June to 9 July 2024
Friends' Meeting House, Ship Street, Brighton

Five seminars conducted by Dr Sue Berry

Tudor to early Georgian Brighton—an ever-changing town c1540-1780

Brighton's history from the reign of Henry VIII onwards demonstrates how a town's ability to respond to challenges wrought by external influences affects both the chances of it prospering or declining and shapes the townscape. We will explore the causes of change and their impact on this fascinating town. Transcripts of documents used as evidence with which to study the town from the Tudor period onwards will be viewed and discussed.

1. Tudor newcomer: Why does Brighton become a town?

Brighton's early development in its broader context of changes in the world of the Tudors—such as the rise in the country's population and major political decisions like the closing of the religious houses and the move away from being a Catholic nation to a Protestant one. The shortage of food played a key role in the development of long-distance fishing as a major part of Brighton's economy, with major influences on prosperity and birth rates.

2. Making a living by long distance fishing and its impact on Brighton 1540-1660.

In this session we closely examine the rise and decline of the fishing industry that had driven the growth of Brighton from the 1540s until the town ceased to send a fleet to the North Sea in the 1660s. Letters written by fishermen and others to the government, petitions complaining about the behaviour of the fish merchants at Yarmouth, wills and other documents bring alive this dangerous but important activity. Some fishermen took their profits to Newcastle and bought coal to sell. Others traded with Europe outside the fishing season. All of this we can see in the documentary evidence.

3. Fishermen and mariners: Brighton's developing social and economic structure seen through the archives 1540-1640.

For a brief period, Brighton was bigger than Lewes or Chichester but lacked the lawyers and other signs of a more sophisticated and robust economy. The lack of other economic activities meant that when fishing declined, the town had nothing else to turn to. We will explore what the townsfolk who did not fish did to earn a living, and how the town was infilled to accommodate the rising population. The houses were usually timber framed and small. Not unlike the old-town part of Hastings today. It was also a world in which women played a key role because so many of the men were absent for lengthy periods.

4. Brighton, the Civil War and interregnum and the start of decline.

Brighton's mariners (seafarers of any kind) were not recruited for the Royal Navy by Oliver Cromwell during the Interregnum after the English Civil War of the 1640s although the government knew that many local people had Royalist sympathies. This is a reason Prince Charles was brought here when he had to escape from England. But the government knew that the fishermen indulged in thieving from Portsmouth dockyard and hijacking French vessels. So an eye was kept on the unruly town.

The period between the 1660s (when King Charles II reigned) into the first half of the eighteenth century was not a happy time for the town. Fishing declined, as noted above, and the town had other issues to deal with, such as coastal erosion, which it could not afford to do. We will discuss the myths about the town during this period and why they became established, and the way in which the population declined. It lost the young people and aged, which put pressure on such facilities as the poor rate.

5. Regeneration and transformation

By the 1720s sea bathing, which was already being used by people who lived near the sea as a health treatment, became fashionable among the very wealthy and the increasingly numerous and prosperous upper ranks of the middle classes, especially townsfolk in London and other growing towns such as Bristol and Liverpool. Doctors had been advocating it as a therapy from the later seventeenth century, regarding it as an alternative to spas. Locally, Dr Richard Russell of Lewes, who had trained in Europe, was advocating sea-bathing by the 1730s. He became one of the many local people who invested in facilities for visitors to Brighton from the early 1750s.

Without any other employment prospects, property in Brighton was cheap to rent. Despite some of the polemics about access from London written by journalists, access in the autumn which was the season for bathing was good and rapidly improved by investment in roads as we will see.

We will look at how we know about the poverty in Brighton, who invested in the town to provide libraries and other facilities and how the investors decided to cope with trying to build on the arable land which was still laid out as five large fields divided into numerous long narrow strips.

By 1780, the investment was paying off. The town was rapidly revising and was beginning to spill on to the arable land. The fashionable visitors from London and elsewhere and wealthy local landowners who knew Prince George were a considerable influence on his decision to visit in 1783 and to develop the Royal Pavilion.

Having seen Brighton revive, albeit dependent yet again on one economic activity, our five-week course ends. If we do another short course, the themes will include how smart moves by developers who took a lot of risks trying to build on the unenclosed common (or open) fields resulted in the distinctive layout the older part of Brighton still has, and at other changes, such as a far more sophisticated economy that offered builders what they needed but also fashionable fabrics and clothes for the wealthy visitors passing time beside the sea.