

THE BANKS OF BATTLE, TO 2018



The definition of a bank has changed over the years, but to most people a bank is, or was, the high street building where one's bank account was held. In Battle there have been at most four: under their last names Barclays, HSBC, Lloyds and the National Westminster. Closures began in 2012 and the last, Nat West, closed its doors in May 2018. All of these four major banks were the results of mergers and takeovers, with the smaller banks disappearing into larger ones (District and Martins for example). Only the Nat West and Barclays banks had Sussex roots; where other banks appeared in the twentieth century it was through late expansion of the giants.

While closures are regrettable, it must be accepted that the need for economies after the crisis of 2008 and the fast-growing numbers using internet banking have inevitably caused a review of local branches.

THE SAVINGS BANK FOR THE RAPE OF HASTINGS

Possibly the earliest known bank in Battle was not one of these but the Savings Bank for the Rape of Hastings, reported as having a Battle branch in 1832.¹ Those Battle people involved in its activities – and there seem to have been no others – were well-known men of the area. In 1857² they were James Watts, Frederick Webster, C Lawrence, Frederick Ellman, C J P Watts, C T Laurence, James Lansdell and John Kenward. The treasurer was Francis Ward and the actuary/receiver Charles Arnold. The trustees included Robert Watts and Sir Augustus Webster. Attendance at the bank in Battle was from 4 to 5 p m on Mondays. It dealt only with what seem small sums, up to £30, but at 2018 values this is more than £2000, perhaps much more. The money held was over £37,000 – a very large sum indeed by today's standards. Clearly the men named were men of substance:

James Watts (1790-1812) was a surgeon, one of the Watts medical family of Battle. The family owned or leased a considerable acreage of land in the area.

Frederick Webster (c1823-) was the younger son of Sir Augustus Webster, then leaving Battle. He was a surveyor and played a part in Battle's local sanitary board.

Charles Lawrence (or Lawrence, c1798-1874) ran the powdermills along Powdermills Lane.

Frederick Ellman (c1812-1870) was a solicitor living and practising at the current home of Heringtons.

Charles James Percival Watts (1825-1891), son of James, was probably intended for medicine but instead took holy orders.

Charles T Laurence (or Lawrence, 1825-1886) was a son of the Charles above and also a gunpowder maker.

James Lansdell (c1785-) was a master builder.

John Kenward (c1897-1866) was a land and house proprietor.

Francis Ward (1814-) was a chemist and druggist.

Charles Arnold (1803-88) was a solicitor's general clerk.

In 1857 the trustees were reported as Robert Watts (1785-1857) and Sir Augustus Webster (1819-86), who was shortly to leave the town.

ESRO records.³

The bank was founded at Battle in 1816, and by at least 1846 was open at Battle every Monday evening between 6 and 7 in the summer and 5 to 6 in the winter; and at Hastings Town Hall every Saturday afternoon from 3 to 4. Whereas most of the names in the first ledger are Battle residents, the number of depositors throughout the district between Battle and Hastings rapidly increased. The bank served a variety of customers, but women and children, servants and charities seem prominent.

Between 1871 and 1896 deposits at the bank fell from £42,743 to £23,419, a decline attributed to the agricultural depression and the facilities afforded by the Post Office Savings Bank. By 1895 withdrawals attributable to the agricultural depression seemed to have ceased and the volume of business improved, and after a meeting with the secretary of the Inspection Committee of Trustee Savings Banks, it was decided to give the bank another year; William Augustus Cassin Raper [solicitor] was appointed assistant actuary to relieve the pressure on his father [William Augustus, solicitor], who himself reduced his salary of £100. But by January 1897 it was decided to wind up the bank, which was closed to further deposits from 20 March 1897. It was resolved to pay William Augustus Raper his full salary, and the auditor Edward Cruse (agent to the Battle Abbey estate) was compensated for loss of office by a payment of £350.

