

# Visit to Calais and Marble Tour

July 1998

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WE HAVE ALL BEEN TO CALAIS, our opposite number across the Channel. I do wonder just how much we really know about it and how much is based upon myth. It was periodically an English possession until lost by the Tudor Queen, Bloody Mary. I can recall being told as a child in school that the loss of Calais was engraved on her heart when she died. I still remember wondering if this was some sort of tattoo but deciding it was risking too much to ask, particularly as it must be on one of those forbidden zones small boys should know nothing about. Nevertheless, the importance of Calais was clearly made. With 25 other, but probably clearer minded, members of The Society, we set off at the crack of dawn to hear about and see Calais from a Frenchman's viewpoint. Georges

Fauquet, a fluent English speaker married to an Englishwoman and leading member of the Calais Historical Society was our enthusiastic guide. Like a good host he laid on bright sunny weather.

History lesson 1. Rodin's statue of the Burghers of Calais is outside Calais Town Hall. The legend (another heard as a school boy!) is that the Burghers offered themselves as hostages in

exchange for lifting the siege conducted by Edward Third in the Hundred Year's War. This merciful monarch told them to prepare to be hanged but they were saved by Edward's Queen, Philippa, getting down on her knees and begging for their lives. The message was "what a noble couple to grace the English throne". I was unable to follow the logic of this moral.



History lesson 2. Dover took a hammering from bombs and shells in the Second World War. Our damage was nothing compared to that received by Calais in both world wars. Most of the building in Calais is new, an indication of the severity of the damage. Georges spoke of the occupation with feeling.

History lesson 3 including architecture. The visit to the church of Notre Dame. Georges spoke with

passion about this impressive building, still only partly restored from the effects of war damage. It is occasionally used and John Gerrard tells of attending a rather grand funeral service there. There are elements of medieval English architecture alongside French styles

served as a lighthouse until 1848, a WW II monument to a 1940 rearguard action by the Rifle Brigade, a Vauban Fort, and Bleriot Plage, all to an excellent commentary.

A switch from lessons to contemporary French life. Lunch. The meal was held at A L'Escale along the coast just past Cap Blanc Nez, a fish restaurant which laid on plenty of wine. The party grew jollier by the minute and one soul who had problems coming to terms with the early start appeared as if reborn. The food was excellent, particularly the fish.

An after lunch natural history lesson. At the Marble Museum our guide told us merry folk the full story of how the marble was laid down and how many millions of years



depending upon who was in control of Calais at the time and this mix was one of several unique features that we saw. Some of the ornamental ironwork had stylistic links with that installed at Versailles and through the dust and pigeon droppings there were some fine pieces of carving to be seen. The restoration so far has included a new roof to replace that lost in the war and modern glass windows which I thought looked rather good. Georges' hope is to see the building fully restored but this just waits upon government money. All who saw it would agree that the restoration is a mountain to be climbed, although I heard a couple of philistines in our party doubt whether the difficulties of the ascent were worth it.

later it was quarried and prepared for our use. I was struck by the beauty of the polished marble with its brown patterns and whorls. On the way back to Calais we stopped to see a working quarry to complete the lesson.

The Calais area has much of interest for Dovorians, particularly with the historic links between our towns. This was a visit that was both enjoyable and informative. The outing was all the more convivial for the excellent company and our thanks are due to Joan Liggett and Leo Wright for organising the trip and to Georges Fauquet who acted as our guide.

Did I clarify my odd ideas about our monarchs of years gone by? I think it's best to keep illusions and not let too many facts get in the way. Anyway school lessons were never as good as this!

History lesson 4. A tour through modern Calais to Cap Blanc Nez but via the Tour du Guet, a watchtower that