

Tour of the Western Docks

AN AFTERNOON AT THE SEASIDE

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Members of the Dover Society love their town and have a deep interest in it. Thanks to Dover Harbour Board and its Chief Engineer, John Gerrard (our Vice-Chairman), we were able to satisfy these feelings with a conducted tour of the Western Docks area and to hear about and see parts of the harbour not normally open to the public.

Undaunted by the rain, we started at 2.30 p.m. near Harbour House, split into two groups of about 40 members each, and set off to take in tugs, dredgers and the old Customs House which DHB are intent on preserving. There was the old Dunkirk rail ferry dock, closed on its 50th birthday, reminding us of how fast technical changes have affected cross-channel trade. It was sad to see the unused dock with its pump house which raised and lowered the water to a precise alignment with the railway. Will the pump house be demolished or will they take up the French engineer's joking comment and turn it into a museum? What about it, DHB?

On past the jetfoil terminal with its beakless ship to the modern replacement for the old railway dock. I thought it had goodlooking lines - a tribute to modern design and its power. SEEBOARD avoided power supply problems with its start up only with the closure of a local colliery, which comment made the mind boggle.

We don't always realise the power and magnitude of local features and we moved from progressively more powerful docks to a pair of impressive Victorian guns in their rotating turret. Although we could only partially see the installation it made us eager to see the whole. It needed little imagination to visualise the conditions inside the turret with firing 16 inch guns, shattering noise and choking fumes. We so often hear of museums now recreating sights and smells of days gone by - tourists would flock to endure a live Victorian gun emplacement.

Onto another treasure, British Rail's Marine Railway Station built in time to receive the wounded of the First World War and containing the impressive War Memorial as a further reminder of the conflict. There are possibilities that the station could be used as a Maritime Museum, should BR vacate with the advent of the Tunnel. Its style would make it an ideal site and we were all impressed by the potential of the redecorated waiting area. At this point a caring DHB fed us tea and buns to help us complete the excursion.

We headed back to the Granville and Wellington Docks past the Lord Warden and the Old Town railway station. Two candidates of obvious merit and style and worthy of recognition and restoration for use by local and town visitors.

We were near the end now as we passed the outfall of our dear old River Dour at the town end of the Wellington Dock. We heard of plans to upgrade the harbour area with quality housing and a yachting marina, which sounds the sort of development to ensure Dover's future.

I should like to record our thanks to Dover Harbour Board and in particular to John Gerrard, Jim Butler, Joe Lyons and Robin Dodridge who gave us such an enjoyable and interesting afternoon.