

February WINE & WISDOM EVENING

Reported by Jeremy Cope

Wine lent the evening a happy conviviality - thanks Mike think that Clive, Jill and Andrew deserve our particular thanks. They run the event with such good humour and choose questions best suited to our strengths rather than our weaknesses.

Numbers attending were, as always, very good with 14 tables.

Euchre is a card game - John Turnpenny got that one right for our team.

And the winners were Enigma by a lizard called skink

Notable result. Enigma and Gay Gordons tied first. Settled with the loser the first to fail with the correct answer. What a skunk!

Dingbats. Terry who is a new member came up with some inspired guesses. He is a computer expert and is, inter alia, involved with dyslexic software. A link perhaps?

Wisdom. Our general knowledge was really not too bad this year but did Clive flatter us? See I above.

I thought that the food was good again this year with the bread spot on. Thanks as always to Joan and her helpers.

Second was also a tie with Jeany (my lot) and Dover Ducks with Sceptics third.

Dingbats. Here is a good one. ie Cexcept Answer i before e except after c

Odd but Edward is not a good name for a king - two out of eight never made it to their coronations.

May we please have another evening like this next year

March TALES OF AN EXCISE OFFICER

A talk by Derek Leach

Reported by Jack Woolford

"It was Uncle Fred's fault. He said it was a good job" said our Chairman, explaining why at age 18, with a serious girlfriend and faced with National Service, he chose to become a Customs Officer rather than go to university. Uncle Fred had been a Chief Petty Officer, RN, who had professionally admired the turnout and anti-smuggling skills of the (then) Waterguard who had no doubt rummaged his ships from time to time. Unable to take the Officer exam until nineteen and a half, after 'A' levels Derek sat and passed the Civil Service Executive Exam before National Service. Wishing to serve in the RAF (rather than be seasick in the Navy or killed in the Army) the only vacancies were as linguists and, armed with O-level German and A-level French, he was accepted only to find he would spend his two years learning Chinese in the Outer Hebrides, where the suicide rate was rather high.

He managed to avoid this and was trained as a teleprinter operator, following which he was posted to the Air Ministry Whitehall on shift work and commuted from home with a living allowance. His sole flight was an hour in a rickety old Anson immediately before demobilization.

Taking up his post in Customs HQ in 1959, he was not popular when he immediately asked for two days off the following week to take the Officers' exam. Being successful, six months later he was posted to 'Waiting Room' to await the next training course. First he was given three weeks amending leave with a box of sixty odd instruction manuals to update. Then followed a series of dogsbody tasks, including holding the tape for a Surveyor

measuring brewery vats, weighing the valuable sweepings of tobacco leaves for duty refund at a tobacco manufacturers, attending packings of tea for export to check the trader's claim for refund of the 2d per pound import duty on tea, watching tree trunks go into a match factory and counting matches emerging as well as supervising the bottling of vintage port. He was also initiated into a certain Spanish practice involving work (or not) on Saturday mornings.

He was then trained for six months to become an Unattached Officer which, in theory at least, trained him to do anything anywhere at the drop of a hat. After classroom theory Derek's practical Customs training at Tilbury and the old London Wharves (now office blocks or luxury apartments) where he learned to gauge a cask properly to establish the liquor content rather than kicking it which very experienced officers could apparently do!

Excise training was at Chatham where in addition to Purchase Tax control he visited pubs to make sure there was no sugar in the cellar, schools to see if the (lab) stills were distilling water and not spirits, and old ladies to help them with probate. Brewery control was learned at Shepherd Neame's in Faversham where the local Officer played cricket for the brewery team, which worried Derek in case the brewer got up to no good in his absence! A special brew was available in the Sample Room for morning teabreaks. During distillery training in Scotland he managed to break a crown lock which guarded equipment only to be used with the Excise Officer's approval but he was elsewhere before any punishment came through. Told to put his head in a pot-still containing 100% proof whisky to cure a cold, he did and it worked!

Once fully trained, Derek chose to commute from Chatham to the City rather than flit from Scotland to Dover to East Anglia to make a bit on the side from claiming hotel expenses and living in the

back of a van as some did. His control duties were very varied and included a Persian carpet warehouse owned by a terrifying Armenian hunchback with an attractive secretary, Hudson Bay Company and the many small fur traders around it, diamond traders in Hatton Garden, a human hair importer, a sponge importer, tobacco pipe manufacturer, Fleet Street newspapers, Smithfield meat traders. Billingsgate fish merchants, the rag trade in the East End, a glass warehouse, placing bets on horses to check on bookmakers' tax returns, and seizing unlicensed one-arm bandits.

In 1970 Derek moved out of Customs temporarily to become Regional Advisory Officer for the Civil Service Council of Further Education in Tunbridge Wells covering the South-East of England where he advised young civil servants to attend college on dayrelease to improve their qualifications and encouraged older people to attend evening classes, take correspondence courses, enrol for Open University degrees, etc, Driving 20,000 miles a year for three years, he also organized lunch-time classes from French to yoga, regional prize-givings and quizzes with 100 teams competing.

On promotion in 1974 he returned to an unrecognizable department because all the separate parts had been merged and Customs and Excise had doubled in size due to increased Customs work and the introduction of VAT as a consequence of the UK joining the Common Market, thus doubling customs work. Derek was compensated for this upheaval by a posting to Dover to begin the love affair with the town which has culminated in his elevation since retirement in 1998 to the Chairmanship not only of River Parish Council but also of the Dover Society! This account of the early years of his career with its many amusing experiences was a rollicking talk, rollickingly received.

