

## **Avon House and the donkeys from the beach**

*This is a note of research into the possible connection between Avon House and the donkeys operating on the beach. This is because the Museum has a collection of donkey's shoes which were said to have been found at Avon House.*

Avon House is a grade II listed building in Avon Road, just off East Street. Its original address was 2 East Court, East Street, but this was changed (apparently in 1916) to Avon Road and Avon House. The listing details say it was built early in the nineteenth century and was known as the Priest's House, and also for a time a beer house. The literature adds that it was a lodging house at the same time that it was a beer house, but it was used solely as a residence later and for a short period as a restaurant.

It is not obvious why it should have been called the Priest's House. The only church in the parish in the early nineteenth century was St Mary's and it did not have a dedicated vicarage at that time. It is therefore credible that it could have housed clergy but it has been difficult to find any supporting evidence, and indeed there is evidence that the vicars occupied a number of different houses in that vicinity over time.

There is plenty of evidence of its use as a public house, the Wheatsheaf, which also offered lodgings. The exact dates are not clear but the period of its use in this way would be within the range 1855 to 1922. The then tenant, James Caffyn, died in 1922 and the house became wholly a residence, but the beer house activity may have ceased earlier. It was used briefly as a restaurant after 1945.

Its use is mentioned in Elleray 1991 (Littlehampton, a pictorial history): illustration 100 says it was a café at time of publication. Barrett & Greenwood 2023 (East Street 1700-2023) devote pp87-101 to Avon House and suggest the period during which it was in use as a beer house. However, Haines undated (Littlehampton, Wick, Lyminster and Climping: their beer shops, Inns, public houses and hotels 1828-1970) provides two pages on the Wheatsheaf but suggests a shorter period of use as a beer house.

None of the literature makes any mention of donkeys in connection with Avon House. However, Barrett & Kahn note that the tenant of Avon House from 1949 to 1962 was William Kahn (or Kahan) who had the catering concession at Butlins and operated a number of other concessions on the sea front. It is not inconceivable that

he made Avon House available to the donkey operator. Photographs of the 1950s show the donkeys operating from a pitch just outside Butlins.

Donkeys, as well as ponies, and even goat carts, were popular as beach entertainment throughout the nineteenth century and until the 1970s. An article in the Littlehampton Gazette (6 October 1978) marking the end of their use in Littlehampton claimed that they had been used for 150 years. The article also suggested that they had been supplied continuously by four generations of the Merrett family.

Friel & Fardell 1998 (Littlehampton) provide on p50 a photograph of donkeys outside Butlin's in 1938 and comment they were run for many decades by the Merrett family of Wick. Zeegers, Nye & Ashby 2007 (Littlehampton Revisited) note p62 that the donkeys were run by Merrett and spent the night in a field opposite the Six Bells in Lyminster. They also have a photograph on p67 of the donkeys waiting outside Butlins in the 1950s.

The donkey story is, however, not necessarily that straightforward. There was a series of articles in the press in March 1956 about five donkeys that were at risk of being put down. The story was that a Mr. Alexander of Southampton had used the donkeys on the beach at Littlehampton for several years (so Merrett's did not have a monopoly). However, he had fallen ill and could not continue to do so. Money was raised for the donkeys to be cared for in an animal sanctuary. It is not impossible, therefore, that it was Alexander's donkeys that were temporarily housed at Avon House by Mr. Kahn, given that Alexander was based in Southampton. There is no evidence to confirm or refute this hypothesis.