

# The Life of Josephine Butler

## *A Talk by Michael Hinton*

*reported by Terry Sutton*

THE life of Josephine Butler (1828-1906), the Victorian social reformer, was the subject of a most interesting and detailed talk by the Reverend Michael Hinton to fellow members of The Dover Society on October 20th.

Michael told us about Josephine's ministry among prostitutes at a time when the attitude to them was that they were deplorable sinners but Josephine saw them, for the most part, as victims. At the time there was a large surplus of women over men in Victorian England and she realised that few women were equipped to make their living in a more reputable way. She and her husband often rescued women from the streets and took them into their own home. When numbers increased they founded several rescue establishments.

Josephine was in the forefront of the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, which were brought in by the government to try to reduce the vast numbers of soldiers and sailors who contracted venereal diseases because they frequented prostitutes.

At the time the Acts were passed there were some 4,000 troops in Dover as well as many sailors. 'To cater for them the

area south of Snargate Street was full of beer houses and music halls, and it was there that prostitutes plied their trade,' said Michael.

Josephine, on a tour of garrison towns, gave talks at Dover's Wellington Hall against the Contagious Diseases Acts, under which any woman was liable to be picked up and checked for VD. In doing this she was flying in the face of contemporary attitudes and she was lambasted by the Dover Express!

At one stage in 1870 there was a disturbance in Star Street, over the hiring of a house for the medical examination of suspected prostitutes. Neighbours raised a petition against this. The controversial acts were finally repealed in 1886, after Josephine's 16 years of struggle.

She also campaigned for the raising of the age of consent for girls, which at that time stood at 12 and it was eventually raised to 16.

"Josephine taught that the sexual restraints expected of decent women should also be expected of decent men. The modern feminist attitude appears to be that women should imitate men in promiscuity," commented Michael, in conclusion.