

2nd Talk

Dover Castle Renewed

A talk by Steve Lang, English Heritage,
Head of Visitor Operations, Dover Castle reported by Alan Lee

In the second talk of the evening Steve Lang, Head of Visitor Operations, Dover Castle outlined the reasons for the converting of the Keep into the Great Tower experience.

Henry II, born at Le Mans 5th March 1133, was one of the most powerful kings to rule England but not one of the most famous. He was nineteen when he married Eleanor of Aquitaine, the greatest heiress in Western Europe. They had eight children, the most famous being Richard I, Coeur de Lion [Lionheart] and King John of Magna Carta fame. At Westminster Abbey on 19th December 1154 Henry became the first King of England. Before that the title was King of the English. Henry died at Chinon on 6th July 1189.

The catalyst for improving Dover Castle came in 1179 when he met the

King of France, Louis VII, on Shakespeare Beach, one of the first state visits. Having nowhere locally to entertain Louis he decided he had to show his importance and if pilgrims and dignitaries from across the Channel were to be more frequent he needed to be able to receive them in the proper fashion. He therefore built the castle tower as a royal residence.

The Keep Tower built in 1181 is the largest in Britain and the last example of an Anglo-Norman domicile. Very old fashioned for the time when it was built it was not for defence but as a showpiece for Henry's power and influence. The Keep is four storeys high, it contains the basement cooking area and the second floor, spanning two storeys, form the royal accommodation. There are two chapels, both with eye-catching stained glass windows. The lower



chapel is in Gothic style, the upper or Thomas Becket's Chapel of Norman style, richly decorated. This is unique to Dover Castle.

The restoration cost almost £2.45 million, involved two years of research and took 140 artists and craftsmen about 18 months to complete. They spent thousands of hours on the design and making 80 pieces of furniture, dozens of embroidered textiles and 140 metres of wall hangings. They crafted 21 new oak doors and more than 1,000 other objects. Clever use of projected virtual reality figures, including the King, add a further impact to the completed work.

The furniture and furnishings contain a surprising amount of colour. The beds seem unusual and are small by today's standards. In Henry's reign people would not lie down to sleep. They were afraid that if they fell asleep and their mouths opened the devil would enter their bodies. With a shorter bed they could sleep in more of a sitting position and this would not happen.

One of the fine 180-foot long wall hangings, inspired by the Bayeux Tapestry, depicts the Norman Conquest and another the story of 30 people





who lived in the Great Tower. Major challenges were the limit on the type of stitches, the use of crewel wools and silk floss and the deliberate use of imperfect stitches to replicate those of the period.

Steve then mentioned some of the little known facts that had come to light in the research of the period. A great favourite at the castle was Roland the Farter. He so entertained the king over the years that when he retired he was given 30 acres of land. There were very few men accompanied by their wives at the castle. This led to the employment of a Marshal of the Court Whores who was in charge of the prostitutes.

Alys, Countess of Vexin had, in 1169, become betrothed to Henry's son Richard the Lionheart. Whilst Richard was away in the Holy Land Henry took her for his mistress and by 1177 this had become an open scandal at court. After Richard came to the throne he terminated their engagement in 1191 on the grounds that she had borne a child by his father. She went back to France in 1195.

Steve Lang finished by outlining future plans for Dover Castle and answering questions about his talk from members of the audience.