FG: Hello and welcome back to episode 16 of the Counties of England podcast. In this week’s episode we will be talking about the county which played host to the Battle of Hastings. The county which holds the second oldest aquarium in the world and the county which contains the first ever house bought by the National Trust. In this week’s episode, we will be covering the county of East Sussex.

East Sussex is a county located in the South East of England. It is bordered by three counties: Kent to the East, West Sussex to the West and Surrey to the North West. It has a population of 844,985 which puts it as the 20th smallest county when ranked against others. In terms of area, it is the 16th smallest county when ranked against others. And in terms of population density, it is the 20th largest county with 1,221 people per square mile. East Sussex is split into 6 different districts. These being: the city of Brighton and Hove, Lewes, Wealden, Eastbourne, Rother, and Hastings. The largest settlement is the city of Brighton and Hove; however, the county town is Lewes.

The median salary in Brighton is £28,000 putting it below the UK average of £31,500. The unemployment rate is 3.7% again putting it below the UK average of 4.8%. The average house price according to Zoopla estimates is £379,810 putting it above the national average of around £330,000.

East Sussex is divided up into 8 parliamentary constituencies, of these 5 are represented by Conservative MP’s, 2 are represented by Labour MP’s and one is represented by a Green Party MP. And the most famous MP from this bunch is the MP for the Brighton Pavilion constituency, Caroline Lucas. She has been the MP since 2010, and she is a member of the Green Party. She is the solitary Green Party MP in the UK.

A very famous quirk about East Sussex is the town of Lewes, and in particular the bonfire night festival which occurs of course on the 5th of November each year. I’m sure that many of you listening celebrate bonfire night in some sort of way, whether it be attending a fireworks show or a bonfire itself. Most of you listening will have celebrated in some form at some point in your lives. However the people of Lewes, and surrounding areas, take things to the extreme. Here is a clip which will explain more [Play Lewes Bonfire clip]

At the festival, if you could call it that, people will often wield burning crosses and burning torches. When the burning torches become too hot to handle, they are dumped on the floor to be picked up by designated people with wheelbarrows. There is also often a stark contrast between how someone might behave on bonfire night in Lewes, and how someone might behave on every other day of the year in Lewes. For example, someone who may take a banger out of his pocket set the fuse and toss it onto the ground as if it were a sweet wrapper, may be a chartered accountant in real life. I don’t know about you, but I seem to think that chartered accountants would not typically be engaging in those kinds of actions. But this goes to show that on Bonfire night in Lewes. People can forget their occupation and how they may be expected to behave, and they can essentially let loose on a night like this.

The origins of the festival come from the fact that seventeen protestant Martyrs were burnt in Lewes under Bloody Mary. So it has become a place for pyromaniacs to wreak havoc, essentially celebrating the burning of Protestant Martyrs. And there is a stark contrast from Lewes on the 5th of November each year and Lewes on every single other day of the year. On every other day of the year, Lewes is what you might call a stereotypical small southern town. It has a Waitrose, and various other small shops. But on Bonfire night is comes alive, which is something that cannot be said for other stereotypical small southern towns. It is estimated that around 60,000 attend the festival, to put into perspective, the population of Lewes is only around 17,000 so this shows that it attracts people from other areas of East Sussex, not just Lewes.

To speak a bit about Brighton. Brighton is now described by many to be the closest thing to San Francisco in the UK. Brighton is also described as being rougher and poorer than its image suggests. However, as Matthew Engel writes, as so much of England has been squashed by conformity, Brighton’s spirit remains unbroken. Here is a clip explaining how people volunteer in Brighton to help clean up the plastic-ridden beaches. [Play Brighton beach clean clip]

The East Sussex flag is based on the East Sussex coat of arms, which is itself based on the heraldic shield of Sussex. The design incorporates the charge of six martlets (a mythical bird found in heraldry, essentially representative of a swift) that have been traditionally associated with Sussex for centuries and that have appeared on the various forms of arms used in the county.

Fun facts about East Sussex include:

Brighton's aquarium is the second oldest in the world after opening in 1872. Only an aquarium in Arcachon, France is older having opened five years earlier. It is understood that Brighton Sea Life centre is home to around 5,500 sea creatures.

It is thought that the Duke of York's Picture House in Brighton is the oldest cinema in continuous use in the UK and one of the oldest in the world. It was opened on September 22 in 1910 and converted from the original building which was owned by Amber Ale Brewery. Still going strong to this day, the Duke of York's is often touted as one of the best cinemas in the country.

As I’m sure you all know Hastings played host to one of the world's most famous battles in 1066 between the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans from France. The Anglo-Saxons were lead by King Harold Godwinson, who famously died when an arrow struck him in the eye, and the Normans were lead by William, the Duke of Normandy. The battle took place on October 14, 1066, and ended with the Normans victorious. William would go on to rule over the land and become known throughout history as William the Conqueror. The events of the famous battle in Sussex are documented in the Bayeux Tapestry, an embroidered cloth nearly 70 metres long.

The Clergy House in Alfriston was the first house that was ever purchased by the National Trust. It was apparently bought for just £10 in 1896 and acted as the model for all future purchases by the charity.

Incredibly Gatwick Airport was once the location of a racecourse that held the Grand National on multiple occasions. Known as Gatwick Racecourse the land was bulldozed over to make way for the current airport. The Grand National was held there in 1916, 1917 and 1918.

William the Conqueror landed at Pevensey, which is actually around 10 miles from Battle where the Normans and the Anglo-Saxons fought.: The famous song 'Sussex by the Sea', which is sung by fans of Brighton and Hove Albion, has been adopted as the unofficial anthem in the county. The song includes the line: "For we're the men from Sussex, Sussex by the Sea." It was composed by William Ward-Higgs in 1907, but may have been influenced by Rudyard Kipling in 1902 entitled Sussex.

FG: And that just about wraps it up for this week’s episode, as always I really hope you enjoyed and that you are looking forward to next week’s episode on the 24th of April. In that episode we will be talking about the county of Essex so stay tuned for that and in the meantime I hope you have a good week, and I will talk to you again next Saturday.