



An
informal visit by some members
 of
The Dover Society

We were grateful to be invited to a preliminary exploratory visit to the Heritage Centre on the 15th March. The invitation came at short notice and it was only possible to inform those members who could be contacted personally or by phone and who could be free at 1.30 on a Friday afternoon!

In the event we were a party of about forty, full of expectant curiosity, which was not disappointed. On the contrary. The façade of the old Market Hall restored to its former glory confirms that it was worth listing and preserving and it harmonises surprisingly well with the new architecture.

Inside the Centre final works were still going on but we were very impressed. The ground floor is an excellent example of contemporary museum presentation. The large tableaux and video interviews with "Romans" are striking and vivid. The small and miniature models are exquisite. The Experience as a whole caters for varied tastes and ages. There are ample written explanations in English (and faultless French, but no German?) which call for leisurely and careful reading. The actual archaeological exhibits are cunningly embraced by the building, very well presented and will surely be added to in the future.

The old-time Pier wasn't ready but the re-construction of wartime Dover is real, even to those who remember the real thing. Last comes the Time and Tide spectacle. There is of course nationwide educational discussion about the merits of the comic presentation of history, but those present who are grandparents were saying that they would surely bring their grandchildren to see it!

We were asked to tabulate our impressions on market-research forms and I hope these prove useful. But it was obvious that we had been interested and enjoyed the visit. More than once I heard the comments: "It's money well spent" and "I think it will succeed".

Back in the Market Square: how happy we would be if the banks and shops could be re-located (perhaps in the Co-op and GPO sites - but there is plenty of choice) thus making possible a piazza and stepped garden and opening up the side view of what is arguably the best building in Dover - certainly the best new building.

LEO WRIGHT

106 *An Architects view of* THE WHITE CLIFFS EXPERIENCE

"Can this be Dover?" asked a young friend, impressed by the quality of the technology at the White Cliffs Experience. I asked the same question but I was seeking the essence of my home town. Dover Society members cannot forget John Sunderland's enthusiastic introduction to his project or escape the 'white elephant' jibes in the letter columns of the local press. Doverians might also lose sight of the sub-title "BRITAIN'S FRONT LINE STORY" and expect more than the Experience claims to offer. Nor should we forget that this is a commercial exercise designed to attract the tourist and develop the town's prosperity. None of us will look through the eyes of the three-generation family at leisure depicted in the introductory booklet.

In order to provide an expert and original approach the Society invited ANN VOELCKER, R.I.B.A., a distinguished architect and a member of the Canterbury Society, to visit the complex and to share her impressions. The visitor is promised education combined with fun and entertainment. How successfully are these claims met?

One must fundamentally accept "processing" – that is following a pre-determined route through a series of scenes. Much as Ann dislikes this practice she found the introductory area exciting with its glazed crescent backed by geological photographs overlooking the remains of the Roman bastion. The wall-mounted display of three-dimensional historically representative characters seemed a rather curious medley, however, until careful analysis revealed that we were being taken back through time to face larger-than-life "Cantiaci tribesmen".

The ensuing Roman sections form more than a quarter of the Experience. Do they provide information about the facts and influences which governed people then? The area which shows Cæsar's INVASION is badly designed. Only half the screen is visible to those obliged to stand at the back. War's brutality and chaos could be better conveyed, without the confusion of strident music and spoken word, although the intention is clear enough.

In contrast the full-sized models of head-severing CELTIC FIGURES were felt to be "as bad as a bad comic".

The series of small uncoloured models, illustrating ASPECTS OF ROMAN LIFE was much favoured. Topics marked (M) here can be studied in greater detail in the Museum. Equally interesting is the small video depicting a regular voyage across the Gallic Strait. Supersonic screens featuring direct speakers are almost overwhelming in these Roman sections, though less so in the part where one may sit down in a small arena. Here it is easy to quibble – with the perfect teeth of the lead-mining slave, for example, but the press-button technique and illumination of the models works well.

One's sense of smell is drawn into play on entering the exhibition of the CLASSIS BRITANNICA remains. The mustiness, genuine according to our guide, emphasises the value of actual artifacts. Objects found on site are displayed, though perhaps not to best advantage. Serial lighting of the original walls is accompanied by a straightforward recorded commentary. However processed there is worthwhile knowledge about the Roman way of life to be gained here.

