



Left to right: Victorian Houses in Toronto Terrace, a view of the Pells neighbourhood with St John's sub Castro church in the background. Both by Mick Hawsworth. The front cover of the new book

# Hopes new book will 'secure memories about the Pells'

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What is the connection between a pagan sacred spring, a rare oak tree, a paper mill with a Royal Warrant and a famous London coroner?

The answer is the Pells neighbourhood of Lewes, which has an intriguing history, and is the subject of a new book written by 16 local residents.

The 160-page, full-colour book is called *The Pells of Lewes: pool, park, people, places*.

Richly illustrated with maps, photographs, architects' drawings, historical documents and original artwork, it is published in September by the Lewes History Group, the latest title in its series of street stories.

Some authors researched their houses and streets by visiting the Keep at Falmer, home of the East Sussex Record Office, delving into

deeds, maps, census returns and other documents.

Others explored local landmarks, such as the church of St John sub Castro and its churchyard, or interviewed residents with stories to tell about the Elephant and Castle pub, Pells School and the famous open-air swimming pool.

"We have been so grateful for the generosity of people interested in this project," said Ruth Thomson, one of the book's editors.

"It has been a real privilege to be lent precious family photos and treasured heirlooms for inclusion in the book, which we hope will secure memories about the Pells for the future."

The project began in early 2019, with a centenary in mind. The pool, the Pells Lake and its surrounding walkways are all on land given to the people of Lewes by generous benefactors over the centuries and the final piece was gifted by Wynne E Baxter, 100 years ago.

## The London coroner

Born into the prominent Lewes printing family, Baxter, who became a lawyer and the first mayor of Lewes, had a long-held ambition to buy land from the Marquess of Abergavenny's estate to give to the people of Lewes.

He was a busy London coroner, who presided over the inquests of the Elephant Man and the victims of Jack the Ripper, but in 1920 he succeeded in acquiring the Pells lake and land which completed the public park.

He died the same year, aged 76.

## The pagan sacred spring

The Pells, meaning 'pools' in Old English, has always been a watery place near the river Ouse, with a line of springs and streams running through it.

St John's Well, near the ancient town wall beside what is now Brook Street, was a medieval holy well and before that a pagan sacred spring, possibly for thousands of years before Christianity.

## The rare oak tree

The history of benefactors goes back to 1603 when John Rowe, a Lewes solicitor, gave a water meadow where the Pells Pool would eventually be built by public subscription in 1860.

The original deeds, now kept at Lewes Town Hall, helped secure the future of the pool when it was threatened with closure in the 1990s. The recreation ground next to the pool opened in 1897 and today has fine specimens of trees, including the unusual Lucombe oak which keeps its leaves deep into winter and was planted by local residents in the 20th century.

## The paper mill

In the 19th century, entrepreneurs began harnessing the power of water to develop industry and transport.

Canals with locks were built on the Ouse and at the Pells a paper mill was built, which lasted for around 40 years. It had a Royal Warrant from the Prince of Wales and

evidence from watermarks shows paper from Lewes was used by Jane Austen, Lord Byron and other famous writers.

Sarah Bayliss, the book's co-editor, wrote a chapter about the Pells school.

She said: "Memories from childhood can be very vivid and former pupils often said they could hear their teachers' voices, especially Mr Turner, the popular headmaster from the post-war era. They could remember playing in the 'black sands' near the Phoenix Iron Works and the taste of 'sherbert dabs' that they bought at Bob's sweetshop in Talbot Terrace."

"We hope these and many other facts about the Pells will make the book a rewarding read."

■ *The Pells of Lewes: pool, park, people, places*, edited by Ruth Thomson and Sarah Bayliss, price £12.50, is on sale from 1 September. See [www.leweshistory.org.uk/pells-of-lewes/](http://www.leweshistory.org.uk/pells-of-lewes/) to order online and for other sales outlets.