Understandably, census returns make no reference to a bank that is unlikely to have had its own premises or employees. One might have thought that business would have been transacted at solicitors' offices: if so, the offices would have been at what is now Herington's because Ellman practised there and was succeeded by the elder Raper. But a directory for 1839 gives the bank's agent as Thomas Ticehurst, who in the 1841 census is indeed described as a banker and was living five houses away from the Deanery, at the bottom end of the High Street.⁴

HASTINGS OLD BANK



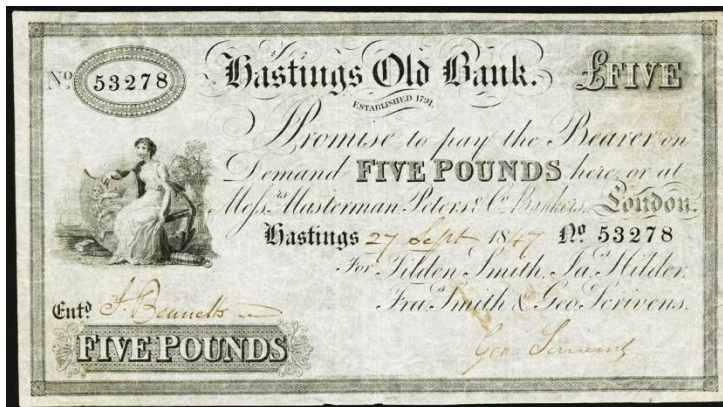
It may, however, be that the Hastings Old Bank was in Battle earlier than the Savings Bank. It was certainly there by 1823.⁵ Its headquarters were at 90 High Street, Hastings, and its directors were Scrivens and Smith. It had been founded in 1791 and was a bank entitled to issue its own banknotes. (All such banks were so entitled until an Act of 1844 prohibited any new banks from doing so. Mergers and changes of name meant that in England and Wales by the 1930s only the Bank of England could issue bank notes. Scottish and Irish banks still do so.)

George Scrivens, a partner at the closure in 1857.
<http://www.thepeerage.com/p19314.htm#i193137>

By 1857 it had branches at Battle, Hailsham, Hawkhurst, St Leonards and Robertsbridge.

The main Smith concerned was Tilden Smith (c1799-1870), who made a considerable amount of money from it. He was a son of another Tilden Smith of Vinehall, described as a banker when he died in 1835,⁶ and other references show that he was a landowner. As an adult the younger Smith lived at Great Sanders, just north of Sedlescombe, which he first

rented and then bought in 1845; he had already built Vinehall House in 1838. In 1845 he married Eliza Polhill Kell, daughter of a Battle solicitor.



All should have been well with the Hastings Old Bank, but it seriously overstretched itself. In 1857, when its partners were Tilden Smith, his brother F S Smith, John Hilder and George Scrivens, it made a

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/term_details.aspx?biold=51579

substantial loan to the Smiths' brother Richard, who was in serious difficulties. He was a farmer who had suffered badly from the hop failures of 1847 and 1848 and who was thereafter in debt. (Tilden Smith had himself campaigned for financial assistance to the hop growers by means of a tax postponement or reduction.) The loan did not prevent him from bankruptcy, which duly happened on 21 June 1857. Four days later the bank closed its doors, never to reopen them. A sorry state then revealed itself. There was about £25,000 circulating in notes; the bank's liabilities were less than £150,000 and its assets £78,600.

Another bank stepped in fill some of the gap, though it remains unclear what happened to the creditors of the Old Bank. The new bank was the London and County, of which much more is related below. They took on all staff of the Old Bank and opened permanent branches at Battle, Hawkhurst, Robertsbridge and St Leonards. In Battle their temporary home was opposite the George.⁷ The Old Bank was soon wound up. As the partners had no limited liability they had to assume the burden of debt. Tilden Smith sold his properties at Great Sanders and Vinehall and bought a farm near Battle.

There are no census data for the Old Bank at Battle but in 1841, again, Thomas Ticehurst was its agent, living five doors into the High Street from the Deanery.

THE NATIONAL WESTMINSTER BANK

This very large multi-national bank owed its site in Battle to the London and County Bank, which was already there in 1861. In turn that bank arrived in the area thanks to the failure of the Hastings Old Bank in 1857.

The London and County Bank had been established at Southwark in 1836 and had grown rapidly, as it continued to do. Originally the Surrey, Kent and Sussex Banking Company, it expanded by establishing branches at Brighton, Canterbury, Croydon, Lewes, Maidstone, Sevenoaks, Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells and Woolwich, obtaining its new name in 1839; by 1875 it was the largest British bank, having made many takeovers across the southeastern counties of England. It waited until the twentieth century before going further north, into Ireland and abroad. The former Nat West Bank at Battle was built in 1899, and the stone-carved insignia of the London and County Bank appears high on its frontage.

