

The Town Hall Project - An Update

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The Dover Society's decision in 2011, supported by Dover District Council and Dover Town Council, to organise guided tours of the Town Hall had the aim of making the local community and visitors to the town more aware of the building's 800 years of fascinating history and its architecture. It was intended as a precursor to a major Heritage Lottery Fund bid to assist in the restoration of the building, as far as possible, to its Victorian glory.

A desire to restore an historic building is not, unfortunately, sufficient reason to merit a heritage lottery grant. Any such grant application has to include, amongst other criteria, proposals for a sustainable future use. Sadly, after a few encouraging initial meetings with interested parties, including the District Council (the owner) and Dover Town Council, no meetings have been held since February 2012 due to the stretched staff resources of DDC.

In the meantime, the Society, with a dedicated band of volunteers, continues to offer guided tours every Wednesday. Since 2011, 1125 people have enjoyed tours, with entrance fees and donations received totalling £1900. Several times a number of people refused a tour but had a look round the Stone Hall – we do not allow them to go any further unescorted in case they get lost!

During the summer of 2011 we started tentatively with tours on Wednesday mornings once a month, but from September with the opening of the History Room in the former Court Room we increased tour hours to every Wednesday from 10 to 4. A constraint is that we have to work around other Town

Hall activities at the same time – the weekly afternoon tea dance and two regular monthly lunch bookings.

Most of our visitors are 'casual' turning up on the day – local people, cruise passengers or others from the UK or abroad – but we also cater for pre-booked groups either on a Wednesday or another day, avoiding commercial events. Groups have included two coach loads from the Historic Houses Association when we guides had to be on our toes with these enthusiasts and their complex questions! The Town Hall operator often benefits from these visits when lunch or refreshments are required.

We have attractive publicity leaflets available at the Town Hall, the Town Council offices, Dover Museum/Visitor Information Centre and the Library. We



Town Hall 1904

also advertise on websites such as Visit Kent and in the Kent History Journal. On sale are sets of specially produced postcards of the six glorious stained glass windows in the Stone Hall. During 2013 requests for a guide book were satisfied by producing a very attractive 32 page full colour guide cum history, which is also available in the Museum shop and at WH Smith or direct from me. It was financed from the Society's publication fund but the cost will be recouped from sales. Any profit will go into our Town Hall Restoration Fund which has benefited from a generous donation of £1,000 from Jack Woolford, from income on shares donated to the Society and the value of the shares. The Fund now totals £4,643.

A disappointment has been failure to obtain permission for regular access to the old cells in the basement, which many visitors ask to see, particularly

those who remember the Old Town Gaol attraction. Most of the cells are full of museum items in store, but at least one cell is empty plus the fascinating passageway with cells on either side, but there are health and safety and security issues. We did, however, manage to have them open specially for the Kent History Conference last May when 150 members of history societies throughout Kent spent the morning in the Town Hall listening to three presentations on Dover - its Town Hall, its caves and tunnels and the Western Heights. In the afternoon people chose one of several guided tours on offer around the town including the Town Hall.

Now we would like to share the building with school groups. To achieve this we are thinking of producing a package of activities for primary school groups using the history and architecture of the Town Hall.

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