

HISTORY IN STONE

A GUIDED TOUR OF DOVER CEMETERIES

REPORT BY TERRY SUTTON

On June 5th members of the Dover Society went on a most interesting tour of Dover cemeteries. Our guide was Martyn Webster, an immigration officer living in Brighton, who is an old boy of Dover Grammar School and a member of the Society. He showed us how much local history is to be found, inscribed in stone, on gravestones and tombs.

In bright sunshine Martyn led the tour around the Copt Hill cemeteries, off Old Charlton Road, and ferreted out the history of many of the town's leading citizens of yesteryear, of foreigners who died on our shores, and heroes of many a conflict including three holders of the Victoria Cross.

The cemeteries toured were St. James', Charlton and St. Mary's but the group could not enter the little walled Jewish cemetery because it was the Sabbath.

Martyn wants to see the tour of cemeteries, and the study of the gravestones, become a permanent feature of Dover's tourism drive. So far his offers to the authorities have fallen on deaf ears.

Mr Webster explained why and how the decision was made to buy the acres at Copt Hill for Dover's burials as the town's population rapidly increased in 50 years in the 19th century from 7,000 to more than 20,000. It was one of three sites suggested and the Copt Hill decision was only made on the casting vote of the vicar of St. James'. "How much the citizens of Dover today, yesteryear and tomorrow owe to the



Tour guide, Martyn Webster

foresight of that gentleman," said Mr Webster.

Pointing out features of the Jewish cemetery Mr Webster said the walled Jewish cemetery was donated to the Jewish community by the Wardens of Dover Harbour Board but he admits he has been unable to find any evidence of this.

Mr Webster revealed many details of the interesting people who have been buried

in the Jewish cemetery, where the gates are kept locked. The first burial there was of Mrs Catherine Isaacs, sugar confectioner of York Street who died in 1868. The Jewish cemetery is still in use, although the last burial there was four years ago. The memorial tablets that line the walls were taken from the shell-damaged synagogue in Northampton Street which was later demolished.

One memorial is to six victims of the sinking of the Netherlands America steamship W.A.Scholten in 1887 which caused the largest burial of shipwreck victims in peacetime Dover until the loss of the Herald of Free Enterprise. The Scholten was, at the time, carrying many emigrant Jews en route from eastern Europe to America. The Dover Express at the time reported that the Jewish mourners went into the cemetery while the Gentiles "most of whom behaved" were outside and lined the walls.

In May 1870 the new St. Mary's cemetery was opened with the ten acres costing around £200 an acre. In this cemetery one of the more interesting



monuments, partly inscribed in Arabic, is in memory of 22 Lascar seamen who died in the sinking off Dover of the P&O liner *Maloja* while on passage from Gravesend to Bombay. She sank off Shakespeare Beach in February 1916 after being mined or torpedoed with the loss of 155 lives. Fifty eight bodies were brought ashore at Dover.

St. James' cemetery's six acres was purchased for £1,200 and opened for burials in January 1855. Mr Webster pointed out a huge granite monument to a South American who died in Dover and the graves of many soldiers, including the three holders of the VC, sailors and airmen. One stone remembered Lt. Colonel Douglas Hyde-Thomson, who had served in the Royal Navy, killed in a flying accident on duty in May 1918, aged 27. "To meet the Lord in the air, so shall we ever be with the Lord" is his gravestone inscription. And there, in a peaceful setting, rest the victims of the 1918 Zeebrugge Raid and not far away the beautifully kept Imperial War Graves cemetery of some of those brought home dead from the Evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940.

High up on the slopes, overlooking this tranquil hollow fashioned by nature, are buried some of Dover's 19th century leading citizens including Sir Richard Dickeson, mayor four times in the 1870s, and members of the influential Terson family. Ivy creeps over Sir Richard's grave, a man apparently forgotten, while the

Terson tomb is well maintained.

The last cemetery of the four to be consecrated was Charlton, ten acres opened in May 1872, bought from the Crown for £2,500. At the time it was known as the Claypits. Here we saw the memorial to the poet Charles Churchill transferred there from an old churchyard now crushed below the dual carriageway of York Street.

In this cemetery Mr Webster laid a rose on the graves of his own great grandfather Robert Webster who was born in 1821, became a yachtmaster and died in 1878. He laid another rose on the grave of his maternal grandparents.

Says Mr Webster: "These four cemeteries combine to make their whole amphitheatre-like site into a veritable necropolis. The scenic natural situation is both stunning and unique for a town the size of Dover. The whole history of Dover is reflected in two centuries of burials of soldiers, sailors and airmen, foreigners, transients, and the citizens of Dover themselves, Christians, Jews, Muslims and Hindus together". A guest on the tour was Kate Parker, representing the Monuments Awareness Board who is hoping that the four Dover cemeteries will be entered in a national award scheme with which she is involved.

The tour ended with a delicious strawberry tea at the home of our chairman, Jeremy Cope, and his wife, Sheila. There we were able to recover from the long walk around three cemeteries. Jeremy expressed our heartfelt thanks to Mr. Webster, who instilled in us all a great appreciation of these beautiful acres.

