

# *The January Meeting . . . .*

*HUGH BAX*

---

THE SUBJECT of the January meeting was the work of the archæologists along the route of the new A20, from the Western Heights to the Eastern Docks. The exploration is being carried out by the Canterbury Archæological Trust, under the leadership of Mr Keith Parfitt, the project director, who, with the aid of slides, gave us a close and detailed account of the progress of the work. The distance involved in this section is about three miles and the time spent, so far, a year and a half. A consequence of the construction of the new motorway is the replacement of the worn Victorian sewerage system by a new one with pipes five feet in diameter in a trench fifteen feet deep. The archæological heart of the study is the area of Bench Street and its junction with Townwall Street, the very centre of the historic town, where a pedestrian underpass is to be built beneath the new dual carriageway.

Mr Parfitt dealt first with the fortifications; first, the South Lines Battery, which was originally equipped with seven guns, not three, as previously thought. This has now been demolished, then Archcliffe Fort, which was thought to be a kind of Victorian bastion, but was found to contain 17th and 18th century elements. This has been preserved, the new road running hard by. We then looked at the site of Great Paradise and a reproduction of the famous painting of Henry VIII's ships entering the harbour. The workers have sought in vain for evidence of the two forts which guarded its entrance but found signs of the beach shingle which eventually silted up the basin.

But then we come to Bench Street, and what riches here! How can one adequately describe all that close and rigorous examination, within a strictly limited time scale, revealed! Beneath the site of the Shakespeare Hotel and Crypt Restaurant, devastated by fire in 1977 and demolished a few years later, were found a Victorian well, a 17th century gutter and 13th century chalk soil deposits. Exploration of documents and letters proved that Bench Street was much narrower in medieval times. Filled-in cesspits revealed two Norman rubbish pits, c1175, with remnants of fish bones and scales.

By the Middle Ages, Bench Street contained fine houses and a tower house, once thought to be the tower of St. Nicholas church, blown up in 1836. More probably this was a town house, very like an existing one in Bridport, shewn on a slide. Excavations have revealed two large cellars or crypts, one on the site of the Crypt Restaurant on the west side of the street and the other adjacent to, but not beneath, the stone tower, on the east side. Also revealed were various details of walls, doors, steps, engravings, vaulted arches and a recessed cupboard. Here the archæologists had a glimpse, for the first time, of the layout of medieval Dover, with later structures superimposed on the earlier ones.

Whilst these things were being identified and recorded, Dr Martin Peters, a geo-archaeologist, was finding fascinating solid evidence of the silting up of both the Roman and medieval harbours. Searches at the Dover Stage car park area produced a flint Stone-Age adze, from c5000 BC.

The site of the gates in this medieval walled town was most interesting too. The Snar Gate was pulled down in 1628. We were shewn a Victorian water colour of what purported to be the gate, with flint walls, Kent pegged tiled roof and an odd and incongruous Dutch gable at one end. It looked most attractive and, said Mr Parfitt, highly improbable. The Baldware Gate was breached by the sea, cut in half, the eastern section swept away and the western section moved sideways. The town wall stood right against the sea and was constantly pounded and beaten by it, its massive foundation stones were smooth and rounded with beach shingle wedged between the cracks. In 1470 an appeal to the King for help in repairing the wall described it as "battered and prostrate". By this time high tides were passing through breaches in the wall.

Near here was found the base of a statue, possibly that of an archbishop. On the site of the Baldware Gate was erected a three gun battery. Further researches in the Bench Street area revealed part of the Roman timber quay.

Stakes had been driven into the sand and behind them huge timbers were laid flat and massive stones set upon them. Thus a link with the Roman Quay in Stembrook was established.

And here, for the time being, the project would have ended but for Mr Parfitt's amazing discovery of THE BOAT!! The authorities had decided that there was a likelihood that the underpass might on occasion be flooded, so that it was necessary to provide a pumping system to keep it dry. In the area selected for this project, just before work was to commence, a section of a large boat was found, much of it still buried. Mr Parfitt described in absorbing detail the events attendant on this discovery – staying the hands of the contractors, uncovering the boat and lifting the remains and storing them in water tanks provided by Dover Harbour Board. There were four very large pieces of wood, joined by yew withies, twisted to form ties. There were sheets, which might imply the use of sail. Only one other boat of this kind has been found in Britain, at Ferriby in 1937. This discovery took Dover's archaeological enterprise into the international class. The boat has been dated carbon dated to c1300 BC.

It was not, we might conjecture, abandoned on the foreshore, but at the edge of the River Dour. Over subsequent years it became a repository for rubbish; waste bits, bones, food, a cow's skull, flint chippings. It was resting in peat, dating back to 10,000 BC, Snail shells found in the boat were of fresh-water snails. And that brings us to a most surprising conclusion. We have grown used to the idea of Dover as a seaport of which the harbour has been silting up since medieval times. But now we have to accept that the area of Bench Street was indeed well inland. The shoreline when this old boat was cast aside might well have been where the Breakwater is now.

Mr Parfitt's expert knowledge, enthusiasm, technical skill and easy and pleasant manner gave the rapt audience a fascinating evening.