

Rolling Back The Centuries

by Terry Sutton

The centuries are to roll back some 350 years at Dover Castle as Henry VIII makes way for Henry II in an English Heritage multi-million pound makeover. The transformed attraction is scheduled to be open to visitors in August.

The massive keep of Dover Castle is now to be renamed the Great Tower. From a depiction of preparing for a visit by Henry VIII in the 16th century, it is to be transformed to what it was like in the earlier days when the Plantagenet Henry II (1133-1189) was master minding the construction of the fort that has dominated the town for 800 years. It is all part of a wider £5 million English Heritage investment programme designed to attract more fee-paying visitors.

Tracey Wahdan, English Heritage's visitor operations director for the South East, says that although Dover Castle welcomed some 300,000 visitors in 2008 the numbers were dropping and it was considered necessary to make the huge investment in order to boost interest.

However, she admitted adult admission to the castle would have to increase to around £13-40 to help finance the investment. She insists it will be "very good value for the money" with the average time spent in the castle grounds four-to-five hours.

Mrs Wahdan also reported that in 2008 the number of visitors included 47% who pay. The rest are English Heritage members and 70,000 free entries for educational purposes. English Heritage considers Dover Castle second only to its top visitor attraction of Stonehenge.

One of the problems experienced at Dover Castle, she said, is that there is not sufficient capacity in the wartime underground tunnels for the numbers who want to visit them while there is capacity at the Great Tower (the keep) for those who want to tour that attraction.

She says the transformation of the Great Tower is estimated to cost in the region of £2 million while another £500,000 was being spent on the provision of a new visitor centre. Dr Edward Impey, English Heritage's director of research, is engaged in the detailed work in progress to recapture accurately the days of Henry II, his royal court and castle construction workers. This would be brought to life by the use of electronic "ghost" projections on interior walls.

In another part of the castle, Arthur's Hall, there is to be an exhibition depicting medieval times including a depiction of what life in Dover was like in that era.

