

# PROSPECT HOUSE

DEREK LEACH

Prospect House or, as many will remember it, the (former) Prince of Wales Sea Training School is on the western side of York Street standing back between the Battle of Britain and York House blocks of flats. The property is bounded on three sides by Princes Street, Cowgate Hill and

## The building

For some time during its life and until at least 1938 there were three front doors facing Princes St. At some date these three houses plus adjoining cottages on Durham Hill became one internally. The joins are quite obvious with different floor levels



Durham Hill. The recent purchase, refurbishment and imminent reopening by the YMCA of these derelict premises, known to many as the (former) Prince of Wales Sea Training School, seemed an opportune time to research its history.

both across the building and from front to back. Some of the front bedrooms have steps down to their floor level as soon as you enter the bedrooms from the landing - most unusual. The roof line of the Durham Hill cottages is still distinctive. The

10 property includes the large hall at the rear fronting on to Durham Hill.

The cellars have thick chalk walls and possibly the start of a tunnel heading down the hill in the direction of The Cause is Altered - possibly used by smugglers and possibly predating Mr Hartley's mansion - unless he was in on the smuggling too! To date I have found no documentary evidence of a tunnel from or under this building.

A good idea of the extent of the building can be gained from the estate agent's literature when the premises were put on the market in 1994 viz. Ground floor:- reception area and office, common room, kitchen, utility room, private sitting room, lobby, staff flat (sitting room, conservatory, bedroom, hall, kitchen and bathroom), laundry room, linen room, toilet, store room, cellar (boiler room); first floor:- flat (entrance hall, dining room, sitting room, 2 bedrooms, cloak-room with toilet, kitchen/breakfast room, bathroom and hall), 7 bedrooms, bathroom; first floor annexe:- rear hall, gymnasium/hall (6 pillars, vaulted ceiling and woodblock floor) plus 2 storage rooms, showers and toilets, 3 bedrooms; second floor:- 14 bedrooms, bathroom and toilet, communal bathroom with 3 toilets and 4 wash hand basins, landing; outside:- internal courtyard, front drive, car park and garden with double wrought iron gates.

### **The occupants**

According to Bavington Jones, John Hartley was a Freeman of Dover and owned property in 1794 which was known as Hartley's Meadow and around 1800 he built his mansion surrounded by meadows. In this building he started a school for young gentlemen. John Hartley was a schoolmaster and so was his son John. In 1838 Henry Crow, a schoolmaster who ran a boys school in St James's St. took over the premises from Mr Hartley. Prospect House School or Academy was the oldest established secondary school in

the Dover district and remained virtually in this same family until it closed in 1905. The 1851 census tells us that Henry Crow was running the Prospect Academy with 23 scholars from various parts of the country. In addition to his school teaching he occasionally gave lectures to the Dover Philosophical Society. His son another Henry Crow took over the school when his father died in 1864 and was followed in 1866 by his son-in-law Mr Hutchinson. Mr Hutchinson apparently kept 'fully abreast of advanced and progressive requirements of modern times'. Special provision was made for the comfort and education of foreign pupils and boys whose parents lived in India or elsewhere at a distance. Special arrangements were made for these boys to stay at school during vacations.

An unnamed article in the Library dating from the turn of the century describes the school:

'Prospect House occupies a healthy site on elevated ground commanding fine views of Dover town and castle within a few minutes walk of the sea, promenades, piers, public gardens and parks. Buildings are well constructed and perfect sanitary arrangements exist throughout - in the past 30 years only 2 cases of infectious illnesses were known at the school and those were slight attacks which were immediately isolated. Classrooms are well ventilated and dormitory accommodation is exceptionally good. Any boy desiring it can have a private bedroom on payment of a small additional fee. Domestic arrangements were under the special direction of Mrs Hutchinson'. There was a 'sound comprehensive modern English education with preparation for various public examinations and instruction in music, drawing, commercial education, modern languages, shorthand etc'. In 1896 Master Walter Hutchinson carried off high honours for writing Pitmans Shorthand by winning the Lord

Warden's silver challenge for all boys at schools in East Kent. The Marquis of Salisbury was Lord Warden at this time. The school was attracting increasing numbers of pupils from all parts. There were 'exceptional facilities for cricket, football and all other outdoor sports recreation with sea bathing and swimming regularly in the summer. Mr Hutchinson is a most excellent swimmer'.