We were disappointed with the poor standard of INFORMATIVE PANELS 107 throughout most of the Experience. There are large sections of prose in small print with adjacent French versions. We felt that some of the content is patronising and badly expressed. Sentences such as "Well, even in lovely Kent it can be nippy at times" seem over-colloquial. Disembodied speech bubbles appear trivial, too. In describing these as an attempt to be "user-friendly" perhaps I am falling into the same trap. Sometimes drawings, often good in themselves, are placed around the text in a disorganised manner. What works best, when possible, are reproductions of contemporary prints or enlarged engravings such as those surrounding the moving "deck" of the ferry.

Ann was impressed by GROMET'S CHALLENGE, a mock-up "on board" adventure playground for children which fulfils the aim of fun and entertainment. Having tested it I can confirm the high standard of natural materials used and the demanding nature of the tasks set. Nevertheless I would not choose to undertake the supervision of a party of teenagers here, particularly as it is situated in the complementary glass-sided and roofed GALLERY overlooking the fragmentary ruins of St. Martin-le-Grand. Youngsters may let off steam while adults speculate about the view.

Continuing the entertainment theme one ascends the gang plank slope to the FERRY DECK. This and the shabby end-of-pier simulation recall with authenticity the atmosphere of neglect which pervaded travel in the immediate post-war period. Models of travellers are excellent but how regrettable the standard of both the mural and the multi-windowed fuzzy advertising film for contemporary Channel crossing. Ann hastened to consult the old timetable to compare journey times to Zurich then and now; another example of the attraction of genuine article.

We had encountered a historium. Now we were to meet animatronics in the "TIME AND TIDE THEATRE", repellant, biologically bizarre, cartoon-type personalities who set out to convey the potted history of notable passengers through the port. Perhaps Sid Seagull was invented for the purpose of advance publicity. He has been an unfortunate ambassador and regrettably our fears were confirmed by the corny clichés paraded before us. Pirates, pollution, moribund plays-on-words are all there. What will overseas visitors think of the jingoism? Perhaps it is just as well that some of the sound is too distorted to be comprehensible. I feel genuine admiration for the technical ability which can make a cliff face expressive but is it too late to introduce some quality into this crude show?

For most of us 'DOVER 1944' fortunately allows "Time and Tide" to submerge. The character of this reconstruction is superior to any others I have seen, including those at the Castle Museum, York, and at Beamish. One returns to history. This is neither fun nor entertainment. I felt my flesh creep as I watched the old news reels and recognised the items in the shops. Most senses are engaged here — almost that of taste. (Touch is a little worrying. Will the objects remain in place?) Children may identify with these scenes too, accustomed as they are to seeing scenes of war and devastation on television. The video accounts of local participants are re-assuring, an interesting contrast with the Roman characters; the former genuine, the latter inevitably theatrical.

Throughout the Experience, utmost exploitation is made of MODERN

108 COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES. Occasionally, one feels subject to visual and auditory bombardment.

The overlap between settings can be unsatisfactory when sound from a previous or succeeding scene intrudes. There is some contrast between calm and noisy areas, spatial variety is explored and with few exceptions, most displays are accessible to all. Boredom is impossible in the kaleidoscope of impressions. We all liked the use of different levels (with lifts available for wheel-chairs) and the abundance of light in the central area.

Externally Ann found the ARCHITECTURE of the building stimulating; the new construction with its good brickwork and varied surfaces was not a disappointment. Dover's efforts were favourably compared with those of Canterbury. The honest manner in which the façade of the Market Hall has been preserved met with Ann's approval as did the cylindrical exterior of the Time and Tide theatre. Paul Koralek, Architect, and John Sunderland, the Project Manager, have produced a well-coordinated scheme. How we regret the exclusion of THE PAINTED HOUSE! Nevertheless we felt that on the whole the permanent features are the better ones and most inferior elements could be altered.

Ann was pleased to discover Dover itself much cleaned up compared with its appearance on a previous visit.

It is expected that most visitors will take approximately two hours to pass through the Experience. In addition they may visit the SHOP and the RESTAURANT.

Then there is the MUSEUM still to explore. The exhibitions here, varied and lively, are likely to find favour with those who prefer a less high-tec yet more scholarly approach to the past.

TOURIST INFORMATION is available for assistance with further exploration of the area.

