

# An Independent 'People Focused' Mayor

Peter Sherrad

So the burning question was, who would find himself or herself Mayor after the Mayor Making meeting in Dover Town Hall on Thursday 14th May 2015? The complexion of the Council was such that anyone from the three groups that made up Dover Town Council on that night could emerge as the next leading town representative for the civic year 2015 - 2016 there being four Independent Councillors, six Labour Councillors and four Conservative Councillors all of whom had, only a few days earlier on 7th May, stood for election for the various wards that make up the Dover Town Council electorate. Christopher John Precious, known more usually as Chris Precious, was elected as one of the Town Councillors for Town and Pier ward along with John Heron. He went into the key Council meeting knowing he would be proposed as Mayor, but who would support him? A Labour Councillor was also proposed and as his party was the largest party only two votes would be needed on top of the Labour votes to see him elected. Alternatively, if a couple of the others, Independents and Conservatives, failed to turn up for the meeting, Labour's hold on the Mayoralty would continue as it had since the Town Council had been formed. In the event every elected person attended and with the Independent and Conservative councillors joining together Chris found himself elected as Mayor for which he says he was "pleasantly surprised". History will record Chris Precious became Dover Town Council's first Independent



*Chris Precious - 4th July*

Mayor, certainly since the 1974 re-organisation of local government, putting a break on the established monopoly of the position by political parties. He was to serve just one term as Mayor before handing over to another Independent Councillor, Neil Rix, becoming the Deputy Mayor for the municipal year 2016 - 2017.

Chris Precious was born on 5th July 1953 in North London. He was one of four children of his parents, Elizabeth and William Precious, Chris having two brothers and one sister. His sister, sadly, died at the age of three. Educated at St Paul's Primary School, Swiss Cottage and Quintin Grammar School in St John's Wood, Chris left school with the wish of entering advertising. Initially he obtained employment in a music library before spending eighteen months in advertising in Covent Garden and then some eight years running a variety of pubs and bars in London. Following a personal traumatic experience, resulting in a nervous breakdown in London, he moved down to Dover in the 1980s. His parents lived in Dymchurch and he found employment running The Bell public house in Lydden.

It was while in Dover Chris first met his wife-to-be, Stephanie, who hails from Chatham. His first marriage having failed, Chris and Stephanie were married in 1999 and they have four children together, the eldest being Honor Ann aged 19, born with Downs Syndrome and currently at East Kent College. Next in line is Robin Thomas,

17, who has an interest in IT and, most recently catering, while Lilith Eve at 15 and Thalia Ruth at 10 are both at school, Astor and Aycliffe Primary respectively. Stephanie works for Immigration Enforcement.

Chris became interested in local politics and stood as an Independent Councillor in a by-election some fifteen years or so ago. Before he was elected Mayor in 2015 he had previously been proposed as Deputy Mayor. Election year 2015 threw up a number of challenges as a General Election was held on the same day as the elections for councillors of Dover District Council and also of Dover Town Council. The count for all these elections was to be held in the Cruise Terminal at Dover Western Docks which proved unsatisfactory because the General Election count did not produce a result until early in the morning of the next day, 8th May, and the District Council votes were to be counted next, with the Town Council votes counted last of all. A practical problem was that the day following Election Day a cruise ship was due to dock at the Cruise Terminal! In Chris's words it all became a somewhat "chaotic" count as the count for the Town Council representatives was transferred to Whitfield, so it was not

until the following Monday, 11th May, that the outcome of the elections in the various Town wards was known - just three days before the Mayor Making that was to break the mould!

From his thoughts of his year as Mayor it is clear that, like others who have taken on the role, he found for the next twelve months he was a very busy person indeed. As Mayor he was the Chairman of the Council and in charge at all full Town Council meetings. In addition he was the Chairman of the Planning Committee and ex-officio a member of all other committees of the Town Council meetings which he endeavoured to attend unless he was on Mayoral duties elsewhere. With few members of the public being interested in, or even attending, committee or Council meetings the significance and worth of a Mayor is measured by public engagement and in this Chris, like many of his predecessors in post, was excellent.

He recalls his very first engagement was a visit to the Duke of York's Royal Military School at the invitation of the Executive Head, Chris Russell, which was an ideal start as it proved to be akin to a family day out! His first official function, which brought home to him the significance of the role he had taken on, was a visit to Dover Castle on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Dunkirk evacuation, Operation Dynamo, for the unveiling of a plaque when, along with other dignitaries, he found himself in the close company of Lord and Lady Ramsey. Throughout the year he had many official duties to perform and functions to attend in addition to those considered fixtures in the Mayoral year, such as Remembrance Day parades and commemorations in November and, in April, the various St George's Day commemorations of the raid on Zeebrugge and Ostend in 1918. In June 2015 Chris



*Stephanie and Chris Precious in lavender field*

attended Walmer Castle for the commemoration of the Bicentenary of the Waterloo Dispatch.

He and Stephanie were invited by the High Sheriff of Kent to an annual tea party given for representatives from all walks of life and it was at this function that Stephanie and Chris found themselves in a large field of lavender where a lovely picture of the two of them was taken.

