

Working for Dover

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A MUSEUM CUSTODIAN : Gill Bowers

For the last thirteen years I have worked, at various times, at the Roman Painted House, The Timeball Tower at Deal and, at present, at The Dover Museum. I did not enjoy History at school, I thought it was rather boring, but I have learned it can be exciting. There is always something *new* to learn!

The beginning of a working day *usually* starts with a cup of coffee, giving a few precious minutes to read the office diary to see which members of staff are in or out for the day and if any visitors or school parties are expected. There are occasions, however, when visitors or schools *do* rattle the front doors in the hope that the staff will open up before the appointed time!

The next duties are to sign on at the till and check the cash. All the glass on displays has to be cleaned, the shop has to be tidied and the stock replenished if necessary. At ten o'clock the front doors are unlocked ready to welcome the first visitors.

The custodian tries to be happy and bright at ten in the morning — and still the same when six o'clock brings the end of the day! One also has to be quite informative — showing, for instance, how to see the cliffs by walking along the Prince of Wales Pier, how to get to the Castle, how to actually stand on the White Cliffs, how to find the White Cliffs Experience, the Town Gaol, the Painted House and, more importantly, the loos! One must be able to explain the layout of the Museum and at the end of the day not to sound like a tape recording!

It is very fulfilling to be able to help young visitors bursting with questions and to show them where to find the information they need. A well-behaved school party is a joy to help but an ill controlled one is a near nightmare!

One learns from visitors when there is time to have a chat, particularly when talking with Dorsetians who know so much more of the town's history than I do.

Visitors are always interesting to observe: for instance, the eight-year old boy with a school party who comes up to the counter clutching his purchases and then realizes that he can't afford to buy all of them, looks disappointed, and has to decide what to put back on the shelf!; the expression of relief on the face of a visitor who sinks into a seat at about four in the afternoon and had probably been sight-seeing all day!; the lower half of a visitor who is standing behind a display panel and kicks off her shoes and walks around the remainder of the exhibition in blissful comfort!

It is a great pleasure to tell visitors what to see in the district and how to get there. One also meets so many people from Western Europe, Scandinavia, the U.S.A. and Canada, Japan, Australia and, now, from what was East Germany.

I am sure many people think that a custodian's job is very gentle, not too demanding, sitting at a till for seven hours, but, believe me, by 6 pm, after a very busy day, perhaps seeing 200 visitors and three or four school parties, the custodian is very thankful to hang up the keys, put on comfortable shoes and walk out into the evening air and home!