Ann would bring her grand-children. We shall certainly take our week-end visitors, expecting to discover more ourselves on each occasion. We shall probably first find Dover in the Museum and entertainment later at the Experience.

SHEILA R. COPE

My impression was that Ann Voelcker is very doubtful about the desirability of preserving a façade only and considers that, given the will, the rest of the building can often be restored.



However, she likes the façade and feels that at least there is no pretence that it is anything more than that, and she recognises that Dover has a relatively limited number of good buildings.

Editor

From wild and frightening Celts to the disturbing sights and sounds of World War II the White Cliffs Experience carries one forward on a tide of novelty and artistry. While a realistic sea laps against Roman turrets a fascinating gallery of characters from the period tell their personal stories at the touch of a button. The recent excavations of the Roman naval fort are pleasingly presented, as are the remains of the great medieval church of St. Martin-le-Grand. On via an enterprising children's play area, hidden within the hull of a Tudor sailing galley, to a dilapidated Admiralty Pier and the swell — and smell — of an early ferry. For children the high-light of the tour will probably be the twenty minutes of potted history presented by Captain Sid Seagull, aided by a talking cliff and hindered rather than helped by the complaining Corporal Crab, while for the older visitor the street and shelters of the 1940s bring back evocative memories, A little short on serious history, perhaps, but all in all good family entertainment.

JOYCE MOLYNEUX

An enjoyable blend of the serious and the frivolous, the historium should appeal to a wide audience. A lot of thought and care has gone into the planning of the tour and there is scope and space for introducing improvements and additions as the exhibition develops. It is hoped that the developers take note of the constructive suggestions of pre-viewers to improve the two-hour 'experience'.

My favourite exhibit is the tableau of people from Roman times, each contributing a view of life in Dubris and illustrating the point that life's problems

remain much the same in any century. What better way for children to learn history?

MERRIL LILLEY

Please bear in mind that on my visit there was still a considerable amount of work to be completed, so I have not as yet seen all of the exhibition in its finished state.

Of paramount significance are the archaeological sites of the Classis Britannica fort, the Saxon Shore fort and the Norman church of St. Martin-le-Grand, all of which have survived in part and will now be preserved for future generations to view.

Within the Exhibition the story begins in 55BC with Julius Caesar's invasion of Britain. There is a life-size display of authentically dressed and equipped troops being confronted by defending Anglo-Saxons on the shore.

From there the visitor is taken on in time to 140AD and can become more involved by selecting one of eleven different authentically-dressed models of Dover residents at the time, to tell their own story of life in 140AD.

Another section of the Exhibition deals with sea travel and its importance to Dover. Here one is given the vivid impression of being on board an old cross-Channel steamer. It is noticeable that a great deal of work and effort has gone into the production of the displays, to make them as realistic as possible,

The latter statement particularly relates to the section of the Exhibition that depicts a Dover Street in 1944. The attention to detail here is extra-ordinary and viewers are allowed to wander at will into shops such as a bakery, newsagents and public

II O house. It leaves nothing to the imagination and one can easily get the feeling of what life could be like in World War II.

My overall impression from the parts of the Exhibition that I have seen is that it brings history to life, by using authentic models, modern audio-visual techniques and real people. It is this variety of presentation that makes it appealing.

Perhaps my main criticism is that the *complete* History of Dover has not been covered, although this might be dealt

with in some respect in the Time and Tide Show Theatre where viewers will be given a 20-minute animated show on the history of the area. (This was not fully set up on my visit).

The Exhibition should have an appeal to all ages whether they be local people or visitors to the town, and it must be a particularly useful resource to schools.

Everyone should find that they have a thoroughly entertaining and absorbing experience of the History of Dover.

DAVID ARMAN



Drawing by Hilary King

Lydden Pond Project

JOHN OWEN

The Dover Society LYDDEN POND PROJECT, in partnership with Lydden Parish Council and KCC, got off to a good start on Sunday 17th March when much clearance work took place and accumulated rubbish was disposed of.

The ambitious plan is to re-instate the village pond which will require all the resources of 'know-how', finance and voluntary labour that we can get. Come and see what we are doing. Bring gardening gloves and tools and lend a hand if you can.

Work sessions are at present taking place on certain Sundays. A notice at the pond in addition to those around the village gives the date of the next session in turn. John Owen can be telephoned on 202207.