It would appear that Prospect House School only occupied part of John Hartley's original building : Prospect House, 11 Princes St. According to the 1889 Dover Directory Alexander Smith, a Dover builder, was living next door at 12 Princes St (which was that part of the original mansion on the corner of Princes St and Cowgate Hill) and he also owned the adjacent cottage at 1A Cowgate Hill. Both he and his wife died in 1891 leaving the properties to their son and daughter. Henry Hutchinson purchased both these properties but apparently not to extend the school premises because the 1905 Dover Directory reveals Thomas Davidson living at 12 Princes St (then called Matlock House) and Henry Hutchinson living at number 11 (Prospect House).

The school continued until at least 1905 then, when presumably Henry Hutchinson retired, the school closed and the fascinating era of Mrs Beresford Baker and the Day Star Mission began.

Mrs Baker was a wealthy woman and a colourful character who via a marriage settlement trust purchased all the premises in 1907 founding and running the Day Star Mission from at least 1908, when it is first mentioned in the Dover Directory, until her death in October 1938. My research has uncovered an intriguing history of Mrs Baker over these thirty years which will need to be the subject of a separate article in a future issue of the Newsletter.

A Captain Geary had been appointed a trustee for the Baker properties in 1923

and was one of Mrs Baker's executors. Her husband died in 1933 and on her death, according to Mrs Morris who knew her well, she left virtually everything to Captain Geary on condition that he allowed the ladies who had lived with her to continue living in the house for the rest of their lives. However, Captain Geary made life so unbearable for them that they all left and he sold everything. 'He was a rotter!' - according to Mrs Morris.

Captain Geary and his wife then opened the premises as the Day Star Mission Guest House. A small brochure described it as 'a Christian Holiday Home and Guest House, comfortably furnished, gas fires in the bedrooms and bathrooms on each floor with hot and cold water. About 5 minutes walk from the sea and within easy access of station and of buses which run to the beautiful country and places of interest around Dover. Terms from 35/- per week according to room and season. Reductions made for permanent guests. Every care is taken to ensure comfort of guests. Family prayers daily. Services on Sunday and meetings during the week are held in the adjoining Mission Hall'.

Despite Mrs Morris's assertions about Captain Geary it appears that the Mission Hall activities continued for a while after Mrs Baker's death. Eric James another valuable source of information told me that Captain Geary was between 40 and 50 when he took over but he did not last a year because he did not have enough money to run the place. Attendances at the Mission dropped off - perhaps because all the perks for the needy stopped.

To date I have discovered little about the War years that followed. Both Eric James and another contact say that the premises were taken over by the WRNS. In 1946 Stanley Geary and Leslie Philips (another of Mrs Baker's Trustees from 1923 and presumably another beneficiary in her will) sold the premises to The British Sailors' Society. I do know that Lillian Kay and her Sea Rangers used to meet in one of

12 the rooms from 1946 to 1952. Ken Wraight and others recall going to dances there at about the same time - apparently up market dances compared with those at the Co-op Hall! Hopefully, I shall find out more about this period in due course from old Dovorians, from any surviving WRNS, The British and International Sailors' Society and from Naval Records.

On Tuesday 18 January 1949 the premises were officially opened by Admiral Lord Mountevans as the new Residential Club for Seamen. This was the result of the British Sailors' Society, Dover National Sailors' Home and the Dover Patrol Memorial Fund pooling their resources into one club administered by the British Sailors' Society. The premises were completely transformed and turned into a home from home for seamen putting into Dover, who were able to entertain guests for social functions. It was also a refuge for shipwrecked crews. Facilities included a private chapel, lounges, reading and writing rooms, shops, restaurant, concert hall for 200 people and comfortable sleeping accommodation with the manager sleeping on the premises. This club had a short life because in 1953 the premises became the Prince of Wales Sea Training School that most of us remember.

