

NOVEMBER MEETING

1st Talk

The Cinque Ports Past and Present

A talk by Peter Sherred reported by Alan Lee

In 1992 Peter Sherred was appointed Deputy and Surrogate to the Judge Official and Commissary of the Court of Admiralty of the Confederation of the Cinque Ports and Two Antient Towns. Or in short Surrogate Judge.

The Confederation of Cinque Ports consists of the five Cinque Ports of Hastings, Romney, Hythe, Dover and Sandwich - two Antient towns of Rye and Winchelsea and the seven limbs of Faversham, Folkestone, Tenterden, Deal, Lydd, Margate and Ramsgate. At one time there were 23 limbs.

The fourteen mayors assemble for meetings of the Court of Brotherhood and Guestling of Shepway and for the annual Speakers Day parade. These are colourful occasions with the mayors and town clerks in full historic robes. Only two of the mayors are dressed in black, those of Sandwich and Deal. This is a mark of respect for John Drury the Mayor of Sandwich killed by French raiders in 1457. The Mayor of Sandwich also carries a stick made of blackthorn.

Speakers Day is an annual event held in Winchelsea and last took place on 6th October 2012. This confirms the Major as the Speaker for the year and includes a parade around the town, a church service and a formal lunch.

There are only two official speakers in the country, one for the House of Commons and the other for the Cinque Ports.

The symbol of the authority of the Admiral of the Cinque Ports is a silver oar. The present one was first used at the Installation as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother at Dover on the 1st August 1979. The original had been stolen during the 1960's.

The origins of the Cinque Ports date back to approximately 1050, the time of Edward the Confessor who organised a few ports on the south coast to provide harbours, ships, men and fighters. In return they were allowed a certain amount of self government. In 1060 William of Normandy continued this agreement. During so called peaceful times they supplied royal transport, naval service and helped to repel marauders. At that time it was the Danes.

The Portsmen were mainly fishermen and mariners who ferried passengers and cargo out to larger ships. They were ruthless, hard to control and a law unto themselves, frequently committing piracy, robbery and raids on foreign ports.

In the 13th Century and early part of the 14th Century under war conditions they became virtually ungovernable. They destroyed Dieppe and campaigned in Anglesey and Scotland. They helped defeat the French fleet of 1700 ships at Damme, then the principal port for Bruges in Flanders, with 300 ships captured and another 100 burnt. They were also present at the Battle of Sandwich and in 1340 at the Battle of Sluys, West Flanders, (then considered to be the best port in Europe) they helped destroy the joint French, Genoese and Castilian fleet. This battle marked the beginning of the Hundred Years War.

In 1359 three hundred Frenchmen invaded Winchelsea and butchered the entire congregation of St Giles Church. In 1457 they sacked Sandwich and killed the mayor. In 1588 the Cinque Ports supplied ships to fight the Armada. Dover provided the 120 ton Elizabeth and 70 crew.

The Cinque Ports still retained many of their privileges, some with strange sounding titles. Den of Stroud the right to land at Great Yarmouth to mend nets and to set up a fish fayre. This caused considerable animosity with the local people. Rights of Toll able to raise their own taxes. Blodwit was the right to punish shedders of blood. Fledwit was the right to seize those escaping justice. Infrangentheof gave the right to detain felons in the 'Ports' jurisdiction. Outfrangentheof gave the right to detain felons out of the 'Ports' jurisdiction. Jetsam, Flotsam, Legam gave the right to items thrown overboard, floating on the sea and washed onto the shore.

The Confederation ran various courts, now with much reduced powers.

The Court of Shepway: In the 12th century a Shire court that could try serious crimes including treason. In Sandwich people could be buried alive in the Gallows field. From the 16th century it was held at the Bredenstone, Western Heights then later within the grounds of Dover College.

The Court of Admiralty and Court of Lodemange was primary to regulate pilots, now controlled by Trinity House.

The Courts of Brodhull (Brotherhood) and Guestling were mainly for internal disputes. One dealt with the western ports and the other the eastern ports (this was based at Sandwich).

The Lord Warden was appointed by the monarch originally to act as a go between in the hope that he would be able to assert some control over the Portsmen. The Lord Warden is always addressed as Admiral even though Lord Boyce is only the second real admiral to have held the post. Until 1906 the Lord Warden also held the post of Chairman of Dover Harbour Board.

The Cinque Ports form part of this country's history of which we should all be rightly proud.

