

# APRIL AGM MEETING

## Reawakening of a Gothic Fantasy

Speaker Martin Crowther

Reported by Alan Lee

After explaining his background and his remit Martin continued by explaining that the restoration of the Maison Dieu (the house of God - Domus Dei) was very much a community project. At all stages Dover District Council has sought to engage with the local community. Especially, that is with the use of volunteers to help carry out the restoration, research and excavations around the exterior of the building. At present there are twenty five volunteers actively engaged in researching the building and its contents.

Continuing, Martin gave a brief history of the Maison Dieu reinforced by showing a number of illustrations. Originally founded as the Hospital of St. Mary, by Hubert de Burgh, it was probably a simple hall offering a place to rest for pilgrims travelling to Canterbury to visit the tomb of Thomas à Becket. It has had an interesting and varied existence. In 1227 King Henry III was present at the dedication of the new chapel and he became its patron. During the reign of King Henry VIII the hospital, in 1544, passed to the ownership of the crown. The existing bakery, brewery, granary, stables and storerooms became part of a victualling yard supplying the Royal Navy and remained in use until 1830. The Corporation of Dover purchased the building in 1834 and set up their offices, a goal (prison), and courtroom there. A new prison was built in 1867/68. The original goal was demolished in 1881 to make way

for the Connaught Hall which was completed in 1883.

The cells of the new prison are situated beneath the courtroom and you can still see a sign above a doorway, leading to the courtroom above, that reads "FELONS FOR TRIAL." Incidentally one of the benches in the press section of the courtroom bears the name Terry Sutton, our press officer, from when he was a junior reporter covering court proceedings.

Between 1849 and 1861 the Corporation restored much of the building. In 1848 Ambrose Poynter drew up plans for a full restoration of the Stone Hall. Owing to his failing eyesight, he asked William Burges to assist him. Burges made working drawings from Poynter's plans and in 1859 the restoration was underway. The Town Hall was officially opened in 1861.

In 1880 William Burges commenced designs for new municipal offices (Mayor's Parlour) and assembly rooms (Connaught Hall) but he died a year later. Two of his



*Over 20 volunteer archaeologists took part in the excavation outside the medieval Stone Hall*

former colleagues Pullan and Chapple completed the Connaught Hall in 1883.

The organ in the Connaught Hall was presented to the town in 1902 by Mr E F Astley.

The Connaught Hall was redecorated in 1911 and 1924. Between 1925-27 the exterior of the building was repaired by the Office of Works, Covering up much of Burges work. 1953 was the last known date for redecoration and it was then that most of the Burges internal decoration was thought to have been covered over.

£9.1m in funding has been secured for the restoration, much of it from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Part of the plans include a new entrance at street level that will allow full accessibility to the building for all. Where the lift comes out on the upper ground floor the panelling will be redesigned, with some of the wooden panels being removed, this will give the visitor a first look down the full length of the Connaught Hall.

Other improvements include the cells and old visitor centre to become a café, all toilet facilities to be upgraded and new

ones installed, the kitchen and servery areas to be improved.

The mayor's Parlour is to become part of a modern holiday let with the original Burges decorative interior work restored. The large circular table will be cleaned but the damage to the top of the table, caused by a piece of wartime shrapnel, will remain. The chairs are by Flashman & Co. Dover and Folkestone upholsterers to Queen Victoria. Made from American oak they are upholstered with Moroccan leather.

During the external renovation work of the original lead roof, parapet and turrets a plaque was discovered fixed to one of the parapets bearing the name J Huntley 1899 (or 1859), not much has yet been discovered about him.

The organ, sadly, will not be restored as part of the ongoing restoration. It is hoped that this will form part of a future project with the cost, at present, estimated at £600,000.

All of the paintings and artifacts in the Stone Hall have been removed for cleaning prior to their return. The six stained glass windows along the south wall were designed by Ambrose Poynter's son, Edward John Poynter will be cleaned and repaired where necessary. They are very detailed and depict many famous characters and events connected to Dover.

During Martin's most interesting and informative talk he showed the audience numerous pictures and recounted many new facts and details that have so far been discovered during the present work on the Maison Dieu.



*Maison Dieu volunteers have been welcoming thousands of visitors to the building for a busy programme of special events*

