Introduction

In the foreword to his *Carnival in Romans* the distinguished French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie asked whether the study of the social and cultural history of a particular French town could be of any interest to 'the reader who lives far from south-eastern France, for example in Lancashire, New York or Minnesota'. Most of his readers would probably have replied that, although its compass was confined to developments in a single town, his book threw light on what was happening throughout western Europe. Can something similar be said about a less ambitious study of a particular town in south-eastern England? Can the social and religious history of the Sussex town of Lewes be said to constitute a microcosm of that of England as a whole?[1]

At first sight Lewes seems an unlikely place about which to ask such a question. Only a few nationally known religious figures feature in its story. While Fox, Penn, Doddridge, Whitefield, Spurgeon and J.M. Neale are at one time or another on stage, their appearances are marginal and fleeting. For the most part this book is the record of the thoughts and actions of obscure men and women. However, it does exemplify most of the major themes of the past five centuries of English religious history: the Reformation, the rise of puritanism, the Great Ejection, the emergence of Nonconformity, the Evangelical Revival, the Oxford Movement, Protestant-Catholic conflict, the ecumenical movement and the decline of institutional religion. Moreover, nearly every branch and brand of Christianity is represented here. The roll-call of the denominations that have at one time or another been present in the town is unusually long: besides six Anglican churches the list includes Roman Catholics, Baptists (General, Particular and Strict), Presbyterians (English, Scottish, Irish), Methodists (Calvinistic, Wesleyan and Primitive), Quakers, Independents, Congregationalists, Huntingdonians, Huntingtonians, Salvationists, Unitarians and Free Christians.

The activities of these groupings and their changing fortunes over the

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years may be said to constitute the essential fabric of the public religious life of England. But if such activities are studied out of context, as they sometimes are in works of purely ecclesiastical history, their true significance may not always be seen. It is only when events are examined within the wider social, economic and cultural framework that they can be placed in their proper perspective. However, setting 500 years of religious change within the context of the total history of a nation would take up many stout volumes and test the powers of the greatest polymath. The task only becomes manageable when undertaken within the confines of a local community – one small enough to give the work coherence, yet large enough to give it substance. Lewes, it is here suggested, is one such town. Known to many merely as a staging post on the way to Glyndebourne, Charleston or the Newhaven-Dieppe ferry, or as the location of the most spectacular Fifth of November celebrations in all England, it is a town with a long and interesting history.[2]

Lewes has almost all the characteristics of what Alan Everitt has called 'the primary towns of England'. Strategically situated on a spur of high ground overlooking the point where the Ouse cuts through the South Downs, it has from the earliest times been a place of some importance. Its name is thought to derive from the *hlaewes* or burial mounds that in the Celtic era dotted the land on which the town was later built. Whether anyone actually lived in such a grand necropolis nobody knows for certain, but, standing at the intersection of a navigable north-south waterway and an ancient east-west trackway, it was a major route centre and a natural place for people to settle at. Although there was probably some kind of settlement in Roman times it was not until the reign of King Alfred that there is evidence of a *burh* here. In late Saxon times the town's role as a major administrative centre is attested by the presence of a royal mint. In the days of Edward the Confessor the lord of the borough was the great Earl Godwin and no fewer than 127 burgesses were living here. After the Norman Conquest Lewes passed into the possession of the Conqueror's friend William de Warenne, who erected a fine castle within the confines of the Saxon town and began the building of a great monastery to the south of it in 'Southover'. It was at this famous Cluniac priory that in 1264 Henry III made his headquarters on the eve of the Battle of Lewes and, after his defeat by Simon de Montfort, that the momentous Mise of Lewes was signed. In this century the town was fortified with walls, which stood the inhabitants in good stead if the French ever launched attacks upon the Sussex coast, as they did in 1377 when they carried off the prior of Lewes as a prisoner.[3]

It is only from the sixteenth century, however, that enough evidence survives to enable us to know much in detail about the history of the town. Henry VIII's reign saw the spoliation of the priory, personally supervised

