

CONTRIBUTORIA

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ARTICLE THE CHANGING VALUE OF MONEY

Your money is no good here Sir



By
Danny Smith



Scratch the dry, reserved, exterior of any English man or woman and underneath is a screaming pagan monster. If you don't believe me, spend five minutes on a Friday night in any largish market town watching the locals fighting, rutting, and howling at the moon. As an island we've basically been invaded and occupied by anyone that could muster up twenty or so men and a few sharp sticks, so with this comes a dual nature: a strong anti-authoritarian streak.

Take Lewes, a medium-sized Sussex town full of book shops and antique fairs. Every year, against the advice of the local police and council, the seven bonfire societies hold massive parades where they throw fireworks at each other. These end with huge pyres where upon they throw effigies of past popes, local authority figures, and this year's pop culture villains.

So it was not surprising to find out that Lewes has its own currency. It launched in 2008 to much media fanfare and flourish as part of the Transition Towns Initiative, it was to cut carbon emissions and deal with the ever growing threat of peak oil by keeping spending local, somehow. Luckily, a friend of mine, Adam, works in Lewes so after an evening drinking cider on Brighton beach I catch a lift into Lewes.

Stuck behind a big red bus marked 'Uckfield' we giggle like the grown-ups we are and he tells me about the parking meters. Apparently after the local council sold off all the car parks to NCP, on that night, they have to cover or remove all the parking meters from the town because parking meters in Lewes have a propensity for catching alight or just blowing up altogether. Nobody has been caught thus far. As we get out the car I hear hooves, Adam sees my confused look on my face.

"It's just the beer delivery cart" he says "they still deliver the beer by horse and cart"

"The dray men?" I ask, not knowing much about rural life but a hell of a lot about the pub trade. Adam shrugs.

"He wears a hat and everything." We turn to see the dray and it's quite an old woman on a horse wearing a helmet and hi-vis jacket.

Adam goes to work and I walk down into the centre of town. On the benches

outside the sort-of high street's shops is a lone alfresco drinker, red faced, enjoying a can of Scrumpy Jack, and listening to the radio. The shops seem split: on one side of the bridge is WH Smiths, Argos, and other chain shops, the other are the local ironmongers, cafés, and antique shops. In the middle is the River Ouse, on which you can see the Harveys Brewery. This part of town is smells strongly of hops and not unpleasantly like slightly burnt Horlicks.

It takes me less than four minutes to reach the end of the shops and hit the residential area so I turn around and try and find somewhere for a cup of tea. My feet carry me past the cafés to a pub that, despite it being close to ten am, has its doors open. I stick my head in and behind the bar is a short lady that looks like she's in charge.

"Are you open?" she doesn't look up.

"Well, the door's open and there's money in the till," she says without looking up. I come in and sit at the bar, order a cup of tea and tell her I'm here writing about the Lewes pound. She gives a dismissive pained expression. I ask her if many people use it.

"A few, I probably change about two to three hundred every six weeks" I do the maths in my head, about £50 a week maximum.

"That's not a lot" I say

"It's alright," she says "although it's a pain getting it changed, and sometimes if

the expiry date has gone it's even more of a pain."

"They have an expiry date?"

"Yes and if its passed you can still change it but you have to fill out forms."

She disappears for a while, so I take some notes and drink my tea. The John Harvey Tavern is the pub outlet for the brewery so behind the bar on the back wall is a row of kegs with cold jackets around them, and two tables are encased in giant barrels over on the far wall making booths. Outside is a large car park. When she comes back she hands me some printed sheets about the history of the brewery, the pub, and Lewes in general with a "here you go love". I gesture at the car park.

"Do you get busy then?"

"We get a few day trips and such, plus our regulars" I thanks her for the info and leave the rest of my tea.

I walk up the hill which is as far as I can make out is the high street. The shops that make up the bulk are mostly independent. A record shop, baby clothes, chemists, all locally owned. It's nice, a welcome break from my native Birmingham. I at the top of the hill the road forks and in the middle greenish and brass angels reach out from the war monument. Eager to get some of the Lewes currency, I spy the Tourist Information office. Behind the counter one middle aged woman stands straight and smiling while one is busy moving around

behind her.

“Hi,” I say to the strangely erect grinning lady “I’d like to change some money into the Lewes pound.” the lady stops smiling for a second and goes to say something to the busy lady behind her.

“There’s a leaflet over there,” she says to the smiling lady gesturing to the place where I had already picked up a leaflet. The smiling lady returns.

“There are leaflets over there” I vaguely wave the one I have in my hand.

“I was just wondering if I could get any of the currency here.”

“Ooh I don’t know” the smiling lady smiles again and creeps over to the other lady as if scared to bother her. The other lady starts to say something, gives up and comes directly over to me.

“We don’t sell it, but there’s a list of places on the leaflet, you could go to the cheese shop over the road, or they change it in the town hall next door.”

“Do you get many people ask?” I say.

“Not really, there were a few when they printed some special Mumford band ones.”

“Mumford & Sons? Did they play here?”

“Yes, that’s them”.

Next door is a set of double doors that lead into a grand looking hall with a brown reception staircase. On the walls are oil paintings of people from the Victorian or Edwardian periods. To the right is a small door that leads to an emulsion yellow and white office and a small waist high desk. I ring the bell and wait.

I can see movement behind the frosted glass. Opposite is a desk with four or five ‘while you were out’ memos and what appear to be a small pile of emails that have been printed out and a notebook with the sticker ‘fishing licences’. The calendar next to the desk shows this week has bright red crosses through each day. A tall lady in a cardigan comes to the desk and I ask to change some money into the Lewes pound. She looks surprised.

