

Dover *in 1500 AD*

IVAN GREEN

The people who lived in Dover five hundred years ago did not look upon that particular period as being one of special interest, except perhaps in that the beginning of a new century always stirs the minds of people, as indeed it does ours, as we look forward to 2,000 AD.

Life did not change suddenly or dramatically in the year 1500 but there were, none the less, important changes in the period. They were happening gradually but they were fundamental and were important in the town's long history. Many of the old ways of life were changing and some of them were disappearing and the signs of a strange new life were everywhere to be seen.

The old town, imprisoned for years within its fourteenth century walls, was now spilling out over them and new houses, new business premises, and even the first beginnings of whole new residential areas, were developing on the empty ground surrounding the old walls, especially to the north and east.

The green fields between the Biggin Gate near St. Mary's church and the Maison Dieu were rapidly disappearing under new buildings and, to the east, between the old fishermen's quarters in Dolphin Lane and Warden Down, the once empty land was becoming covered

with houses, a new brewery, stables and a leather tannery, to compete with those in and around Last Lane, where a number of leather workers produced footwear, harness for horses, souvenirs and other leather goods.

The old town walls, already in serious disrepair, had houses and shacks built up against them, many of them offering primitive, but at least some, shelter for many of the poorest citizens. Many of the old town gates no longer worked at all and were inconvenient relics of a past age.

The once empty land north of the Maison Dieu, as far as the ancient crossroads beside the present Eagle Inn, were being occupied by 'out dwellers', people who were not Dover citizens and were not allowed to sleep in Dover but did come into the town to perform various menial tasks. They were forbidden to live inside the town lest they should try, by that means, to achieve citizen rights.

Many 'out dwellers' cultivated small plots of land round their primitive shacks, growing principally vegetables, much of their produce being sold in the town.

Between Charlton and Buckland the river separated into several small streams, forming a large boggy area

30 where large numbers of osiers grew and these provided the material for a prosperous basket-making industry for the inhabitants of the Leper Hospital which then occupied the higher ground above Chapel Hill. They were few in number and they very probably did not suffer from leprosy at all, but from a variety of skin diseases and complaints. Large numbers of these baskets were used, many of them by people of surrounding villages, to bring their market gardening produce into the town for sale on market day.

The great old canonry of St. Martin Le Grande, which then stood on the west side of the Market Place, on the site occupied today by the museum and the White Cliffs Experience, had been there for more than four centuries and was falling into decay, its stonework crumbling, its roof no longer watertight, or even safe in places, and its main walls breached. The town churches of St. James and St. Peter were in the same condition.

The monastery of St. Martin of the New Work, heavily in debt and with its numbers greatly reduced, and also the Hospital of the Maison Dieu carried on with difficulty, appearing as shabby survivors of a more grand and splendid past.

The great days of the mediaeval church were over and the calling of the religious in holy orders no longer held its old attraction. Monks were few and even the famous 'Passage Mass' was not regularly celebrated at St. Martin of the New Work. The remaining monks there, as is evidenced by their most ample and varied stocks of local and continental food and wine, lived very well as gentlemen and still kept their employees to serve them in the monastery and to till their farms.

The church everywhere no longer

had a monopoly of learning or of influence and rich people were no longer as generous in the matter of bequeathing in favour of ecclesiastical institutions. Hell no longer had quite its earlier fear.

The increasing genteel shabbiness and decay of the old church institutions contrasted strangely with the new domestic buildings which were springing up like mushrooms all about them. It was the end of an era and the beginning of a new one.

Throughout the country great developments in business were being brought about and these were fostered by King Henry the Seventh, in outlook and in policies our first modern ruler. One of his policies which particularly affected Dover was his edict that in future British goods should be carried in British ships. In consequence the moribund Dover fleet became prosperous again. The wines and oils from France and the Mediterranean, furs from Northern Europe and exotic spices and luxuries from the east, bought by travelling English merchants and imported into the country for the old aristocracy, the new rich and the shrinking numbers of the occupants of the monasteries, many of whom had long since abandoned their original austerity and were living as members of comfortable closed social clubs, were to arrive in English ships.

Dover's seafaring people had been in increasing difficulty because of two factors. First, the decline of the monastic populations all over the country caused a sharp decline in the demand for barrels of salted herrings and other fish, which had long been a staple trade for Dover and the other Cinque Ports, and, second, the dramatic decline in pilgrimages, especially to Canterbury, caused much hardship to

Dover's sailors working the passage between Dover and the continent.

In the early years of the fifteenth century as many as 100,000 pilgrims, a large number of them crossing from the continent to Dover, brought much prosperity to the town. Yet, in 1470 Canterbury's Great Festival, held every year since Becket's death, was so badly supported that special permission had to be given to repeat it the following year and even that was largely a failure, causing the once-great festival to be abandoned.

Henry's edict that English goods should henceforth be carried in English ships was therefore a life-saving event and new ships were constructed at Dover. In those days there were no shipyards, the ships being constructed on the beaches within rings of scaffolding piles set into the beach, in plan the shape of, and slightly larger than, the hull of the ships to be built. Local blacksmiths, sail and rope makers and ancillary trades all profited, everything being made and provided locally.

The victualling trade also began to flourish and much money was brought into the town by travellers, businessmen and those connected with the carriage of goods to and from the ships. These began to replace the missing pilgrims and they could afford greater sums for their sustenance in the town and for their passage across the channel.

Socially there were also the beginnings of considerable change. Previously there were the very few rich, the very large numbers of poor and the members of religious orders who were educated and able to read and write and were therefore essential for the conduct of business and administration. The religious group was declining both in numbers and in social and business

importance and was, increasingly, being replaced by a new, growing and vibrant middle class. Members of the new prosperous families began to learn to read and write and carry out their own business affairs. The consequence was that the religious orders began to be replaced in business affairs and in administration everywhere by educated laymen. This new educated middle class indicated the increasingly civilised nature of the community, since the size of its middle class indicates, not only a nation's prosperity but also the state of its civilisation.

Newsletter Binders

With the co-operation of Members we will be able to supply "Cordex" Binders for the *Newsletter*. The burgundy coloured binders have a capacity for 13 copies and are lettered on the spine "The Dover Society Newsletter" in gilt foil.

The minimum order we can place is 100 and a list is being compiled of those who would like to have one. (At the moment we have fifteen names). When the list has, say, eighty names the binders will be placed on order. The cost, (likely to be a few pence more than last time's figure of £3.00) does not include postage for out-of-town members.

To add your name to the list write a note to the Secretary, Leo Wright, at "Beechwood", Green Lane, Dover CT16 3AR.