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by his chief minister Thomas Cromwell, who coveted its possessions for his son. Edward VI's brought further destruction of church property and Queen Mary's saw the burning of numerous Protestant martyrs in Lewes High Street. In the age of Elizabeth things became more settled and the town experienced great prosperity. The antiquary William Camden, who toured the Sussex coast at this time, was rather rude about Arundel and Shoreham, but was most impressed by Lewes, which for 'populousness and extent may be ranked among the principal towns in the county'. Lewes, with the new outlet to the sea (the 'new haven') that had been created at Meeching, was now a thriving commercial port which was handling an increasing volume of coastal and overseas trade. Its role as an administrative centre also grew in importance. To it came country gentry from different parts of Sussex to dispense justice, levy taxes, administer the militia or simply to enjoy the social attractions of the town. Some acquired town houses here. Sir John Pelham of Laughton re-modelled the large house in the High Street that later became the White Hart hotel. George Goring of Danny in Hurstpierpoint erected another close by which, after a change of ownership, came to be called Pelham House and finally became the headquarters of the county council. And his elder brother Sir Henry Goring of Burton near Petworth bought the Bull Inn by the west gate and added the substantial back-addition that was later to become Westgate Chapel.[4]

By the seventeenth century Lewes was not only a major marketing centre, full of merchants trading in agricultural produce or in manufactured goods brought up river from Newhaven or down river from the Weald, but also a hive of light industry. Here, in numerous small workshops, craftsmen in leather, cloth and metal wrought the articles and implements to be sold to shoppers from the town or the surrounding countryside. The place teemed with the 'middling sort' of people who, throughout Europe at this time, tended to be attracted to radical forms of religion. Lewes became noted for its puritanism and, when the Civil War broke out, its inhabitants were strongly Parliamentary in sympathy; but there was no fighting in this part of Sussex and the war left the town unscathed. The most serious disruptions occurred after the war was over and the Stuart monarchy had been restored, when the large numbers who had withdrawn from the parish churches were punished for their nonconformity.

In the high Georgian era there was little religious conflict in Lewes. This period, it has been said, saw the 'heyday' of the county town. Colin Brent has recently provided a vivid picture of Lewes at this time, with its 'vibrant intellectual, religious and political life', which stimulated (among others) Tom Paine, Jane Austen and the great geologist Gideon Mantell. People flocked into the place to buy perukes or clay pipes, watch a play or a prize fight, attend the races, witness an execution, vote in an election, sample a sermon or simply meet their friends in one of the town's

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innumerable hostelries. The prosperity of Lewes was based upon its role as 'the mart of mid-Sussex'. Up the river from Newhaven came the barges loaded with consumer goods and the heavy consignments of coal, iron, and Baltic timber that made its merchants among the richest in Sussex. This wealth led to conspicuous expenditure and the period saw the re-modelling of many of the old timber-framed houses in the High Street, which were re-fronted with bricks or 'mathematical tiles'. Here as elsewhere this was a time of rapid expansion, with the population rising from about 2,500 in 1760 to over 8,500 in 1831. But by the third decade of the nineteenth century, partly owing to growing competition from nearby Brighton, the town's heyday was over.[5]

Although Lewes ceased to be the social and commercial capital of central Sussex its economic advance continued unabated. The Victorian age brought considerable prosperity. The coming of the railways, linking the town to Brighton, Eastbourne, Hastings, Seaford, East Grinstead, Tunbridge Wells and (twice over) to London, strengthened its ancient role as a route centre. It was a time of industrial expansion, with local firms such as the Phoenix Ironworks (owned and managed by the Every family) manufacturing products for a world market. These developments meant that Lewes, with its new and enlarged county gaol, its expanding local government bureaucracy and its continuing role as a major market for agricultural produce, offered plenty of good employment prospects for its inhabitants, whose numbers by the end of the nineteenth century had risen to over 11,000. In the twentieth century, rather surprisingly, the population did not rise as rapidly as that of most English provincial towns: today there are still only about 15,000 people living here. Physical constraints have limited its extension: hemmed in by marsh to the north and south and by downland to the east and west, it has not proved possible to build as many houses as the growing demand has warranted. Nevertheless the years following the first World War did see some westward suburban expansion, some of it necessitated by slum clearances and commercial developments in the older parts of the town.

