

⁴ *The Society visits Calais*

CALAIS
ACCEUIL

A WARM WELCOME — 5 October 1991 — SHEILA COPE

WE were roused, unusually early for the majority, by the sound of thunder. What sort of omen was this for an 'invasion' by the Dover Society of Calais from which the English had been banished in 1558? Undeterred, eighteen of us enjoyed a calm crossing and were greeted on arrival by the President, M. Roger Pilate, and other officers of Calais Accueil. Some of us had been concerned about the competence of our O-level French to cope with any but the basic civilities. Leo Wright's command of the language, together with the fact that Mme Marian Lefebvre, Liaison Officer of Accueil, is native to Colchester, enabled us to relax. As we arrived in hazy sunshine at the Musée des Beaux Arts and our hosts began to circulate among us to explain the exhibits, we felt real anticipation for the day ahead.



The HÔTEL DE VILLE, CALAIS

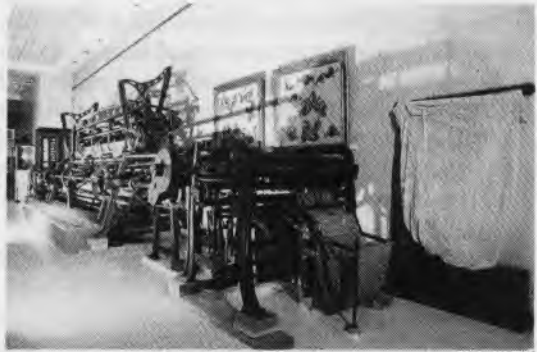
The Accueil or 'welcome' movement is a national one in France although the groups, which exist in most large towns and cities, are autonomous. Newcomers to an area, especially wives and children, can immediately begin to get to know each other and become involved in local events. The Calais group comprises about 190 families at present. The programme includes eleven regular activities (language teaching, gymnastics, painting on silk, for example) together with about five social events each month – exchange visits, outings, dinner dances, talks, friendly bridge contests, etc. A shopping trip to Canterbury will take place in December and our own visit was organised in return for that made to Dover by Calais Accueil a year ago. (Newsletter No, 9).

As our time at the Museum was limited we concentrated on specific exhibits, starting with a large model of Calais in 1904. This showed an attractive old town and revealed at once how 75% of the buildings were destroyed in the last war. The system of waterways around Calais was also evident, together with its very clear division into two separate districts – Nord and St. Pierre. The construction of the Town Hall on a former sandbank between the two areas has ever since helped to foster a greater sense of unity.

Passing showcases of maritime and other costumes, ceramics and implements typical of Calais from the 17th to the 19th centuries, we came to the lace room and the immediate reminder that it is for machine-made lace that Calais has been famous for over 150 years. Fishing and lace-making, which in its hey-day employed 30,000



THE FERRY TERMINAL



INSIDE THE MUSEUM



LES 6 BOURGEOIS – Rodin

6 people, were once the main industries of the region. The old looms and machines were fascinating, representing to some extent the emancipation of women from eye-strain and drudgery. One of the largest looms was stamped "Built in 1875 by T. Kendrick, Radford, Notts." and much of the technology came from Britain. Only a few hundred workers are required by the industry nowadays.

The Sculpture rooms nearby are a complete contrast. Although this is one of the most important collections of 19th and 20th century sculptures in Northern France, we concentrated on the studies and models made by Auguste Rodin between 1886 and 1895 for his monument *Les Bourgeois de Calais*. We saw, for example, one of the plaster maquettes and the life-size bronze male figure demonstrating the beseeching raised hand-movement characteristic of Rodin's style. The famous sculpture, known to us through its casting at the Victoria Tower Gardens in London, was originally placed on a high plinth at the Place d'Armes in Calais. Now, more obvious to all, the *Bourgeois* stand before the Hôtel de Ville.

Finally, we moved to a breathtaking exhibition for a provincial gallery – a selection of about 30 late Picasso paintings given to the State by Jacqueline Picasso in lieu of death duties. Although some works seemed familiar from reproductions, nothing can reduce the impact made by coming face to face with the original canvas for the first time. This collection, which will move on to Amiens in December and will subsequently be dispersed, would surely prove a worth-while attraction to modern art enthusiasts in Kent. The K.M. Dover Extra is to be commended for its new section, "What's On across the Channel" which should help to publicise such opportunities. Do local French papers perform a reciprocal service?

