

The Dover Society AGM 2012

Report by the Chairman Derek Leach

Having ploughed through the past year's minutes of the Executive, Planning and Refurbishment Committees to put this Executive report - my 8th - together, I am amazed at the number of issues, both large and small, discussed, pursued and acted upon. As usual time will only allow me to give you the headlines of all the activities carried out on your behalf, but underlying them all is the continual and dedicated bread and butter work that goes on year in and year out by a relatively small number of members. All taken together makes The Dover Society what I hope, indeed I know it is - a force for good in Dover, a force to be reckoned with and a force respected.

Membership

We were delighted that following the appointment of two of our members as honorary Freemen in 2010, Dover Town Council saw fit last year to add our own Terry Sutton to that select band. Our membership shows a slight net increase from last year 444 to 457. Whilst this is a healthy number, the more members we have, the stronger our voice becomes. Next year The Society will be 25 years old. Let us celebrate that by reaching 500 members by the next AGM. Please encourage relatives, friends and work colleagues to join. Our thanks as always go to our membership secretary, Sheila Cope.

Now may I invite you to stand whilst we remember those members who have died in the past year Kenneth and Delysia Berry, Brenda Lee, Muriel

Mellanby, John Turnpenny, David Pike, Jeane Steed and Maurice Sayers.

So what have we been up to?

When asked what is The Society for? I always summarise our formal objectives by saying that we care about Dover's past, its present and its future. To do this we have to react and comment upon what is going on around us both locally and nationally - there has been plenty of that in the past year - but we are also proactive by taking the initiative ourselves or by influencing others. A common thread running through our efforts whether on heritage, future of the port, planning or refurbishment is making the best of what we've got.

Planning

Patrick Sherratt has become a very effective and energetic Planning Committee chairman. In addition to commenting upon controversial individual planning applications, we continue to meet the Dover District Council (DDC) Director of Community and Development informally to discuss progress - or lack of - on all the major regeneration schemes. We have welcomed the latest St James' area redevelopment plans with minor reservations as a big improvement on the previous ASDA scheme, although we have objected to the design of the proposed Travelodge building. At long last we welcomed a start on the Buckland Paper Mill site and on relocating the Visitor Information Centre to the Museum. We have also

attended meetings about or submitted views upon DDC's draft Heritage Strategy, its Open Space Policy, its standards for shop fronts in conservation areas, the Green Infrastructure Plan, the Dover Surface Water Drainage Scheme, Dover Town Council's (DTC) Ambition Plan, the proposed River Dour cycle route and the Localism Bill (now an Act). China Gateway gave a presentation to the Executive on its ambitious ideas for Farthingloe and the Western Heights as part of its consultation process. The Executive's present view is that the Western Heights Ancient Monument should be protected; however, since private money appears to be the only way to preserve and promote this valuable heritage asset, we may be prepared to accept some sensitive development if there is a substantial gain for the Ancient Monument. The original proposals have been substantially modified already, but we must wait for the detailed planning application and then consult members before we come to a final view. At long last DTC and DDC are taking legal action on our aim to see neglected properties improved or repaired and The Society has nominated some for early attention. We are also lobbying about the need to bring the many empty homes back into use. We have kept a close eye on the derelict former cinema in Castle Street and hope that its proximity to the St James development will at long last galvanise Wetherspoons into action.

We were pleased to see that some of our major concerns about the government's controversial national planning reforms were alleviated somewhat in the final version of the National Planning Policy Framework - the default automatic

approval for development has been omitted, brownfield sites and town centres should once again be considered before green spaces are used and the term 'sustainable development' has at least been defined, but will probably create a load of legal wrangles.

Refurbishment Committee

Our Refurbishment Committee, chaired by Jeremy Cope, is making an impact with its survey of the condition of our many listed buildings and conservation areas, but DDC's ability to enforce building standards both for new buildings and old is severely limited now due to staffing cuts. Our request for DDC's civil enforcement officers' (parking attendants) duties to be extended to include certain antisocial behaviour and litter dropping has been unsuccessful to date, although DDC responds quickly when we report litter blackspots. On a brighter note, we were pleased to congratulate Morrison's for the much improved area around their store. The state and lack of public toilets continue to give concern especially on the seafront. Our efforts to get Kent Highways to replace any diseased street trees that are removed have been rebuffed due to financial constraints. The need for an easily accessible footpath to link the castle to Langdon Cliffs via the Bleriot Memorial has resulted in The Society proposing a route. With DDC unable to undertake the costly repair of Connaught Park pond its future is in doubt, but we are seeking a grant. We can report no success in getting Kent Highways to replace felled street trees or to remove the stumps left behind due apparently to lack of funding.

Future of Dover Harbour Board

The future ownership and development

of the port again took up a great deal of time. With the vast majority of our members opposing the sale of the port as proposed by Dover Harbour Board (DHB) and supporting transfer to the Dover Community, but with no decision from government we have continued to be closely involved with developments to seek the best possible deal for Dover. We submitted views on the government's proposed revised criteria for the sale of Trust Ports and these criteria now require the local community to have a long term involvement in any future ownership causing DHB to revise its proposals that we expect to be consulted about shortly. A significant development was DHB handing over to representatives of the community the task of setting up the Port of Dover Community Trust (part of its original proposals) should it be needed. I represent The Society on this independent working group, which is considering the aims of the Trust, the area of benefit, the structure of the Trust and how its members would be recruited.

Projects

No new major projects were begun this year - we had our hands more than full with the existing ones!

On the heritage front the success of Heritage Open Days in Dover continued with once again 10 properties open free of charge for the September 2011 weekend.

