



## *a DAY at the* **WELLS**

MAY JONES (117) records the day's outing

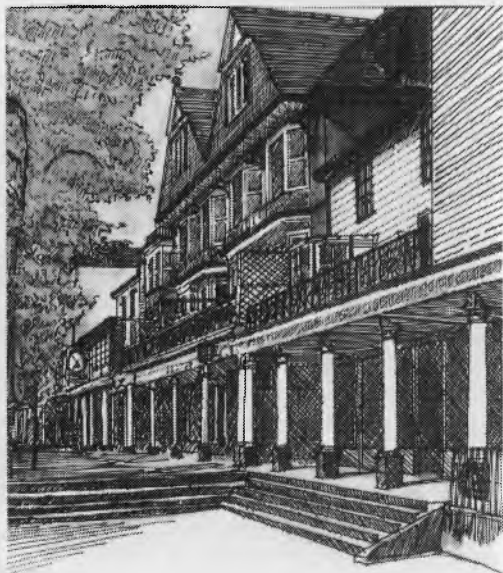
Our usual coach pulled out of Pencester Road at 9.45 on Saturday 28 May, carrying some thirty Dover Society and Festival members and after negotiating the current road works and rash of cones along the Folkestone Road reached the motorway via the new A20.

The journey provided an opportunity for some of the party to view the Channel Tunnel Terminal from a new angle and for all to enjoy first the fresh greens of the local countryside and then the delicate lines of rhododendrons in the woods and gardens of Mid-Kent.

A short walk from the coach park (just off the map provided) brought us to Sussex Mews and the Corn Exchange which housed "A Day at the Wells, a lively depiction of Tunbridge Wells life in 1740."

There we queued to receive walkman sets with taped commentaries to be switched on only *after* we had visited the new anteroom display with its theme of seaside and hops – completely unrelated to the main exhibition. It did, however, give an entertaining impression of sea bathing in the early nineteenth century when participants were advised to drink a healthy half-pint of sea water daily (Southern Water please note!) and a display of typical naughty postcards showed the twentieth century form of seaside humour, while sticks of rock reminded us of simple childhood pleasures.

Equipped with cassettes and earphones we then began a tour of the fashionable eighteenth century spa with Master of Ceremonies Beau Nash as our guide. We stepped straight into an inn yard complete with stage coach and smell of horses, guard dogs and servants and mounted the stairs to view all from above and hear travellers' comments on the freshness or otherwise of the



opportunity to pronounce on the dress accepted for a morning appearance and the potions available for those with an indisposition (alias a hangover!) – the realistic aroma of coffee causing some of us to wish that a modern drinks machine had been provided at the entrance!

Further rooms with life-like figures depicted dancing, gambling, the music gallery, the chalybeate spring with dipper girls drawing the daily measure of water, that panacea for every conceivable ailment of digestive over-indulgence or misfortune. It was customary then for guests to attend prayers before shopping for fairings (souvenirs) and it was outside a retail establishment for such trinkets that we were introduced to children dressed like adults from the age of five, when childhood had to be left behind.

Tableaux and commentary gave an excellent impression of the public life of the leisured classes during their stay at the Wells, with Beau Nash directing all operations with a flick of his finger or a rap of his cane. Thus was decorum and etiquette maintained and all allowed to see and be seen in that marriage market. Even cards had to be played



in public and great stress was laid on the need for tipping for every conceivable service rendered (entirely out of gratitude for the recipient's assistance?)

Lunch at a nearby Pantiles restaurant consisted of excellent ploughmans when they did eventually arrive – not just delivered with the speed and efficiency our leader had been led to expect! In contrast a pseudo open-air café, under a domes glass roof in the discreet modern development opposite, provided a good afternoon “cuppa” with admirably rapid waiter service before we returned to the coach for the journey home.

Street maps and tourist promenade leaflets allowed us to undertake our own exploration of the town in the afternoon, to imagine it in its heyday and to assess the mixing of old and new today. A stroll along the Pantiles and through the charming spalled (cobble) lanes and alleys, some with tile-hung houses, thence to wander under shady trees of the Grove and up onto the open park of Calverley Grounds with its wide views over the town in the valley to the wooded hills beyond, all helped to create the atmosphere of the historic Tunbridge Wells – which Calverley Park

66 Crescent, the Calverley Hotel used as Mount Pleasant House by members of the royal family during the 1830's) and the Royal Wells Inn, for instance, reinforced. Modern brick, although recently used, was not so obtrusive as to spoil the illusion.

Although people walked purposefully about their business, there was an air of unreality about it all, despite the Safeway Supermarket and Hopper's superior department store. Where was the heart of present day Tunbridge Wells? Presumably the national chain stores and hopefully a good book shop were to be found in the new Royal Victoria Centre, together with a variety of other shops and adequate parking space. Time did not allow our foursome to explore so far.

Unusually for an urban centre of this size there was only one church, St. Charles the Martyr, fulfilling its original function, but the 1829 Holy Trinity was in use as the Trinity Arts Centre and the neo-classical Congregational Church housed Habitat. At least redundant churches of architectural merit had not been destroyed – likewise the Opera House turned bingo hall! The city fathers/town planners had obviously successfully striven to retain the character of the town and had not allowed unsightly modern shop fronts and facias to disfigure it.

We left much undone that we would like to have done – buildings unseen and roads untrodden, to say nothing of our neglect of the Common with its famous rocks. We saw, for instance, no sign of the concert hall in which I remember watching Kent Opera productions some fifteen years ago.

We are greatly indebted to our Social Secretary, Joan Liggett, for a very enjoyable and successful day in the company of old and new friends and look forward to a repeat visit to the Wells in the future.

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## Membership News

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As indicated in the April Newsletter, members who pay their subscriptions by cheque or standing order will not normally receive an acknowledgement or card. This keeps costs to a minimum. Each member retains the same membership number throughout and I am always happy to provide new cards if required.

During the past year we have attracted new members from a younger age group and we hope to continue this trend. It is one reason why we seek to keep our subscription low – £4 single and £6 joint. Over 50 members have taken advantage of the standing order scheme, thus ensuring that their subscriptions are always paid on time.

Current membership is 415 but every summer I need to give some double reminders. Members must pay by mid-July to receive the August Newsletter.

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