In 1909, after the merger with the London and Westminster Bank, the London and County was renamed the London County and Westminster Bank; it changed again, to Westminster Bank, in 1923. The merger with the National Provincial Bank was in 1970, when its current name appeared; later still it became part of the Royal Bank of Scotland.⁸

After some 160 years the branch at 16 High Street closed on 24 May 2018, the last traditional bank in Battle to do so.

BARCLAYS BANK

The last Battle bank with local roots was Barclays, again a bank with ambitions. Its local ancestor was the Lewes Old Bank, founded in 1789 and becoming part of Barclays in 1896.

One researcher⁹ writes:

The Lewes branch of Barclays still carries the name 'The Old Bank', despite this having been one of about 20 London and country banks that amalgamated together in 1896 to trade under the name of Barclay & Company. Prior to 1896 the Lewes bank had an independent existence for 107 years, opening its doors on 1 July 1789. Ten accounts were opened on the first day of business, but within three years these grew to over 4,000. Later there were branches in East Grinstead, Tunbridge Wells, Battle, Eastbourne, Hailsham, Uckfield, and Seaford & Newhaven. There were four founding partners in 1789, each contributing £5,000 capital. They were:

- Francis Whitfield, a wool-stapler and grocer
- Benjamin Comber, gentleman
- Joseph Molineux, ironmonger
- Richard King, soap boiler and tallow chandler



Like the Hastings Old Bank, the Lewes Old Bank issued its own paper money. This was issued in 1882, fourteen years before the bank was taken over by Barclays.

www.londoncoins.co.uk

The bank went through a number of name changes without losing its Lewes roots: Whitfield, Comber, Molineux & King; Molineux, Whitfield, Molineux & Whitfield; Molineux, Whitfield & Dicker. By 1878 it was at 68 High Street, Battle, premises which it kept (and rebuilt) until its departure from the town. It also had branches in East Grinstead, Tunbridge Wells, Eastbourne, Hailsham, Uckfield, Seaford and Newhaven.

Barclays was the first Battle bank to close since the Hastings Old Bank in 1857. It shut its doors at 68 High Street in August 2014.

LLOYDS BANK

Lloyds Bank began as Taylors & Lloyds in Birmingham, in 1765. For the first hundred years, the Bank operated from just one office in the growing town. But in the 1860s, Lloyds embarked on a period of rapid expansion and growth. By the time of the TSB merger in 1995, it had absorbed more than 200 banks. Lloyds is one of the two odd ones out here in that it had no local origins, being founded at Battle by its parent bank after the First World War. This was part of a major territorial expansion: in eastern Sussex alone it opened branches at Uckfield in 1923 and Heathfield in 1928.

Lloyds had no local origins, being founded at Battle by its parent bank in 1963/64. Its premises were at 80 High Street and it closed early in 2017.

HSBC

HSBC, although the formal name of the bank today, in fact stands for the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, a remarkable organisation founded in 1865 that survived both the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong (though its manager Sir Vandeleur Grayburn died in the hands of the occupiers) and the Maoist takeover of most of the Chinese mainland in 1949. That it was present in Battle was due to its takeover of the Midland Bank in 1992.

The Midland had been founded in Birmingham in 1836 and became the country's largest bank by the 1930s. This was partly due to its wish to expand well beyond its base, particularly after the First World War. For example, it already had branches at Hastings and Eastbourne, and opened further branches at Hailsham (1930), Hassocks (1936) and Seaford (1937).¹⁰ Battle had to wait until 1960/61 for its own Midland branch.

The Battle branch at 81 High Street closed on 4 December 2015.

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with help from other BDHS members

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¹ Pigot's Directory

² Sussex Advertiser, 3 February 1857

³ ACC 2300/177

⁴ Pigot's Directory, 1839

⁵ Pigot's Directory, 1823

⁶ The Spectator, volume 8, 1835

⁷ The above is from the Sussex Advertiser, various dates in 1857

⁸ <https://www.rbs.com/heritage/companies/westminster-bank-ltd.html>

⁹ John Farrant: <https://leweshistory.org.uk/2016/06/03/lewes-history-group-bulletin-70-may-2016/>

¹⁰ The Sussex Agricultural Express, various dates