Within a short time we had retraced our steps down the Rue Royale and arrived at the Hôtel de Ville. Here was another warm welcome from M. Desitter, one of the deputy Mayors of Calais. We were one of many groups who are shown, with great pleasure, around the Town Hall, begun in 1911 and completed in 1927. The apparently solid wood roof beams cover some of the first experiments in the use of ferro-concrete. On the ground floor there was much evidence of the *Colours of Calais* – a white cross on a blue background – interspersed with the French Tricolor.

In the *Salle des Mariages* on the first floor, one's first impression was of richness combined with simplicity. The lower walls were wood-panelled, with green and gold above, and we sat, as wedding guests would do, on red velvet-covered benches on either side of the matching central carpet. We gazed at a romantic painting reminiscent of Arthur Rackham entitled;

Spring, the youth of the year,
Youth, the spring of life.

We could believe the claim that few other French towns, even Lille, had a Marriage Room superior to this. Civil weddings, under the Mayor's jurisdiction, are obligatory in France, though some people choose an additional religious ceremony. 506 marriages took place in that room last year, unless special judicial permission had been obtained for a ceremony elsewhere.

All the public rooms, including the central corridor, seemed spacious and lofty. The architecture might be termed Flemish Baroque but the style of the Council Chamber was more ponderous. Here, as in the *Salle des Mariages*, the far wall was dominated

by a painting, the work of the same woman artist. This was *Dévouement des Bourgeois de Calais 1347* and the wife of Edward III is seen pleading for their lives. We were told that during the summer, when the Council organises play schemes for 1200 children, these public rooms are used for rôle-play so that young people may understand their future civic duties.



DENTELLE DE CALAIS

In the Council Chamber, where the Mayor sits eight times a year with his 14 deputies raised to his right and 49 councillors facing them, M. Desitter outlined the French system of local government. Deputy Mayors chair committees dealing with education, buildings, etc. and their decisions are

implemented by 900 local government officers. There is no central control of local taxes which are levied and spent locally. Mayors have real power. The present Mayor of Calais, who is a Communist, has had four sessions in office and is in daily contact with local citizens. Elections are held every six years and seats allocated by a type of proportional representation. The present majority party holds 60% of the seats. Unemployment was 20% in Calais before tunnel construction began. The problem has been alleviated temporarily because much labour was recruited locally. Asked about the transportation of live animals, our host failed to reply, as if it was a subject about which most French people were not sensitive.

Having seen the large hall which is hired out for functions – that evening a reception for council employees and the following day a presentation of medals for hard work – we returned downstairs. The stairs are illuminated by a stained glass window depicting the banishment from Calais of the English by François, Duc de Guise, “never to return.”

How mistaken he was! In his formal address the Deputy Mayor said how much he valued the contacts with Dover. In reply, Leo Wright explained the civic nature of our Society and outlined some of our recent endeavours. Gifts were exchanged. Beryl Jones presented a picture of the new Port Control at the Eastern Entrance donated by the Harbour Board and Leo accepted a blue porcelain plate. After toasting each other in sparkling white wine we dispersed in groups to nearby restaurants to enjoy each other’s company as much as the food. At our table ten acquaintances became new friends as common interests were shared.

As we returned to the bus from the supermarkets thoughtfully marked on the maps provided by Marian Lefebvre, we were passed by a procession of wedding-cars with flying balloons and rhythmically tooting horns. The down-to-earth version of the mural in the *Salle des Mariages*?

Back in the ticket hall the members of *Accueil* bade us ‘*Au revoir*’. We appreciate the generous manner in which they gave us their time and ensured the smooth running of our visit, thus increasing our enjoyment. Nor do we forget to thank Lin Clackett for organising the travel arrangements and Leo Wright for his diplomacy and translation throughout the day. In Dover it was raining hard; our Society’s visit to Calais had been ‘*très tranquille*’.

8 LEO'S RESPONSE to the WELCOME AT CALAIS

Monsieur le Maire-Adjoint

Monsieur le Président de Calais Accueil

Ladies and Gentlemen

Je dois tout d'abord faire les excuses de notre Président.

Il doit ce matin présider une conférence importante et il regrette tellement de n'avoir pas pu nous accompagner. Il est très francophile et il adore la cuisine française.

Nous sommes très sensibles à la chaleur de l'accueil de votre association, soulignée par cette réception municipale. Nous sommes très contents de renforcer, encore que modestement, le jumelage Calais-Douvres.

A ce sujet j'ai une petite communication de la part du conseil municipal de Douvres. Au cours de la visite de votre groupe à Douvres l'année passée, Monsieur le Président, à la réception à notre hôtel de ville, on a posé la question: "Avez-vous à Douvres une organisation qui correspond à L'Accueil des Villes françaises?" et la réponse était négative. Le message est ceci: l'officier responsable a dit: "Voici encore un domaine où nous pouvons admirer et apprendre quelque chose chez nos voisins et les imiter". En attendant, Rotary et certaines familles, à titre particulier y mettent du leur en invitant des étrangers employés aux travaux du Tunnel et d'autres.