Throughout the year Chris attended numerous Mayor Makings and events in many of the nearby towns. Other notable events he recalls include the Remembrance Service on Dover seafront in June 2015 for the 58 Chinese victims found dead in a Dutch refrigerated truck coming into the port of Dover and which he found most moving. He was present at The Herald Express Heart of the Community Awards at the Port of Dover Cruise Terminal recognising the contributions of people to the town's local communities. Grand Day at the Duke of York's Royal Military School was a very special full day commitment at the end of which was scheduled the Dover Festival Prom which he had to ask his Deputy to attend in his place as he had another function to which he had been invited and to which he was committed. After all a Mayor can only be in one place at any given time!

An examination of a sample of the Mayor's Engagement List in June 2015 reveals the extent and scope of the demands upon his time with commitments in many different places. The first week of that particular month saw Chris at Walmer Castle for the official re-opening of the castle and its gardens, followed by an event in Faversham for Magna Carta Rediscovered and then heading across the Channel to Calais for the Dover/Calais Festival of Sport and then back to St Margaret's Bay for a "Big Lunch"

at The Pines Calyx, in addition to meetings at the Council offices. Later in the month his week included events in Dover (the sea front memorial plaque for the 58 Chinese victims referred to above, the Heart of the Community Awards also referred to above and the Armed Forces weekend (Hellfire Corner), then in Calais he attended the inauguration of La Halle before venturing to Broadstairs for the 200th anniversary of the announcement of the outcome of the Battle of Waterloo and all these events in addition to Committee and Council work. The following week Chris was in Deal for Fly the Flag for Armed Forces, rushing back for a meeting at the Town Council offices and next day attending a meeting to discuss disabled access to buildings, then chairing the Town Council meeting and attending the Dover Grammar School for Girls for its Art and Photography Exhibition and then a Drumhead Service and Ceremony for Armed Forces Day in Deal. The Mayor's list gives a snapshot of the activities and commitments a Town Mayor of Dover is obliged to undertake in the role of leading citizen and for flying the flag for Dover.

In addition to all the formal and official functions and duties, Chris was above all things a people person and undertook a vast range of functions including official openings of pubs and shops and attending boot fairs and school fetes all by invitation. To maintain a good contact with members of the public Chris became the first Dover Town Mayor to open a Facebook page, being aware that many people nowadays obtain their news from, or communicate through, social media. Through this medium Chris would publish his schedule of activities for a week or more and this way of communication proved to be very popular and enhanced his engagement with members of the public. Frequently, he found he had been invited to a function with a specific aim of cutting a ribbon or

declaring a fete open but then organisers had a dilemma as to what one does with a Town Mayor after that point. Chris had the answer - he would go round each function and talk to stallholders or representatives present and engage with people, showing a keen interest in what they were doing and why. He remembers in particular receiving a note from the Reverend Dr Michael Hinton (who this year has just been made an Honorary Freeman of Dover) thanking him profusely and congratulating him on having taken time to speak to all stallholders and spending time with them at a particular event. For Chris it seemed the natural thing to do! In truth Chris was clearly not a person impressed by the titles or the status of people, but treated everyone with equal attention and interest. He was a Mayor for the people. When invited to Walmer Castle by the Lord Warden, Chris took with him his sea cadet, Olivia Moroni, reasoning that each mayor had an appointed cadet and it was only right that cadet should be involved with the mayoral year rather than just be a nominal appointee.

At the close of his year he received a telephone call from Lord Boyce commenting on the fact, he had brought his cadet to suitable functions and congratulating him for so doing.

Reflecting on his year Chris comments on his increased awareness of just how many people in all walks of life are engaged in undertaking jobs and various tasks and organising events, all on a voluntary basis and for the good of the town. He bemoans the lack of engagement with groups in the town by some local councillors. During his year he had as his nominated charities the Dover smART Project for young carers and the Western Heights Preservation Society who benefited from his support. Chris admits he was "sad to let go" at the end of

his Mayoral year but was appointed Deputy Mayor for the ensuing year. He continues to enjoy life as a councillor. He remains very active in his local community and within the town's affairs, being a member of Dover Tales, a member of the Dover Society and of the Royal British Legion and remaining Vice Chairman of the Planning Committee on Dover Town Council. Additionally, on the domestic front he is the main carer for his and Stephanie's children while she retains her important role with Immigration Enforcement. In short he leads a full life.

It may have only been one year in the role of Mayor but Chris has the knowledge that it was he who broke the mould of 'political party' Mayors by being the first Independent and non-partisan elected Mayor and the first Mayor to employ fully Facebook and social media to engage with and keep in contact with the people. Like the late Ronnie Philpott he was above all things a people's Mayor and who is to tell he will not take up the role again in the future? No doubt that will be determined by the political complexion of the Town Council, a body where some take the view that party politics should have no place!

An unassuming and sociable individual, Chris can look back on his experience as Mayor and comfort himself with the knowledge of a job well done and with dignity.



*At last the late night and early morning has caught up*