

## Birth of The Dover Society

With considerable concern over recent events in and around Dover Philomena Kennedy, artist and teacher at Dover Girls' Grammar School, approached several people and persuaded them to meet to discuss the possibility of forming a civic society. Issues included the futures of Connaught Park, Brook House, Pencester Gardens and River Recreation Ground, which was threatened with housing development. These, coupled with anxieties arising from completion of the Channel Tunnel with its threat of mass unemployment and with a desire to be involved in the proposed remedies of tourism brought the group together in March 1988. The inaugural meeting of The Dover Society quickly followed on 25th April in the Menzies Hall of Dover College with about a hundred people present. Peter Johnson, before proposing 'That The Dover Society be instituted and the Civic Trust Constitution be adopted' made these remarks: "Many people in Dover have felt a growing concern about what is going to happen to the town in the future. That concern stems to some extent from events during 1987 and the sometimes bitter conflict between the people and Dover District Council (DDC), mostly about the selling off of public open spaces. But the issues are far wider than that. It is this concern that has brought together a body of people who have felt strongly the need to care for the town, for its people and for its future. Let me at this stage say what we are not.

We are not a protest group.

We are not party political in any shape or form.

We are not demonstrators and, I hope, we are not cranks.

What are we then? I can only say what we aim to be, namely a body of people

concerned about the future of Dover, informed, experienced in a wide range of skills and activities, responsible in our actions and constructive in our criticism. We hope also to be influential. This will depend on the breadth of support we can win from the people of Dover and on the input those people can in turn provide from their knowledge, experience and wisdom. We hope to work with DDC and not against it. I think the majority support the council's plans for making Dover a mecca for tourists, but there is some thought that those plans are too narrow and lacking in vision, too heavily influenced by outside commercial advice and lacking in in-depth knowledge of Dover. They ignore little things, relatively insignificant in themselves but an essential part of our history and our environment.

As an example I would remind the meeting that yesterday was St. George's Day and the 70th anniversary of the capture of the Mole at Zeebrugge, one of the most historic and heroic naval engagements of all time. The bell from the mole hangs on the balcony at Dover Town Hall and yesterday at noon the Town Mayor rang eight bells and buglers from the Royal Marines at Deal sounded the Last Post and Reveille. The Charter Trustees, representatives of the Services and youth organisations and of the Royal Society of St. George were present and there followed a moving service in St. James' Cemetery where many of those who lost their lives at Zeebrugge on St. George's Day 1918 are buried. How many visitors to Dover, and indeed Dovorians themselves, know of the bell and its history engraved on the stone tablet set into the front wall of the Town Hall, dirty with age and neglected? This is just one small example of the little bits of history to be found in the town. The Dover Society as we see it would look at every aspect of the

town and, among other things, ferret out the smaller matters and perhaps initiate action to bring them to the fore.

The Society would also wish to make informed and constructive contributions to major development and pursue a quest for quality. Civic quality stems from good design, good taste and attention to detail.

The resolution which I put to this meeting tonight is that, "The Dover Society be instituted, that it be included in the national register of local amenity societies sponsored by the Civic Trust and that the model constitution prepared by the Civic Trust be adopted".

He concluded: "I believe that Dover has a great future. I am one of those who do not believe that the Channel Tunnel will have as disastrous an effect on Dover as some have forecast. On the contrary, I believe the port will continue to flourish in handling both freight and passengers. It is right, however, that we should be looking to the future by making the town itself a tourist centre. Dover is unique in the breadth of its history extending from Roman times to the present day and there is no reason why it should not become a 'must' for tourists comparable with Canterbury, York and Bath. I am not a Dovorian by birth, only by 35 years of adoption, but I regard myself as a citizen of no mean city. If I may borrow a phrase of today from the *Dover Express* 'I'm backing Dover' and I invite you to join me by launching The Dover Society."

