History of the iron and steel works

The Works were founded by John Every in 1832. The business was started in a small building at the bottom of North Street, Lewes. It was originally a simple furnace, with the fan to supply the blast driven by a horse attached to a wheel. In 1861 John Every purchased land at the bottom of North Street and moved the business into entirely new premises. The business developed quite rapidly and in 1872 he was joined by his son, John William Every. By 1885 the third John Every, John Henry Every had joined his father and grandfather.

By the early 1930s John H Every was running the business. At this point, the works was vast and employed at least 500 men and women. There were two furnaces and it wasn’t unusual to make 25 tons of castings a day. In addition to the furnaces there was an engineering department and departments for the fabrication and construction of steelwork which included a hydraulic riveting plant. The power to drive all the machines came from two steam engines. A large amount of the material travelled by river and vessels were served by two steam powered cranes.

J.H. Every purchased part of the Paddock Playing field and erected a pavilion in the grounds for use of the Phoenix Sports Club members. In 1943 J.H. Every’s son, John Morris Every, changed the name to John Every Lewes Ltd which can be seen on many drain covers around Lewes.

In 1951 the works was sold to Mr Burchell and was renamed East Sussex Engineering Company Ltd. During the 1950s and 60s the demand for cast iron was declining and the company concentrated on heavy engineering and structural steel work. By the 1970s there were few works in England that had the capabilities to take on a job such as the gangways made for the cruise ship SS Canberra’s visit to Hong Kong’s Kowloon Wharf. However the engineers at East Sussex Engineering Company played a major role in the design and the entire works was involved in the creation of these gangways.

In 1976 Aurora Holdings bought the factory. They sold off the assets and most of the employees lost their jobs. The non-ferrous metal side was bought by GKS Coxheads Ltd in 1978. They continued trading until April 1986, when the last casting was made and the last four men to be employed were made redundant.

The Lewes Phoenix project

This is the creation of locally based Artemis Arts Ltd lead by Wenda Bradley and Christine Hall. The team are capturing stories and images of the former iron foundry and engineering company employees and their families.

Sarah Hitchings, an oral historian is recording interviews from previous employees and their families. Students from Priory School in Lewes have made a documentary film about the Phoenix Iron and Steel Works and exhibitions of the newly discovered information and images have been held in the town. Small travelling exhibitions are available for schools and community groups to borrow.

A team of volunteers has been recruited from the community and have conducted research about the ironworks in local libraries and the East Sussex Records Office. Several of the volunteers are ex workers and they are able to use their substantial knowledge to inform the research.

The project, funded by a Heritage Lottery Fund grant and Lewes Town and District Council, aims to enrich and add to the existing archives and will leave a lasting legacy to the town about an important part of it’s industrial history.

If you would like to find out more and read and hear the stories of Phoenix workers please visit: www.lewesphoenix.org

The ironwork for Brighton and Eastbourne Piers was made in Lewes as was most of the railway stations, bridges and street furniture in the South of England including the railings at St Paul’s cathedral.

Major engineering projects in the Far East and Australia were designed and fabricated at the Phoenix site.

Phoenix Iron and Steel Works
1832 – 1986

Discover the lost industrial heart of Lewes

Sussex was once the centre of English Iron manufacturing and the forges and furnaces in the Weald employed over 50,000 men.

John Every set up the Phoenix Iron Works in Lewes in 1832 and in the late 1800’s it was as significant a landmark of the town as Lewes Castle. Four generations of the Every family developed the Phoenix into the biggest local employer during the 19th and 20th century.

The Phoenix Works was a community in itself with workshops, a smithy, a foundry, assembly bays and offices. The Phoenix Workmen’s Institute provided meals and hot baths. It was also the focus for social gatherings, concerts and entertainment for the workers and their families.

After a disastrous fire in 1948 which destroyed much of the original works in Phoenix Place, the Phoenix rose from the ashes and in 1951 became East Sussex Engineering Ltd reflecting the changed emphasis from castings to general engineering.

Supported by The National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund
Phoenix Foundry.

The Phoenix name is well known in Lewes history, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. An eighteenth century replacement of the mediaeval crossing, widened in the 1930s, the railings, ironwork and benches were cast at the Phoenix Foundry.

First built in 1857, columns, bridges and other ironwork bears the Phoenix and John Every Lewes name. Many other stations and rail bridges in the area also have the foundry iron and engineering work.

A large field purchased in 1913 by The Paddock Syndicate led by J H Every. This Reeves photo shows the Sports Pavilion and the clinker wall in Paddock Lane.

The Maltings holds a fascinating archive of maps, plans and documents relating to the Ironworks and many other historical records of Sussex.

The castle was begun soon after 1066 by William de Warenne but The Barbican was not completed until 300 years later. It now houses the Sussex Archaeological Society’s archive and holds material dealing with the history of iron working in the area. Fine examples of Every cast iron lamp columns are found between Barbican Gate and The Bowling Green.

A large field purchased in 1913 by Tom and Tanya Reeves contains many previously unknown images of the Phoenix Works from the 19th and 20th centuries.