

THE OFFICERS' MESS DOVER CASTLE

Lesley Shaw

The Officers' Mess stands to the south of the Church of St Mary-in-Castro and the Roman Pharos, facing southwards over the Port of Dover and the English Channel. On the same site, between the Roman Oval fortifications and the edge of the cliff, civilian inhabitants of Dover in Roman and Saxon times are reported to have had their dwellings.

The Officers' Mess was built in the mid-nineteenth century as part of a programme of construction and renovation in the Castle initiated by the Commission of Defence in 1858. The need for new officers' quarters must have been prompted in part by the overcrowding when the Castle played host for a short time to a large number of troops returning home from the Crimean War in 1856.

A magnificent stone building, it now stands empty and forlorn. In winter it is lashed by strong winds and rain, but in summer it is a lovely calm place with superb views over the Channel to France.

In recent years the west wing of the building was used by the immigration services, and is still known as the "Immigration Block". This wing retains its original floor and room structure, although the interior is much in need of renovation. The interior of the central hall and east wing of the building was removed some years ago to convert it to a Visitors' Centre, but the work was never completed. A few reminders of its former glory, such as the lovely stone fireplaces, remain amidst the bricked-up stubbs of the former interior walls and the reinforced concrete floor.

But English Heritage has kept the exterior of the building in good repair and water-proofed, and the interior wood panelling stripped from the central hall and east wing is safely stored, ready for the day when the building will once again be put to use. The question is, to what use?

A number of options for the Officers' Mess have been suggested in recent years, including turning it into a hotel and conference centre, an exhibition centre, converting it to office units or residential units, turning it into time-share units, or to a short-stay centre for archaeological students visiting the Castle for study purposes. English Heritage commissioned a report three years ago to consider the feasibility of some of these options. The building is not ideal for any of these uses, and renovation and refurbishment will probably cost somewhere between two and four million pounds depending on the final use.

But the building and its settings are magnificent, and Dover Castle is the most important tourist attraction of our area. As we make efforts to draw more visitors to the Dover area as a way of improving our prosperity, surely we can find an economically viable role for the Officers' Mess which fits with this plan for tourism.?

Dover District Council is aware of the importance of the Officers' Mess and is considering how it might be developed to fit in with their Tourism policy for the area. Between them I am sure that our District Council and Ken Scott will bring the imagination and resolve to ensure that, if at all

feasible, the Officers' Mess becomes a living part of our community once again.

(Contributed by Lesley Shaw by kind permission of Friends of Dover Castle)

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