

From the Joe Harman files...

DOVER and the **CONTAGIOUS DISEASES ACTS**

by Derek Leach

On 19 January 1870 three Metropolitan police officers began duty in Dover to enforce the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869, designed to curb the high incidence of venereal diseases amongst the armed forces which was affecting military effectiveness. Apparently in 1864 290 of every 1000 soldiers suffered from VD. The acts only applied to garrison towns and provided for regulated inspections and supervised 'cures' of common prostitutes. Metropolitan police were brought in as a safeguard against corruption and a guarantee of impartiality, although this proved to be flawed in practice. It is true that members of Dover's own police force were sometimes reprimanded for consorting with prostitutes.

A report on the working of the acts stated that 'there is no comparison to be made between prostitutes and the men who consort with them. With the one, the offence is committed as a matter of gain; with the other it is an irregular indulgence of a natural impulse'. It was always assumed that this was a chosen profession and never the only alternative to starvation. Another quote was, 'women being the match that was ever lit and a threat to the gun powder of male sexual urges'. Transmission of the diseases was obviously from the women to the men and they were to blame, hence the action taken against women.

At this time Dover was a popular health

resort, thriving from its port and garrison with frequent royal and important visitors. Yet a health report commented that 'with the exception of Manchester, Dover was the foulest town of any from which statistics obtained'. In April 1869 the 91st Regiment stationed in Dover had 478 cases of VD. Why was there such a high incidence? Between 1864 and 1870 22 different regiments were stationed in Dover. Only a small proportion of men were allowed to marry - 6% in 1864 - since wives were considered by the military as a distraction! This policy encouraged camp followers and prostitutes. Departing regiments left behind substantial numbers of pregnant girls.

Soldiers were given routine medical examinations every six months, but regular examination of soldiers was thought distasteful with an effect upon morale and married men were assumed to be free from disease.

Under the acts notices were issued to known prostitutes asking them to submit to fortnightly internal examinations for a year. Failure to do so resulted in forced attendance and avoidance carried a three-month prison sentence. The examinations, taking three minutes, were painful and carried out without any sensitivity in the presence of a Met. Police officer. Those found to be diseased were detained for treatment for up to nine months. Those wrongly accused who wished to appeal had to prove they were

Seven Star Street, in the Pier District



not prostitutes. Since there was no definition of 'common prostitute' no woman of the 'lower classes' was safe from accusation. In 1870 Dover had 92 known prostitutes, but 392 women were stopped in the first two months and by the end of the year 1,654 had been examined at 7 Seven Star Street in the Pier District. The enthusiastic police officers were not so much identifying 'fallen women' as identifying women who in their opinion were not acting in a respectable manner. One such officer in plain clothes induced a woman to take a walk with him and then revealed his identity and denounced her. These officers were assisted by somewhat dubious informants: brothel keepers, diseased soldiers and women with a grudge. Suspicion only was needed, not proof. Compare this with the proof needed when accusing landlords of keeping a disorderly house. Whilst women in a licensed premises consorting with soldiers could be accused of being prostitutes, the landlord would not be convicted for keeping a disorderly house because how could he be expected to know what sort of women they were!

The officers kept detailed records, ensured accused women attended for

examination, arrested those who failed to appear, appeared in court to make a case against women and escorted them to the lock hospital at Shorncliffe Camp or to overflow hospitals in London. Many of those who suffered under the acts were soldiers' wives, especially those separated from husbands posted

overseas and forced to work for a living with only 'risky' jobs on offer such as pot girls deliberately employed by pub landlords to attract men.

Women sent for hospital cures did not know where they were being sent for months at a time, they lost their jobs and carried the stigma for years. In addition to medical treatment moral and religious instruction was given in these 'lock hospitals' as they were known.

Public protests soon began with various opinions such as the oppression of unfortunates from some quarters and the threat of embarrassment to respectable women forced to submit to medical examinations or to appear in court to defend their reputations as well as the acts allowing men to be free from blame.

In 1878 there were 5453 signatures on a petition for repeal of the acts in Dover, helped by the case of Elizabeth Burley who was pursued through the Pier District by the Met. officers. In desperation she threw herself into the dock and the police left her to drown. Fortunately, others rescued her. Elizabeth wrote to the press protesting her innocence supported by the Chairman of Magistrates whose home

she had lived in for three weeks and the clergyman who had cared for her after her ordeal. The Home Secretary had to answer questions in the House and as a result the police modified their behaviour somewhat.

With opposition growing stronger and evidence that the acts had not reduced venereal diseases since there was an even higher incidence, the government, in 1883, discontinued compulsory examinations and the Met. presence in Dover was reduced to one man. This was not welcomed by Dover Town Council which wrote to the Home Secretary regretting the end of compulsory examinations and hoping that the acts would not be repealed in view of the

benefits 'in the suppression of vice and immorality and in diminishing the spread of disease'. Repeal came, however, in 1886 and 7 Seven Star Street closed for business.

These acts epitomise the class and gender inequalities of the period where some were automatically thought impure and others innocent and pure. Let Elizabeth Burley have the last word, 'I am only a poor girl, but my character is as much to me as the character of a lady'.

PS Compiled by Derek Leach from a Womens' Studies MA thesis entitled 'The Hateful Ordeal at Seven Star Street' by Deborah Cheney whom Joe Harman assisted in her research.

The Western Heights Preservation Society

Report from Chris Taft, Publicity Secretary

Open Weekend 2008

The Western Heights Preservation Society (WHPS) is deep in the throws of planning the 2008 open weekend. This year there is



Working progress at the Drop Redoubt

to be some slight behind-the-scenes changes as the 2008 event will be led and managed directly by the WHPS, instead of through the White Cliffs Countryside Project as in the past. This naturally means there is a great deal of work to be done by the Society but happily many aspects are under way.

The open weekend will take place on Saturday 31st May and Sunday 1st June 2008. The Drop Redoubt and Grand Shaft will both once more be open, with a small charge being made for the Drop Redoubt. Other events are planned to work alongside the opening although it is anticipated that once more the Drop Redoubt will be the main attraction.