

The Dover Town Clerk

A talk by Mike Webb reported by Alan Lee

It is three years now since Mike Webb took over as Clerk to Dover Town Council (DTC). He originally came from a marketing background and his last position was with Dover Town Centre Management. He spoke with some pride of his involvement in heading that organisation and some of the initiatives taken. Two in particular that are still working well today are the *Shop Watch* scheme, taken up nationally and *River Watch*, now under the River Dour Steering Group.

Mike mentioned some of his many links with the Dover Society including the blue plaque scheme and especially the one that marks the spot of the first bomb dropped by plane on British soil.

He said how vital it was that people should know what is happening in the town and how sad it was to see the closure, after 150 years, of the Dover Express office. This is the first time since the publication of local newspapers in Dover that there would not be any local offices. He hoped that the Town Council along with the help of the Dover Society could facilitate the storage of the Dover Express archives locally.

The Mayor is the first citizen and is chair of the Town Council. The Town Clerk as the Proper Officer and Chief Executive is not answerable to any single member of the council or the Mayor but only to the full council. He is responsible for checking the legal standing of decisions that the council takes.

DTC comprises eighteen elected councillors and employs four full time and seven part time staff. In contrast, Calais employs 1,400 staff. The council has an annual turnover of £800,000 with the main income coming from the rates and investments. It is organised into various committees (all councillors sit on at least one) and these report to the full council. They can resolve (make a decision) or resolve to recommend (pass the decision on to the full council). Owing to the large



Mike Webb, Dover Town Clerk

number of committee meetings that take place the full council only meets about every five to six weeks. DTC have adopted an open and transparent style and limit the times that they exclude the public from sensitive items, always printed on pink paper.

The responsibilities of the town council are slowly increasing due, in part, to the district council being rate capped. This sets a limit on the amount of money they can raise through the rates while the town council has no such limit. The town has, at present, an eight star council rating, one of the highest in the country.

Town councillors do not receive payment and most stand for election out of a sense of public duty.

Two major achievements in the early years of the council have been the purchase and refurbishment of Maison Dieu House for use as council offices and the purchase of the Town War Memorial for a nominal sum from the District Council.

The Mayor and representatives from DTC were the first Britains to meet the new Mayor of Calais Mmm. Natacha Bouchart officially. A member of President Nicolas Sarkozy's UMP party, her election in 2008 ended 37 years of Communist rule in Calais. The meeting discussed the Olympic flame coming through Dover, which has the backing of Calais and Belgium. Over in Calais they have proposed that they erect a huge billboard to advertise the Olympics. The estimate is that 80 million people will see it before the start of the games.

On a completely different note - DTC

have just taken over another 30 plus allotments from the Municipal Charities, bringing the number under council control to well over 200. These make a small loss but to encourage their use the cost to the public is set deliberately low.

The town council at present has initiated its own award system to recognise the good work carried out by townspeople to help the community. Meanwhile the House of Lords is reviewing the situation whereby the town could grant the freedom of Dover to individuals once more.

If present in the office, the town clerk or his deputy will always see members of the public who wish to see them.

After the talk questions followed and it emerged that when the town clerk issues a press release the only embargo is on politically and legally sensitive statements. He also admitted that he has mellowed and was more outspoken when he was on the Town Centre Management team.

The town council are legal consultants to the district council and as such, they should be listened to more on planning matters within the town. Another slightly contentious issue occurs if the council raises a planning matter with the district council. They classify it as one objection as was the case when a single person raised an objection.

One concern highlighted was the poor condition of some of the buildings that would be on the route of the Olympic torch, if it comes through Dover. Mike agreed and said that as a last resort in tidying up the town the district council had the power of compulsory purchase.