Our long term project of restoring the Town Hall to something like its Victorian splendour in partnership with DDC and DTC is gathering momentum. The first task was to make the public both near and far more aware of the building and its history. From last May

guided tours every Wednesday morning once a month were organised with guides provided by The Society and Kent Greeters. From September, with the opening of our new History Room in the old Court Room, tours have been run all day every Wednesday. To date nearly 500 people have visited and paid over £500. We are now targeting and attracting groups of up to 40 people at a time. The project is now in its second and more difficult phase of preparing the ground for a major lottery fund bid by considering how the building should be restored, used and managed in the future to maximise its potential for commercial, community and heritage use.

Our dedicated band of volunteers led by Jeremy Cope has continued to maintain the whole area of Cowgate Cemetery with their fortnightly work parties and we continue to take a leading role in the River Dour Steering Group where we suffered a setback with cuts in White Cliffs Countryside Partnership funding threatening the continuation of the monthly litter clearances by volunteers; however, whilst we try to find alternative funding, we, together with DTC and River Parish Council, have found the money at least for the next 12 months.

We are now considering providing more Dover Society historic plaques with the first possibly in memory of Doctor Koettlitz and placed on the newly restored Charlton House.

More of the same

Now I turn to what I call 'more of the same' - regular activities which are part and parcel of The Society and perhaps taken for granted, but no less important.

Social programme

Our winter series of meetings continue to be well supported and I thank Patricia Hooper-Sherratt, Sheila Cope, Georgette Rapley and the happy band of kitchen helpers - not to mention Mike Weston the wine waiter - for all their hard work. We changed our raffle prizes as an experiment and I shall seek your views this evening. Support for the Christmas Feast is dwindling and you have been asked to complete a questionnaire in the March Newsletter. Our trip to the Houses of Parliament was heavily oversubscribed but our second outing to the Geffrye Museum was cancelled for lack of support. Again we do need feedback on what, if any, outings you would support.

Publicity

Our Newsletter expertly edited by Alan Lee continues to be highly regarded by members and others. We are indebted to all the contributors, Jean Marsh our advertising manager, the envelope stuffers and all our distributors for their efforts. The excellent website, managed by Mike McFarnell keeps members up to date and helps to interest internet browsers not only in the Society but in Dover as well. Terry Sutton's regular press reports also help to keep The Society in the public eye and we continue to provide a Dover Society article in the Dover Life magazine.

Events

As usual I represented The Society at the St. George's Day commemoration of the Zeebrugge Raid and we also laid wreaths at the Remembrance Services at the town war memorial and at The Society's plaque to the Unknown Warrior at the Western Docks at which this year a descendant of one such unknown warrior also laid a wreath. As

Chairman I was invited to a consultation on the future of the Officers' New Barracks at the castle, the launch of the Dover Tattoo and the Cultural Framework Survey launch.

Thanks

I have not mentioned the sterling efforts of our Treasurer, but Mike Weston will shortly dazzle you with his annual accounts.

That concludes my report of a very hectic year for The Society except for thanking every member of the Executive, including Georgette Rapley who is not seeking re-election, our minutes secretary, Barbara Stapleton who has had to step down, our Audit Committee, and all those members who have contributed in any way to the work of The Society during the past year.

Jack Woolford

You will have noticed that there has been no mention of Jack Woolford and he is unable to be with us tonight. Failing health has meant that he has played little part in Society affairs for more than a year and he has decided that at 94 the time has come for him to retire from the Executive. Jack, with Philomena Kennedy and Peter Johnson, were the founders of The Society and it has been the centre of his life since 1988. We shall miss his enthusiasm, wisdom, experience, wit, command of the English language - and the champagne on his many birthdays! Jack remains a Vice President and we shall make a presentation to him.

Help needed

Finally, may I make an appeal for practical help in 3 areas:
- somebody to organise our programme

of speakers

- a minutes secretary for the Executive Committee

- a raffle organiser, which is pretty simple with the voucher system

- please consider whether you could contribute in this way.

I submit my report for your consideration and welcome any questions.

Editor's comments

We require more feedback on our summer outings and welcome suggestions as to suitable destinations.

The question was put to the meeting regarding how the raffle will be run in the

future. The vote went overwhelmingly to continue with the present format.

A member appealed for the Society to recognise Braddon Village at the Western Heights and to help secure a village sign. After discussion the Chairman stated that the Executive would consider the matter.

Following questions from the floor regarding possible development on the Western Heights and in the Farthingloe area, the Chairman assured members that at the appropriate time when the developer's final plans were made public in the form of a planning application, members' views would be sought before the Executive submitted its formal views to the planning authority.

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

Shiela R Cope Membership Secretary

To save postage, this year's subscription reminders have been delivered by phone or email in the first instance. At time of writing this method seems to have been effective. Please remember that cheques and cash are only acknowledged on receipt of a stamped addressed envelope. Above all, however, the forethought of those members who pay their subs on time is always much appreciated.

Another change is that we have used up our original batch of membership cards and decided not to have more printed since we could not remember any occasion when they have actually been needed. As a result, new members now receive a much more prosaic receipt for their payment but those who still have cards are welcome to have them stamped at the AGM as they have traditionally done.

Just at present we number 469, 22 of whom have been recruited since the last Newsletter and several introduced by existing members to whom we are grateful for their good work. At the AGM we enrolled 11 new members which is a record. The new members are:- Mr K Smith, Mrs A Reardon, Mr J Morgan, Mr P Headon, Mr & Mrs S Yarrow, Miss E Smith, Mrs S Judah, Mrs G Blythe, Mr D Vincent, Miss D Lee, Mr C Nelson, Mrs J Dean, Ms L Pimblett, Ms J Jones, Ms C Smith, Mrs K Marsh, Mr S Mills, Mr C & Mrs S Parsons, Mr M Scanlon and Miss S Mackintosh. They are all most welcome!