“We don’t get many people changing it into Lewes money, they’re normally changing it back” she say as she roots around the desk for the key to a small safe box.

Now with five Lewes pounds in my pocket I once again hit the high street and am drawn to one of the small tables of books set outside one of the shops. I find a copy of the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and a charming 1930’s edition of The Picture Of Dorian Grey by Oscar Wilde for only a pound each. Entering the bookshop I’m hit by the wonderful smell of old books a man gets up from the desk out back and I hand him the books.

“Can I pay with Lewes pounds?” I ask. He looks bemused.

“I suppose you can” I hand him two pound in the light green notes and he stares at them looking them over.

“Do you not see many of them?”

“No, none really,” he carries on looking at them “they bought them in a few years ago.”

“2008 right?”

“Yes that’s it, then there was a flurry of them, some people even sold them on eBay”

As I write this there are two listings for the Lewes pound on ebay.com, a one pound note for £4.99 and a five pound note the top bid of which is £3.95 + pp.

We both smile at the thought

“Then nothing, then about eighteen months ago they try and relaunch it,” he says making a show of accepting the money into his till.

“When was the last time you accepted any Lewes money then?” I ask

“Eighteen months ago”.

By this time the sun is by far over the yardarm and thirst has the better of me so I pop over the road to the White Hart Hotel, the plaque on the wall says:

'THOMAS PAINE 1737 - 1809
HERE EXPOUNDED HIS
REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS.
THIS INN IS REGARDED AS
A CRADLE OF AMERICAN
INDEPENDANCE WHICH HE
HELPED TO FOUND WITH
PEN AND SWORD'

Thomas Paine lived in Lewes for six years and in that time wrote one of the tracts that would inspire the American Revolution: Common Sense. It was a piece of writing that attacked the monarchy of the time and that probably had nothing at all to do with the fact he was near bankruptcy and faced debtors prison.

The grand white Tudor building belies a rather empty looking foyer and bar area with threadbare carpets and laminated menus on sticky tables. I wait at the empty bar and order a drink. The barman/porter takes my order with so little communication I'm not sure if English is second language. I offer some of the Lewes pound and he just shakes his head.

By this point town had started to fill up, chuggers for an animal rescue charity

bother people walking by. The age range of the town seems to skew toward the middle age, older men with long grey hair and deep tans like retired surfers, or odd facial hair. Eccentric people. Not the showy strangeness of nearby Brighton where their oddness is strictly performative and for other people to witness, but the comfortable weirdness of people that had made peace with it.

The dray cart goes past, its driver has a blanket over his legs and wears a tatty bowler hat.

Later Adam finishes work and brings Sarah, Sarah is a 5 year resident of Lewes and member of the largest bonfire society, Cliffe. I ask her if she or anyone she knows uses the Lewes pound.

“No, she says, there the only shops that take them are the independent shops, and really the only people to use them are the DFL types”

“DFL?”

“Down from London.”

“But having your own currency seems to be an independent thing to do, people from Lewes seem to be quite anti-authoritarian.”

“Oh yes and not afraid of making trouble, a local pub, the Lewes arms was bought by Greene King not long ago but Greene King refused to stock Harveys bitter, so everybody organised a boycott. There was a petition and people

standing outside explaining the boycott, it got into the local press. In the end Greene King sold the pub.”

“I suppose because of the infrastructure of the bonfire councils it’s quite easy to organise that sort of thing.”

“Yes, they’re a little competitive but can pull together for good causes.”

“Exactly, so why doesn’t everybody use the Lewes pound?”

“Well nobody asked us or got us on board or even explained it properly,” says Sarah “and you can’t use it in most shops, just some of the local ones, and nobody sees the point anyway.” Sarah indicates to the landlord standing nearby “what do you think of the Lewes pound?” she asks him

“Can’t use it really, it’s a pain in the arse to change, I can’t pay the staff or the suppliers in it, and nobody wants it in thier change so it just sits in the till. This from the youngish looking man in avengers T-shirt and shorts who I wouldn’t have picked out as management.

“One of the banners we have on the march is ‘we won’t be druv’ it means ‘we won’t be driven’ or told what to do. Nobody knows who Transition Town are or what that even means, they’re supposed to be an environmental group but I’m not sure how a local currency helps.

In an episode of The Simpsons, Homer takes his family to Itchy & Scratchy land,

an analogue of Disney World, at the counter he's asked if he wants to buy any Itchy & Scratchy Dollars.

"What's that?" he asks.

"It's money made for the park. It works like real money, but it's...fun." the teller tells him, encouraged by the kids he takes \$1100 dollars worth. As soon as he enters the park every sign on all the shops tells him they do not accept Itchy & Scratchy dollars.

When I came to Lewes I wanted to find a local currency that was two fingers to the establishment, a way of exchanging goods and services that didn't rely on the government even if it was in the most symbolic and ineffective way. What I found was a voucher system not that different from high street gift vouchers that nobody but tourists really use. A project implemented by a initiative that nobody really knows or trusts.

Lewes is a cool place, bristling with pagan desires and quirky British rebellion: so much so when someone tells them to use a different currency they ignore it.



About the writer

"My wings are like a shield of bourbon. Writer, drunk, lover, not always in that order."
Danny's work has appeared in Vice, Fused and Area magazines. He typically writes about

culture, pop and otherwise, and his own experiences travelling through subcultures. He's worked behind the bar and on the doors of the roughest pubs in Birmingham, sold encyclopaedias in the Australian outback, and taught gang kids from the ghettos of New Jersey how to shoot a bow and arrow. He most recently worked as a teaching assistant in a pupil referral unit, but gave it up to explore India and spend more time writing.

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