

REPORTS ON MEETINGS

NOVEMBER

Roads & Rogues

Reported by Merril Lilley

The meeting held on 16th November, at St. Mary's Parish Centre, hosted two speakers, on very different subjects.

Richard Church, the Chairman of the Weald of Kent Preservation Society, talked about transport in Kent. He launched into his subject with a breath-taking anecdote from Tbad of Tbad Hall, conjuring up a vision of new roads, eating up the open countryside. Are we, he asked, building too many roads in the wrong places? He observed that we could go on building new roads forever, so we would have to decide how best to utilise the roads we had and this meant using them less frequently. How could we do this.

Our speaker had many suggestions. He discussed public transport, pointing out that, in this country, public transport costs 40% more than in other European countries, where it is heavily subsidised. He thought we should invest more in public transport and make it cheaper to use. He talked of the idea of using tags or bar code methods of taxing motorists. He discussed the probability that, in the future, more people would work from home for part of each week and thus reduce the amount of traffic on the roads. He suggested that using fleets of school buses would also reduce traffic at peak hours.

It was evident that local and county authorities recognised the need for change but, said the speaker, we all had to understand the problems.

The talk led to some lively discussion from the floor, about the state of local transport in the towns and in the country villages and the time needed to implement new ideas. More money was being spent on improving rural bus services, rather than building new roads. But could we all use our cars less than we were doing now? And could we use local shops more often?

Ken Wraight thanked the speaker, praising his boundless enthusiasm for his subject and his clarity of expression.

After the interval, with its customary raffle

and refreshments, the second speaker of the evening was Christine Down, from Dover's Young Offenders Institution, speaking on "Young Offenders and the Community". With a background of social work in both Australia and in the North of England, Christine Down is now part of the management team in Dover, dealing with social welfare and links with the community.

Housed in buildings dating from the time of the Napoleonic Wars, the Young Offenders Institution holds, in a secure environment, 316 young men aged from 17 to 21 years. From 1999 the age group will start at 18 years. The occupants are accommodated in five houses with six-bed dormitories, which, the speaker said, are not really suitable for the type of prisoners held there.

She gave her audience a detailed insight into the life of the young offenders. Each of them has a file which is kept up to date and reviewed regularly. There are six-monthly assessments. There are incentive schemes and earned privileges but also demotions for bad behaviour.

Many difficulties arise. There are often interpersonal difficulties between individual prisoners and between groups of prisoners. Victimisation can be a problem, as can bullying. There are also suicide risks. She demonstrated how a rope can be painstakingly manufactured out of toilet paper. She also showed how prisoners contrive to make weapons of various kinds; knuckle dusters, a needle in a toothpaste tube, a razor in a biro, with exhibits for us to handle.

She went on to talk about the length of sentences and the types of crime committed by young offenders. Sentences could be anything from six months to four years or more. Sometimes a prisoner was in the Dover institution for such a short time it was difficult to embark on any programme of support. For those with long sentences there were many avenues of assistance. Young offenders have to learn to obey rules and live within certain parameters of social behaviour. They are assessed for educational skills on entry. While some have low literacy and numeracy skills, others are able to embark on training courses in subjects like bricklaying,

motor mechanics, plumbing, electricians and physical education and can progress to taking City and Guilds examinations.

Offenders in the Dover institution have a background of a wide variety of crime; burglary, theft, robbery, reckless driving, breach of community service, wounding, wounding with intent, grievous bodily harm and rape. Many of the youths have records which show evidence of drug or alcohol abuse; many have been in local authority care; some have a history of suicide attempts. 40% of the young offenders had a background of family breakdown, foster homes or homelessness.

The number of young offenders in prison is growing fast. The sentenced young offender population reached a high of over 10,000 in 1985. It then dropped to just over 5,000 in 1993. Since then it has risen by half and currently stands at over 7,500. An additional 3,000 young offenders are held on remand. Half the crimes in the United Kingdom are committed by young males aged between 10 and 25 years and 60% of the victims of crime are young males aged between 16 and 25 years.

The members of the audience seemed temporarily stunned with the unexpected mass of information they had received about an institution on their doorstep, which they had not previously considered in detail. However, as soon as they recovered the speaker was swamped with a rush of questions which she answered to the best of her ability in the time remaining. She talked of help with allotments, with repairs and with disabled adults. She described community links and work with the Y.M.C.A. and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. She mentioned courses in gymnastics, in swimming, in life-saving and in first aid with St. John's Ambulance. She mentioned career advice and the possibilities which arose for temporary employment with local firms.

Lilian Kay thanked the speaker for her fascinating and informative talk on a subject which had never been tackled previously at a Society meeting. It had given the audience much to think about and an insight into the numerous problems faced by those who worked with young offenders.

DECEMBER *The Christmas Feast*

Report by E. Merrill Johns

On the 19th of December, 1998, some 93 members and friends of The Dover Society were, once more, for their Christmas Feast, the guests of Dover College. As always, we were welcomed with a sherry, though I suspect we did not need it to loosen our tongues as we exchanged greetings with friends, acquaintances and table companions.

We had honoured guests to welcome more formally. The Town Mayor, Paul Sheldrake, was announced, escorted to his seat and welcomed. Our Chairman, Jeremy Cope, presided over the proceedings and included in the welcome Mrs Gillian Sheldrake, our M.P. Gwyn Prosser and his daughter. I am sure the political guests were greatly cheered to know they had no responsibilities for the evening, except to enjoy themselves. We also welcomed ten guests from our sister organisation in Calais, led by their secretary Mme. Fabienne Tomas.

It was a pleasure to see our local historian Ivan Green, one of our Vice-Presidents, though we were sorry to learn that his wife Margaret had been admitted to hospital. The hope was expressed that she would soon be home and well. Sadly, there were four other members who had booked but were too ill to join us. Miss Kay, also a Vice-President, was absent for the first time. We missed her.

It was a first opportunity for some of us to see Howard Blackett, the new Head of Dover College, while for all of us it was welcome news that he had agreed to become one of our Society's Vice-presidents.

After Mr. Blackett had responded to his welcome into the Society, we were ready to line up for the splendid buffet. This is always an introduction to a real feast with wonderful food, magnificently presented and served with good-humoured efficiency.

During the serving of coffee we were encouraged to buy raffle tickets and I, for one, was disappointed not to win the bottle of claret from the House of Commons.

Following the meal, the Dover College music teacher, Roderick Spencer, conducted members of the school choir in a delightful selection of music, beautifully executed.

The evening concluded with a chance for us all to sing carols. It is always good to share