

A Brief History of Local Times?

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With the Millennium fast approaching, the 25th anniversary of Dover District Council may seem small beer in comparison. Yet a quick look back over the past three decades highlights how much this part of East Kent has changed in a quarter of a century.

In the early 1970s, five local authorities, the Boroughs of Dover, Deal and Sandwich and the Rural District Councils of Dover and Eastry (which now make up Dover District Council), became reluctant bedfellows, forced together by the Local Government Act 1972. Scared of losing valuable resources to their neighbours, they began a spending exercise. Dover quickly added a new sports centre to its swimming pool and Sandwich built a fine extension to The Guildhall and discovered a way of retaining its toll bridge receipts for the small Town Council which would remain. The rural areas started a "small is beautiful campaign" but to no avail. Following a public inquiry over the northern part of the new District, Eastry RDC lost the five parishes of Sarre, St. Nicholas, Acol, Minster and Monkton to nearby Thanet. Sandwich successfully fought off similar attentions from Thanet, thanks to the Cinque Ports connection and the not disinterested support of Dover and Deal, eager to encompass the healthy rate revenues of Sandwich's industrial hinterland within the new District's coffers.

Many of the 55 (now 56) Councillors for the new District had served with the smaller constituent authorities and found it difficult to adapt. Representatives for the rural areas, in particular, were horrified at the way party politics ruled in the larger towns. The new Council was predominantly Conservative and the Deal members showed their political clout by taking six of the seven major committee chairmanships. Under a new national Labour government and in the gloom of the 3-day week, the new authority felt its way to the starting line of 1st April 1974, a date which passed without the general population appearing to notice

much difference.

With 27 different offices and depots scattered around the District for staff and workmen, and with technology harking back to a bygone age (Gestetner copiers and simple manual typewriters), the new authority took time to get its act together and had to prevail on Thanet District Council to let it share existing computer facilities at Ramsgate. The political skills of the new leading Conservative Councillors were not, perhaps, matched by their personnel skills and two Chief Executives soon passed acrimoniously into history, the first never even making it to the starting date of the new authority. Some preoccupations in the early years were the route of the A2 Dover Bypass and Jubilee Way, the future of Waldershare Park (on which John Aspinall had designs) and severe flooding at Deal. The first attempt to revive plans for the Channel Tunnel came and went, struck down in 1974 by a succession of general elections and, later in the decade, Hughie Batchelor began his assault on Sladden Wood at Alkham.

The District Council had to get used to managing new functions such as planning (previously the prerogative of the County Council) and to letting go gracefully of those which had been taken away, principally highways and libraries. On highways, a compromise was reached with the County Council, with a complicated agency agreement transferring certain functions in Dover and Deal back to the District. New efforts at co-operation and powersharing between different local authorities and with private sector bodies was ultimately to become a major feature of local government life, less acrimonious and more spontaneous and fruitful as the years went by.

Throughout the 1980s (and to this day) as local government was subject to increasing belt-tightening by the successive governments of Margaret Thatcher;

18 rationalisation and competition became the order of the day. Successive local elections brought in new Councillors, unhampered by memories of former authorities, who strove to streamline and modernise the Council, concentrating more on its services to the public in general than to their own particular patch. In 1980 the first word processors struck terror into the hearts of departmental secretaries and typists. In 1983 the whole staffing structure of the Council was rejigged to reduce the number of departments to six. The privatisation of major services such as refuse collection, street cleaning and highway maintenance reinforced the links with the private sector. Sales of council houses soared. Between 1982 and 1987 Council staff were gradually gathered into new offices at the White Cliffs Business Park at Whitfield. Efficient, responsive services (backed up by a comprehensive complaints procedure), were at a premium and tested to the full with the Herald of Free Enterprise disaster in March 1987, the hurricane in October of that year and the Deal Barracks bombing in 1989. The Herald Fund, set up by the Council with its Chief Executive as Chairman of the Trustees, was formed, met and authorised first payments within six days of the disaster.

The 1980s also saw the building of the White Cliffs Experience and the new museum at Dover, major refurbishment of pedestrian areas in the centres of Deal and Dover, Tides Leisure Pool and the tennis bubble at Deal and the public inquiry into the new route for the A20 from Court Wood to Dover Docks. The Poll Tax, subject of bitter dissent, came and went. A more successful Channel Tunnel scheme now came to fruition and, nearer home, the Council finally assumed responsibility for its own computer services with a new IBM facility at Whitfield. The SDLP made a brief appearance, to be replaced in early 1991 by the Lib Dems, then the Liberals, who came and stayed but failed to conquer, although they did so in adjoining authorities.

And what of the 1990s? They saw the planning and opening of the Eastry/Whitfield Bypass, a revamped Crabble

Football Ground and Dover seafront, other multi-agency initiatives at Elvington and in the former coalfield areas and improvements to major car parks and the general environment. Increasingly these joint initiatives owe their existence to the promise of central government or EC cash. New industrial estates have sprung up at Whitfield and, as the wheel comes full circle, the Council is poised to assume responsibility from KCC for all local highways.

The last nine years have seen major changes politically, with the original large Conservative majority dwindling in successive local elections to give, eventually, a hung Council and then a Labour majority rivalling the original Tory one and now yet another hung council. Local government finance was, and still is, screwed down by Central Government, reinforcing the quest for value for money and better services at lower cost. Technology has spread into every corner of the Council's operations. Staff and workmen, who numbered nearly 1200 in the mid 1970s are down to around 500, despite the addition of new services such as economic development and information technology. Many staff have transferred to the private sector. In the mid 1990s the Conservative Government's Land Commission toured the country, as history repeated itself another reorganisation akin to that of 1974, beckoned, with the promised return of old style County Boroughs, responsible for all local government services, a concept extended to mixed urban and rural areas and not just to major cities. But East Kent escaped unchanged, although Dover, Deal and Great Mongeham acquired new town or parish councils. Escaped this time, that is, for the Commission will return.

New reforms still beckon - locally elected mayors and less restraint on spending in return for meeting nationally approved targets. As the District looks forward to its next quarter century the only certain prospect is change and more change. So a small birthday celebration is, surely, in order, for who knows what form local government may take in 2024?