

Preface

I have known and loved Lewes nearly all my life. I first entered the town on foot in 1935 at the age of five, my parents being confident that I was now old and strong enough to walk the seven miles along the Downs from Ditchling. But I was far too tired to appreciate the fine view that greeted us as we skirted the race-course and, passing the new houses then being built on the Nevill estate, made our descent into the town. The only thing that kept me going was the prospect of scrambled eggs on toast at the 'Tatler' tea rooms. Having as yet no taste for history I probably did not notice the ancient churches that I passed on the last lap of the journey down the High Street: St Anne's, with its fine Norman doorway, and St Michael's, with its distinctive thirteenth-century round tower. And I certainly would never have noticed Westgate Chapel, just over the road from St Michael's, and then almost hidden from sight behind an avenue of laurels.

Fifty years later it was an interest in Westgate Chapel that eventually led me to come to live in Lewes and join its historic Protestant Dissenting congregation. It was then that I began to explore the history of a cause that, combining elements of each of the original 'Three Denominations' of Dissent (Baptist, Independent, Presbyterian), may justly claim to be unique in England. I read J.M. Connell's admirable *Story of an Old Meeting House* but was disappointed that, while making much of the ministers, it had little to say about the laity. I particularly wished to find out more about a family named Ridge who had helped to found the congregation in the seventeenth century and remained active well on into the nineteenth: here, it seemed, was a remarkable example of continuity in a period of great religious change. After a chance meeting with Jessie Ridge, the last of a long line of Protestant Dissenters, I decided to pursue the social and religious history of her family. But the project widened when I was invited to give a course of University of the Third Age lectures on the religious history of Lewes. This obliged me to place Westgate Chapel in its wider context and to study the history of all the churches and chapels that had ever existed in the town.

It was at the suggestion of U3A members that I embarked upon the writing of this book.

In the course of doing so I have become indebted to many people. I am especially grateful to my good neighbour Asa Briggs, Lord Briggs of Lewes, for his critical appraisal of the first draft of the text and for kindly agreeing to contribute a Foreword. I also wish to thank Colin Brent, who knows more about the history of Lewes than anyone, for his comments on the early chapters of the book. Other friends who have read sections of the book and made valuable suggestions are John Bleach, Alan Everitt, David Hitchin, William Lamont, Alan Ruston and David Wykes. I have also benefited greatly from conversations with Judith Brent, Christopher Day, Susan Haines, Laurence Keogh, Graham Mayhew, Christopher Whittick and the late Kathleen Vinall. In addition I wish to acknowledge the helpfulness of the staff of the British Library, Dr Williams's Library, Sussex University Library, the Public Record Office, the East and West Sussex Record Offices and the volunteers who look after the library of the Sussex Archaeological Society, of which I have been a member since 1949. I should also like to thank Cliff Bowes, Sarah Greenland and my sons Charlie, George and Danny for assistance with computing, Andy Gammon for designing the cover and illustrations, and Adrian Brink of the Lutterworth Press for making the process of publishing so pleasurable. My greatest debt is to my wife Rosemary, who reads everything I write with a keen eye for clichés, obscurities and hyperbole – and without whose help I should never have been able to embark upon this project, let alone bring it to completion.

Finally I should like to pay a posthumous tribute to two great history teachers. A.E. Wilson first aroused my interest in history – and especially the history of Sussex – when I was a schoolboy. S. T. Bindoff, another of 'Doc' Wilson's former pupils at Brighton Grammar School, supervised my post-graduate studies and, in his best-selling Penguin book *Tudor England*, set a fine (if inimitable) example of how history should be written.

Foreword

Asa Briggs

This absorbing book, which tells many stories and investigates many different situations, speaks for itself. I am privileged, therefore, to have been invited to write a brief Foreword. The author, who has carried out meticulous research, often testing and difficult, invited me to write it for two reasons. First, I am a neighbour in Keere Street, Lewes, and know Lewes over several decades. Second, I am a social and cultural historian, who has always set out to relate local to national and comparative international history – and religious history to social and cultural history.

I also share with Jeremy Goring a sense of delight in time travel, spanning centuries and not, as so many professional historians do, getting caught in one ‘period’. I found the pre-Reformation chapter in this book as illuminating as those which dealt with recent history. The detail is as illuminating as the generalisation, and I was gripped at once by one of the first of the many disturbing stories – that of John Hoggesflesh, a largely forgotten early sixteenth-century heretic who for his ‘detestable opinions’ had his case referred beyond Chichester to the archbishop of Canterbury, to the duke of Norfolk and to King Henry VIII. As Jeremy Goring observes, ‘rarely in the history of religious conflict has one obscure individual caused so much trouble to so many important people over such a long period of time’.

There is much in this book about religious conflict, some of it between individuals or groups of people not far separated from each other by their religious convictions, about ‘martyrdom’, and about the contrast between Lewes and Chichester. Yet these are not the only themes. Others are ‘Nonconformist ascendancy’ and the role of women in different congregations. One of Jeremy Goring’s last stories was about a twentieth-century Hogsflesh (different spelling), the widow of Amos Hogsflesh – a Methodist whose ‘spiritual influence sitting quietly in her pew may have been greater than that of a succession of men pounding away in the pulpit’. For Jeremy Goring, ‘if continuity and change are the weft and warp of the

historical process’ – and I believe that they are – ‘it seems to be, in religion as in other spheres of life, the women who provide the continuity and the men who produce the change’.

For readers involved in the current life of religion in Lewes the most interesting and in places surprising details concern St Michael’s Church and Westgate Chapel, almost directly confronting each other over Lewes High Street. It will surprise many readers that for centuries St Michael’s was a stronghold of militant Protestantism. By contrast Westgate illuminates almost every aspect of religious change, and it was a Westgate pastor – Thomas Walker Horsfield, a Yorkshireman and an avowed Unitarian – who wrote what remains the most monumental *History of Lewes* in 1824 and 1827. There are biases, which Jeremy Goring notes, and it was from a hymn by a different Unitarian writer, Frederick Lucian Hosmer, that he took the inspiring title of his book. The pentecostal fire to which it refers has often burned bright in Lewes, and when the great hymn was sung at the close of the service to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Westgate Chapel – on 5 November – the Rector of St Michael’s was present and the Roman Catholic parish priest at St Pancras read one of the lessons.