

Strawberry Tea at Dover College

—DAHLIA HARRIS

A BRIGHT BUT BREEZY DAY brought over sixty people along to enjoy the guided tour and strawberry and cream tea on Saturday, 19th June. Members and friends were split into four groups and our guide happened to be Mrs Marjorie Wright. We started at the Effingham Crescent entrance where we learned that the Priory was founded in 1130 by King Henry I. It's full and correct title was "The Priory of St. Martin and St. Mary of the New Work or Newark". It received VIPs from all over Europe and was obliged to feed and house them free of charge. Records show Kings Stephen, Henry II, Edward II and Henry VIII among those staying there.

We were shown a print from 1760 showing only a few buildings on this site surrounded by meadows, only a footpath where the now busy Folkestone Road runs.

The Priory had a great library containing 15,000 books at the time of the Renaissance, which were all catalogued. Unfortunately, they were scattered all over Europe and only a tenth of them are now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

During the years of the Dissolution, the buildings looted and torn down, it became a farm. Even when then site was known as 'Priory Meadow' it was used for the ceremonial installation of the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. Our Queen Mother heads a long list which includes Sir Winston Churchill, Sir Robert Menzies and, of course, the Duke of Wellington, for whose installation a magnificent temporary pavilion was built in 1839.

When the College was founded in 1871 it probably looked something like St. Radigund's Abbey today, a meadow, a farm and some ruins. The surviving four mediæval buildings are the Chapel, the Gatehouse, The Cloisters and the Refectory. Behind the School House we visited a pleasant walled garden, ideal for music or open-air theatre, these were probably the walls of a 'common' guest house.

From the garden we walked to the Chapel, built in 1139. It was very moving to see the names inscribed on the walls of men and boys from the College who died in the Boer War and the two World Wars. In the days of the Priory this was not a chapel but most probably a 'first-class' guest house. It is said the King Stephen died in this hall in 1154. It was long called the King's Hall or White Hall.

Crossing to the Gatehouse we passed the site of the monks' carp pond. The outline of the pond can still be clearly seen after torrential rain. The Gatehouse, built in 1320, is now used for sixth-form reading rooms. Restored in 1882 and again in 1945 it appears on many engravings.

We were fascinated to hear as we walked towards the Refectory from the Gatehouse, that soundings had been made to the depth of eighteen feet, and that we were walking on vaults, cellars and crypts.

The Cloister ruins, where the Priory Church stood, covered a site which extended to Effingham Crescent and into Saxon Street. It was probably the size of Rochester Cathedral. Until quite recently, we could have walked down the ancient steps which led down from the Church, but the area has now been re-levelled and fenced for games. The monks' burial ground was near the south transept of the Church, and skeletons were found in coffins cut in the chalk, when the boiler room for St. Martin's House was built in the 1950s. The monks' dormitories stood along the present line of Effingham Crescent with buildings and gardens extending down to the Maison Dieu and . . . St. Edmund's Chapel.

As we entered the Refectory through the new passage, built by the present College workforce, we heard how in 1295 when the French set fire to the building, the stone was changed to pink with the heat. It was built with Caen stone brought from Normandy. In Victorian times there still remained the red-on-white drawing of the Last Supper on the East wall, which was part of a thirteenth century fresco.

A large shield on the wall reads, "NON RECUSO LABORUM", the motto of St. Martin, which, translated from the Latin, means "I do not refuse to work" which the boys – and girls now – see every day as they dine in this historic hall.

So, as this was the end of our guided tour, we did as many had done before us, used this glorious old Norman refectory to eat – and enjoyed our strawberries and cream! I had invited my daughter as my guest and we both thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon and meeting old friends over tea.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *As stated on the application form for places for the Tour of Dover College, one of the aims of the day was to introduce new members to the Dover Society. Many of those attending brought friends with them and, as a result, the Dover Society recruited six new members. Many thanks to Joan Liggett for arranging The Day and to all the members who helped with the refreshments and with the guided tours.*

Thanks also to Leo Wright for the anecdote concerning the Dover College schoolgirl, who, on entering the College said she understood the motto to mean: "We never vote Labour"!!