Members of the temporary committee were then confirmed in office and others elected from the floor: Chairman Jack Woolford, Vice Chairman John Gerrard, Secretary Barry Smith, Treasurer Norman Willis, Press Officer Sybil Standing, Social Secretary Linda Clackett, Newsletter Editor Philomena Kennedy and Ken Berry,

Phyllis Dobbins, Jeremy Cope, David Elms, Michael Foad, Peter Johnson, Terry Khambatta, Viv Liggett, Mike McFarnell, Jim Truelove and Ken Wraight as committee members. The Countess of Guilford agreed to be President and a number of Vice Presidents were appointed: Budge Adams, Lord Ennals, Jack Ind, Ivan Green, Peter Johnson, Lillian Kay, Jonathan Sloggett and Ray Warner. To round off the evening Jack Woolford gave a commentary entitled 'Dover: Assets and Liabilities' with a selection of slides taken by Ray Warner and Philomena Kennedy. The new society was registered with the Civic Trust as a civic society on 16th May and affiliated to the Kent Federation of Amenity Societies.

### ***The first year***

The Society soon got down to work. Some DDC Officers and District Councillors met members of the committee in June. The objects of the Society were outlined and the hope expressed that useful contacts with the District Council would help to avoid misunderstandings and enable the Society to offer informed comment in the future about planning applications and other issues. The futures of Connaught Park and Pencester Gardens were raised and the council's encouragement of upgrading properties in conservation areas by the use of small grants was welcomed. A tour of Brook House followed. The sad state of the interior of this attractive Victorian house formerly housing the Borough Council was all too obvious. Despite continuous pumping the high water table and unsatisfactory foundations had resulted in severe damp everywhere. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that several potential purchasers had lost interest.

### ***The Newsletter***

*The first Newsletter was published in June edited by Philomena Kennedy - not the refined*

*and professional version of later editions (number 8 onwards) but duplicated with her own pen and ink illustrations. The now well known logo, designed by Philomena, was used on the front page of the Newsletter from the outset. Later, it was produced as a car or window sticker and as a lapel badge.*

*Newsletter Number 8 produced in September 1990 was the first printed by A. R. Adams and formatted by member Budge Adams. Advertisements appeared for the first time. It was received favourably with Sybil Standing commenting, 'The tea is just as good but we have exchanged our Oxfam mug for Crown Derby!' This professional standard journal, edited first by Philomena, then by Merril Lilley and latterly by Alan Lee, has stood the test of time extremely well.*

*Newsletter 30 in December 1997 was the last that Budge Adams, at age 88, page set. Having to pay for this in future meant that the Newsletter would be reduced from 56 to 44 pages. Newsletter 52 in April 2005 was Editor Merril Lilley's last after 14 years. She had only taken over the job temporarily whilst Philomena Kennedy toured the United States! Alan Lee has proved a worthy successor.*

*The name 'Newsletter' does not really do it justice. The varied reports and articles provide a fantastic archive over the last 25 years not only of the Society's past, but of local issues as well as the many fascinating articles on aspects of Dover's history.*

A brainstorming meeting was held with DDC consultants, Kent County Council (KCC), Eurotunnel and others to discuss alternative employment for Dover when the Channel Tunnel became operational. Tourism was a possibility but Dover had an image problem - a transit town with run down properties, poor shopping, catering and accommodation with little entertainment. Suggestions included a heritage centre, a maritime quarter, golf

course, White Cliffs country park, a caravan park, reinstatement of the military tattoo and Dover's cricket week, sea festivals, firework displays, harbour boat trips, water sports centre, regattas, cable car to the cliffs and a bus service to connect the Maison Dieu, Painted House, castle and harbour.

By June the Planning Subcommittee, chaired by Ken Wraight, was in action but its attempt to save Brook House by seeking listed building status was pre-empted by a demolition without warning at 5am. During the first year the Market Square improvement scheme was welcomed as was the opening of the Old Town Gaol tourist attraction at the Town Hall. Proper preservation of Dover's incredible Roman ruins were urged (in addition to the Painted House opened 11 years previously). The Society was consulted from the outset by DDC and Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit about their conflicting plans for a heritage centre. A study was carried out to identify which Dover buildings should, if possible, be protected and which to allow redevelopment.

The Society made its first awards for amenity improvement with framed certificates for Buckland Paper Mill's refurbishment and to the KCC architect for the design of Dover's new magistrates' court in Pencester Road. DDC was invited to comment on the Society's new Dover Plan.

The Social Subcommittee organised its first outing in September when John Gerrard gave a guided tour of the Eastern Docks. This was followed by the first Christmas Feast attended by 70 people, which was held in the historic Norman refectory of Dover College. This became a tradition that continued until 2012 saw a dramatic change to a lunchtime event at the Marina Hotel.