

Rebuilding Dover ~ Post WWII

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

By Barry Vaughan reviewed by Merril Lilley

Three years ago Barry Vaughan embarked on a degree course in Archaeology at Canterbury University and in 2008 was awarded a First Class Honours Degree. For his thesis Barry chose to examine the subject of Rebuilding Dover in the post war years, looking at the opportunities, choices, visions and realities in re-making a modern town. This has been recommended for publication and the author is presently working on a number of revisions with this in mind. Anyone wishing to read the document in full should get in touch with the author, Barry Vaughan.

The paper aimed to identify and discuss similarities and differences between re-building policy as it affected buildings of different functions and status; to study the choices made by planners and see if these changed over time; and to see how sympathetic the re-building was to the original structures, surrounding environment and sensitivities of local people. It also aimed to see if the social structure and spatial arrangement of the town was affected. Lastly it looked at the memorials that relate to Dover's history.

This was obviously a daunting task and one that had been undertaken in part by other local writers. However, the author has focussed on the post war period, with a useful introduction to pre-war Dover and then the damage suffered by the town from 1940 onwards when it was under constant attack for four years. A

large section is devoted to valuable pictorial evidence, with many 'before and after' pictures showing war damage and subsequent re-building. A document entitled 'Dover Reconstruction Proposals' by Philip V. Marchant, Borough Engineer and Surveyor (1947) is a useful reference throughout.

The section of the thesis called 'summing up' does not pull any punches and is followed by a substantial section on items for discussion. Objections to plans and opposition to buildings are all highlighted. Many objections revolved around the plans for the road that was to run along the sea front to Eastern Docks, necessitating the demolition of many properties. There was much opposition to the construction of the Gateway flats. In the central area of the town some damaged residential properties were demolished, some turned over to industrial use and some council properties either demolished or repaired with little new development. Some privately owned





task, the focus of the planners and rebuilding policy and the fact that great care was taken with sympathetic restoration of civic buildings and high status residential properties. He stresses that overall policy of rebuilding was centrally controlled and directed by the Council. The inhabitants of the town had very little input but the Dover Harbour Board significantly influenced decision making in the dock and sea front areas.

properties were initially left as they were with owners repairing as they saw fit. Some large Regency houses were compulsorily purchased and subsequently replaced by flats. The area to the north east of the town had several hundred prefabricated properties built until permanent structures could be erected. Religious buildings, which suffered anything other than the most superficial damage, were demolished and the land put to alternative use.

There had been plans to redevelop Dover before the outbreak of war, and the size of the rebuilding task had been anticipated very early on during the war by both local and central government.

The rebuilding policy was dictated and controlled by the council with, it appears, little consultation with local residents regarding the future of the town. It seemed that industrial development took priority over residential development and historic monuments and tourism were regarded as largely unimportant. Provision of roads and car parking was a high priority. In the main it was civic buildings where trouble was taken to restore them in a manner sympathetic to the original.

In conclusion the author attempts to bring together all the issues raised including the need to redevelop, the magnitude of the

It was envisaged that the plans would take twenty years, by which time a significant amount of new housing had been constructed, much of the road building achieved, the car parks in place and the seafront area rebuilt. However, the author comments, the centralisation of civic buildings did not occur and the massive industrialisation of the town had not materialised. He says 'the archaeological and historical evidence reveals much about Dover society in the immediate post-war years a great deal of which was reflected nationally.'

He concludes, 'With hindsight it is easy to criticise those who planned and redeveloped Dover but the size of the task was enormous and it is probable that those responsible, by and large, acted with the best of intentions'. However, the author does point out that decisions relating to reconstruction were almost exclusively taken by the elite minority with almost no meaningful consultation with ordinary people. From an archaeological perspective it is the richness of the surviving evidence that is of most importance; Dover provides a window on past scenarios (such as London after the fire of 1666 and Pompeii after the earthquake of AD 62) where less of a record remains and interpretation is reliant on a far greater degree of speculation.