

"Vivat Invicta"!

TWENTY THIRD ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF AMENITY SOCIETIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

WITHERSDANE HALL, WYE COLLEGE,

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Despite the excellent example set by the Dover Society with its four participants (Chairman, Ken Wraight, Arthur and Vera Goodburn), this year's Wye Conference was undersubscribed. The fare, however, both oratorical (said he modestly) and comestible was up to standard.

Adrian Quanjer, Minister Plenipotentiary for Economic Affairs from the Netherlands Embassy, spoke cogently, indeed brilliantly, on the need for coordinated transport policies in densely populated countries like Holland and England. The former has one; the latter does not.

Bernard Gambrell, Union Rail's Environmental and Design Manager, described the House of Commons Select Committee's work on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Bill and forecast (with fingers presumably crossed) dates for the House of Lords' proceedings, the royal signature, the choice of the Promoter, and the beginning and end of construction.

Spencer de Gray, our late President's architect son, partner of Sir Norman Foster, showed splendid modern buildings designed by them in France, Germany, Singapore and Tokyo but not in Britain. He thought that although the Prince of Wales had successfully stimulated wider interest in architecture, his interventions in favour of historical pastiche had made our architects nervously conformist.

Canterbury Society sought blessing for its proposed statue of King Ethelbert and Queen Bertha on the site of St Augustine's Abbey, River Conservation Society and the Windmill Hill Residents' Association

(Gravesend) expounded their problems and triumphs, and the Dungeness Nuclear Power Station tried to persuade us how safe it was.

KCC's Strategic Planning Officer Leigh Herrington updated us on the Third up-date of the Kent Structure Plan with special reference to housing: how many thousands more should there be in various parts of the county? KCC's Environment Programme Manager Clive Gilbert brought home to us in Kent the Rio Conference's Local Agenda 21 which, recognising mankind's devastation of our planet's physical and atmospheric environments, seeks to promote "sustainable development".

All this was elevating and terrifying, or both, so that the high enjoyment spot of the (remarkably cheap but sumptuous) weekend was undoubtedly the Saturday afternoon Tour of Dover, planned and led by Ken Wraight, founder member and twice former Chairman of the Society's Planning Committee. I reproduce the article on it by Dr Philip Robinson, Reader in French at the University of Kent at Canterbury, which he wrote for the Canterbury Society newsletter:

"If any of the bus party had any tendency to think that they knew everything worth knowing at Dover, maybe these days not

116 the most glamorous location in Kent, then our guide Ken Wraight from the Dover Society was there to prove us wrong. Dover is steeped in military and maritime history and, if anything, been subject to more radical change than other places in Kent which conservationists hold dear. It was an inspired choice to concentrate on the Western Heights end of the town, and not only out of prudent avoidance of a demonstration (Animal Rights) at the Eastern Docks end: the western side is where the changes can best be appreciated.

We began with a view from the northern edge of the Western Heights, seeing the strategic layout of Dover in its seven valleys, and could readily understand from there its peculiar communications problems: a current issue is how to get traffic from Thanet to the Channel Tunnel without creating "rat-runs" around River and without cutting off Whitfield with a "spaghetti junction". Then, as we walked up towards St Martin's Battery past one of the old entrances to the fort, the keen historians could envisage a century and half of military change from the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars to the Second World War and the botanisers admire the incidental effect of military activity on the flora. The view of the harbour from the Battery is magnificent even to the untutored eye, but Ken Wraight brought it to life in a new way, not only invoking the railway history around the Western Docks (for example, the unlikely Italianate building of the old Harbour Station which is now listed [through the Dover Society] and the site of the old Town Station, which is, of course, nearer the sea!) but also the future: not many of us realised, for example, that the old Western Docks (Maritime) railway station is to become a luxury cruise centre, or even that those docks will soon receive luxury cruise ships.

From the Heights, the coach now dropped us at the old Prince of Wales pier end of the esplanade. While, in what is now called "Wellington Dock", a marina is not half as exciting as the ship-overhaul which

used to go on there, it is at least more peaceful, most of the time, for the occupiers of the magnificent Waterloo Crescent to the seaward side. One of our party took a photograph of one of the new breed of sea-faring men getting an on-deck haircut from his female partner. We were also able to appreciate the work of the Impact scheme to restore to its former glory the Grand Shaft of the Western Heights, including the guard room at the bottom. More than a titter was caused by the idea that the soldiery descending the shaft, provided by a thoughtful government as a short-cut from the fortifications to the flesh-pots of Snargate Street, did so on three interlaced flights of stairs (for officers, NCOs and rankers respectively). There were no volunteers to give the stairs a try, or to decide which set was appropriate.

Another surprise was that German bombardment from 1940 to 1944 was only one rather dramatic contribution to the structural changes in this area. Before 1939, and indeed until well after the War, there had been not only an opposite side to Snargate Street (helping to make more plausible the former existence of 52 pubs in the quarter), but also, behind that, another entire street fronting the Wellington Dock had been peacefully demolished even before Adolf invaded Poland. These graphic illustrations that change is constant and irrevocable were admired as well as a (for once) successful modern underpass, providing pedestrian access across the dual carriageway from the town centre to Waterloo Crescent. The construction works had revealed two thirds of a Bronze Age boat preserved in the silt of the ancient harbour (the other third remains under a rather sad and precarious corner shop).

As we mused about our forbears, contemporaries of the Pyramids and the rise of Troy, messing about in their boats, the coach took us off to afternoon tea and remembrance of another maniac of the waters, the very first Channel swimmer (1875), at Webb's Hotel. Dover Society, and the pub, did us proud.