The Prince of Wales Sea Training School was opened in Lincolnshire in 1920 - the only one of its kind in the country - and came to Dover in 1953 when Prospect House was taken over by the British Sailors Society who ran the school. About 120 boys a year, aged 15 to 17 years, 40 at a time, underwent a 16 week course training for life at sea both in the classroom and practical work on the water in three whalers. Around one third of the boys came from Kent and the remainder from the rest of the UK, Rhodesia, New Zealand and elsewhere. The fare to Dover had to be found plus (in 1963) a £100 fee. This was sometimes paid by charities and there were some scholarships for Rhodesian

students. The boys wore uniform and were inspected by the Captain at morning parade. The mast in the grounds was used for visual signalling and every boy had to scale it. Elementary ships construction, use of the compass and lifeboat drill was taught. Wire and rope splicing, rope bends and hitches were some of the skills learned. The boys were also taught to do their own washing, mending and darning and to take a pride in their appearance. For two and a half days each week the boys attended an engineering course at South Kent College. After two years at sea the boys returned to Dover for a twelve week course at the College to qualify as marine mechanics.

A report in the Kent Messenger dated 13 January 1961 stated that the school had had a busy year with 110 boys trained for the deck department of the Merchant Navy during 1960. Forty five were placed with the P&O and Orient Line (with twelve joining the new ship Oriana on her maiden voyage) and 30 boys with Port Line. Whilst they joined as deck boys there was no bar to further advancement - they were encouraged to study for Second Mate Certificate by correspondence course. Several apprenticeships for outstanding boys had been obtained. Commander J S Hough DSC was Captain Superintendent at this time.

Two hundred guests including many parents attended an open day on 12 June 1963. The guest of honour was the Marchioness of Zetland who presented prizes to the winners of various sporting events. There was a display on the Recreation Ground behind the school including a parade, bends and hitches demonstration, deck hockey, races, tug of war, PT display and a simulated rescue from a stranded ship using breeches buoy. Tea was followed by a conducted tour of the buildings including the new Seamanship Room to be equipped with models and the Mess Room with its new tubular steel furniture. The event closed with a march

past.

In 1964 Commander Hough moved to become Deputy General Secretary of the British Sailors Society. His wife had taught at Barton Road Primary School. He was succeeded by Captain Colin Vine.

The school closed in December 1975, killed by inflation. It was costing £35,000 per year to run and was put up for sale with offers invited around £105,000 for the freehold. The old ship's mast and windlass that used to stand in the grounds was donated to Dover Transport Museum and still exists. It may soon be returned to its old home.

From 1975 the buildings were then used by Dover College as a school boarding house for girls. They leased the premises from The British Sailors Society initially but purchased them in 1988 for £102,038. The premises became surplus to requirements in 1994 and were put on the market.

The YMCA purchased the premises in 1996 and commenced renovation work to bring the large derelict building back into use. Dover YMCA was launched in 1856 and has served Dover ever since. It operates

informal youth clubs both in Dover and four villages. At their Leyburne Road premises they accommodate up to eight residents with short to medium term needs, plus up to twenty-five backpackers at any one time, offering budget overnight accommodation. In addition an emergency service is offered to local and transient folk needing safe supportive short term accommodation. Having raised the funds to purchase Prince of Wales House, fund raising continues in order to renovate the premises. Although renovation is not complete the project has already developed relationships and partnerships with various agencies such as the Probation Service and the local Young Offenders Institute. This means that support, advice and referrals to training and employment opportunities are already available. Upon completion of the project this will be expanded to include supported housing and an introduction into more permanent accommodation.

Hopefully this old building with such an interesting history will serve the town well for many more years.

*Copyright reserved*

