

Official Opening of CENTENARY COTTAGES at Langdon Cliffs

LAWRENCE A. GAGE

17 October 1995 was a bright sunny and blustery day. Our Chairman, Jack Woolford and I were amongst the distinguished guests on top of Langdon Cliffs at an event to celebrate the centenary of the National Trust – the opening of the recently converted ‘Skidding Sheds’. The cement was still wet on the path as we walked up to the two new cottages that replace the lower of the two buildings that were originally built to store the ‘skids’ – large baulks of timber used to support the cliff-top artillery earlier this century. The rather plain utilitarian building has been sensitively restored and replanned by London architects van Heyningen and Haward to provide round the clock, on-site warden presence to improve security and reduce vandalism.

Sir Angus Stirling, the National Trust’s Director General, gave a brief history of the Trust’s acquisition and involvement with the White Cliffs and Langdon Hole, and explained plans for the future as part of their Operation Neptune project. He stressed how important the cliffs are, not only in landscape and ecological terms, but also as a potent symbol of national identity. In thanking those involved with the project he specifically referred to the “much valued help and support of the Dover Society”.

After partaking of an al fresco lunch in the rather incongruous setting of a dusty building site, the party was taken on a conducted tour of the Cliffs and Langdon Hole by James Cooper, the Trust’s land agent, ably assisted by his very lively puppy and Jimmy Warren, the present warden who will soon be moving into one of the cottages. It was explained how a five-year plan of grazing by Dartmoor ponies is helping to re-establish the balance of natural chalkland plant species including an abundant resurgence of rare wild orchids.

As the party broke up and people started going home, I must admit to a slight feeling of anti climax – the whole event had been a rather low key way of celebrating an important point in time. It must have been a big disappointment to the Trust that they were not opening the ‘Visitors Centre’ that was originally proposed to mark their Centenary. I understand the Trust has so far been unsuccessful in obtaining European funds for the project. It now seems that if a visitors’ centre is to be built at all, it will be much more modest than originally proposed. Many, including myself, will welcome a more modest design – one which in no way compromises the atmosphere of rugged un-manicured wildness that we all enjoyed that blustery afternoon.

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