Since the second World War there have been even more changes in the town. The 'Tatler' tea-rooms have become (inevitably) an Indian restaurant. The butchers, bakers and grocers that once plied their trades in the High Street have also disappeared, their premises now occupied by estate agents, building societies and shops selling souvenirs, antiques or charity clothes. The continued expansion of local government has resulted in the erection of a new and hideously obtrusive County Hall at the top of the town, while commercial development has led to the destruction of many fine buildings at the bottom. Lewes may no longer be what Alice Dudeney, the popular novelist who lived here from 1916 until her death in 1945, called 'the most divine spot in the world', but it continues to attract numerous incomers. The electrification of the railway, enabling people to work in London and

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live (or at least sleep) in Lewes has brought many long distance commuters and their families into the town. The coming of Sussex University and part of Brighton Polytechnic (now Brighton University) to Falmer, four miles away, has caused a great influx of academics who find Lewes quieter and more congenial than Brighton. Nevertheless, unlike some other Sussex towns, Lewes has not been so swamped by incomers as to lose its identity; many of its residents are genuine 'Lewesians' whose families have lived here for generations.[6]

Among old and new residents alike there is great interest in the town's history, and especially its religious history – as was clearly demonstrated in the summer of 1981 when a grand historical pageant was put on to mark the thirteenth centenary of St Wilfrid's settlement in Sussex. Called 'Tongues of Flame' and directed by Monica Russell, the pageant had a cast of 100 and was performed twice before capacity audiences in the grounds of Lewes Castle. Beginning with the saint's shipwreck on the Sussex coast in 666 and ending with the establishment of Lewes & District Council of Churches in 1957, it gave a dramatic presentation of what the local newspaper called the 'violent story of a religion'. Lewes people take a great pride in their town and its traditions, particularly those associated with Guy Fawkes' Night, when tens of thousands of people flock in to witness the bonfires and street processions that are famed throughout Europe. There is a popular belief that these celebrations are survivals of fire-festivals dating back to the Dark Ages. If Lewes was once a great necropolis is it altogether surprising that such rituals should continue to be practised here in November, the so-called 'month of the dead'?[7]

The first book devoted to the religious history of Lewes was written by J.M. Connell and published in 1931 under the title of *Lewes: Its Religious History*. Some people thought that it paid too much attention to Westgate Chapel, where the author was minister, and not enough to the other places of worship in the town. It may be that similar criticisms will be made of the present work, where the story of this particular congregation again features prominently. This could be due in part to personal bias, but there are other reasons for the imbalance. One has to do with the availability of sources: it so happens that Westgate's records survive in greater abundance than is the case with most other Lewes congregations. The other reason relates to the content of the surviving documents. The records of some churches are so formal that they supply little information about anything but the state of their finances or the condition of their fabric. On the whole the records of Nonconformist congregations are rather more meaty than those of parish churches and provide more evidence of how people thought or acted at a given time. Since the sources for ecclesiastical history so often consist of records of conflicts and disagreements it may be that

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Nonconformists, being generally more disputatious than Anglicans, have left more evidence of their activities behind them. When it comes to more recent times, however, there is a more obvious explanation for the prominence of Nonconformity in this book. From the mid nineteenth century onwards it relies heavily upon the evidence of newspapers, and especially the *East Sussex News*, which usually contained more about Lewes than its rival, the *Sussex Express*. While the sympathies of the *Express* were predominantly Conservative and Anglican those of the *News* tended to be Liberal and Nonconformist. The paper was in fact edited for many years by a leading Congregationalist Henry Walston, who was on its staff from 1871 to 1907. He was evidently a man with a mission. At his funeral in 1919 he was described as 'a strong believer in a clean Press', who always 'strove to promote the interests of truth and morality'. Since he clearly considered the Free Churches to be among the greatest forces for good in the world, it was only natural that he was happy to include a great deal about them in his paper. But being a fair-minded man he did not neglect the Church of England: if Anglican clergy provided him with news from their parishes he always seems to have been prepared to publish it.[8]