Toujours sous ce titre de profiter de bons exemples chez nos voisins, j'ai lu avec plaisir, hier encore, que les présidents des deux chambres de commerce: votre Henri Ravisse et notre Peter Sherred ont invité nos trois leaders de parti: Major, Kinnock et Ashdown à venir voir l'excellent réseau de communications déjà en place et projeté pour servir Calais. Nous voudrions l'égaliser.

The Dover Society est très heureux d'accueillir des groupes comme le vôtre, Monsieur le Président, mais notre constitution nous impose d'autres responsabilités. Nous sommes une association civique de plus de trois cents membres, très active en ce qui concerne l'urbanisme et l'environnement. Par exemple: deux affaires qui nous occupent en ce moment, de concert avec le conseil municipal et la chambre de commerce: le renouvellement de notre centre commercial et aussi la chasse au pavillon bleu pour nos plages.

Pour conclure: si je peux me permettre un peu de nostalgie du passé:

La première fois que j'ai été honoré d'un vin d'honneur dans ce magnifique hôtel de ville, c'était en 1947!

Nous étions arrivés en deux petites embarcations à voile, appelées "baleinières": deux profs, et deux fois huit élèves. Monsieur le maire-adjoint, votre prédécesseur, nous a accueillis comme "les jeunes Anglais sportifs." Oui. Tout passe. Tout lasse. Mais, ces élèves-là, maintenant des pères de famille, pour ne pas dire grands-pères, n'ont pas oublié Calais en 1947 – une ville en ruines, aux ponts sautés, comme Douvres d'ailleurs, à l'époque, mais qui nous a accueillis chaudement. Ce qui démontre, Monsieur le Maire-adjoint, que Marie Tudor n'est pas seule à avoir Calais gravé au cœur. Nous ne sommes pas dans la salle des mariages, mais le mariage de nos deux villes voisines est constant et se porte bien.

Levons nos verres au jumelage Calais – Douvres, sous le grand parapluie (parasol?) de la Communauté Européenne! A l'Entente Cordiale!

POSTSCRIPT

The reciprocal visits to and from Calais Accueil have had a very pleasant and rewarding sequel.

The A.V.F., with some 600 voluntary centres in France, are now thinking European. Already into Germany, they are looking to introduce the good work of the Accueil into Britain, starting in Kent. We were asked to arrange a meeting with Dover District Council to explore ways and means.

On 11 November Leo and Marjorie Wright entertained Madame Violette Picot, a national vice-president, and Madame Renée Vernusset, regional representative for Nord-Pas-de-Calais, and a meeting was arranged with John Moir, Chief Executive of D.D.C. We were able to give them some promising contacts, which they are already following up.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

During one week in October, it so happened that I had occasion to observe several visitors to the town in different situations, which constituted their first impressions of Dover.

Passing through Brook House car park, on my way to the Library, I saw three coaches unloading parties of tourists, on their way to the White Cliffs Experience. The sun was shining, the flowers blooming in recently-weeded beds, the paths were clear of litter, the ducks bobbing on the Dour, as the visitors crossed the footbridge and made their way to the pedestrian precinct. I think their first impressions were favourable.

At the Painted House, I encountered a couple who had just arrived by train for a day in Dover. Seeing a sign to the Painted House they had made that their first stop and were answering a tourist questionnaire, put to them by a helpful custodian. They had decided to visit Dover for the day to sight-see, because they had previously only passed through on their way to the ferry! Their welcome was a very friendly one.

As I stood near the desk at the Tourist Office outside the museum, I heard two Americans. They were booking bed and breakfast in Castle Street, a ferry crossing for the following day and enquiring about a three-day stay on their return from the continent. However, the assistant failed to help them with their last query. The banks had closed and they wanted to change some dollar travellers cheques. Surely, I thought afterwards, they could have been directed to the Bureau de Change on Townwall Street.

So far, so good. In all these situations the tourists seemed very happy. However, the following Saturday, when out walking, I saw some very tired-looking travellers. making their way along Snargate Street, after avoiding several hazards connected with the roadworks for the A20. There were at least 60 or 70 people, some with children, some elderly, some with suitcases, all WALKING from Western Docks to Dover town centre. Hardly a welcoming entrance to Dover for these visitors. Surely buses could be provided for them!

EDITOR