The unevenness of the sources is not, however, the principal explanation for the prominence of Nonconformity in the pages of this book. The fact is that in Lewes, unlike other Sussex towns, Nonconformists were for a long period more numerous than Anglicans. In the early eighteenth century the congregation of Westgate Meeting was probably larger than the combined congregations of the nearby parish churches of St Michael and St Anne. In the early nineteenth century the number attending Cliffe Chapel and its daughter churches was undoubtedly greater than the total attending Anglican services throughout the town. Ecclesiastically as well as geographically Lewes is the polar opposite of Chichester: in the western county capital, with its great cathedral and its vast array of clergy, it is the Nonconformists who have usually occupied the shadow. In Lewes, throughout the nineteenth century the richest men were almost invariably Nonconformists, with money to spare for the building and endowing of chapels and for the maintenance of their ministries. Their ascendancy persisted into the twentieth century and, although there has been a suffragan bishopric of Lewes since 1909, the established church still has no weighty presence in the town. The absence of an imposing parish church, centrally located like that at Maidstone or Tewkesbury, where a suffragan can feel himself to be seated as in a cathedral, may be a significant factor in the situation. If any building in Lewes ever deserved the designation 'cathedral' it was the Congregational Tabernacle, for long the largest, most prestigious and best situated place of worship in the town, where for a quarter of a century Burgess Wilkinson, known locally as the 'Bishop of Nonconformity', exercised a magisterial ministry.

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It has to be admitted that previous accounts of the religious history of Lewes written by Nonconformists have not been free from an element of personal bias. Colin Brent has pointed out how Thomas Walker Horsfield's monumental *History of Lewes* (1824, 1827) reflects the author's own prejudices:

> Horsfield was the pastor at Westgate Chapel, and his Radicalism had a Unitarian edge. He saluted the Marian martyrs who died at Lewes for 'free inquiry in matters of religion'. They left a 'dark damp cell' beneath the Star to confront 'the faggots which blazed before it'. Under Charles II 'the harpies of bigotry' seized the property of Lewes Dissenters whose worship offended 'the minions of a lascivious court'. . . . He denounced (as though pounding a pulpit cushion) 'the poison tree of Rome', the 'haughty, imperious and tyrannical Warennes', the 'arbitrary, bigoted, licentious' Henry VIII. He rejoiced that goats now browsed at Southover where the Cluniac despots had trodden. He admired King Alfred, King Harold and William Wallace, but not De Montfort, promoting instead the Whig paladins of the 1680s, John Locke, Lord William Russell and Algernon Sidney.

Connell, who pounded the same pulpit cushion as Horsfield, was careful not to perpetuate his partisanship. In *Lewes: Its Religious History* he positively leant over backwards to be fair to people with whose churchmanship and theology he disagreed. Although an heir of the puritans, he had good words for Archbishop Laud. 'It is difficult', he wrote, 'not to sympathise with Laud and those who felt as he did nor fail to realise that they were just as sincere in their way of thinking as the puritans were in theirs.' Moving on to the nineteenth century he was full of praise for the High-Church hymn-writer John Mason Neale. 'We should have supposed', he said, 'that the man who did all this fine work and added so much to the spiritual riches of the Church of England and of Christendom generally would have received every encouragement', but 'it has with sorrow to be remembered that a Lewes mob treated him most shamefully.'[9]

What Connell wrote in the preface to *Lewes: Its Religious History* may provide a fitting introduction to this one:

> Lewes may claim to have some special fitness as a starting place for the study of English religious history. Its traditions reach far back into the past. . . . It saw the rise and fall of the great Priory of St Pancras, and the burning of Protestant martyrs in its High Street. It shared in the struggles of episcopalianism and puritanism, orthodoxy and heresy, ritualism and evangelicalism, and these have left their marks upon it, in the variety of its denominational groupings and in the diversity of thought and worship that exist today.

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The present work covers, albeit in far greater detail, much the same ground as Connell's pioneering study, considering the same conflicts and exploring the same varieties of religious faith and practice that have existed in the town since the Reformation. However, in order to make sense of the post-Reformation religious history of Lewes, it is first necessary to do as he did and go back even further into the past to the time when Christianity was first planted in this part of England.[10]

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