

JANUARY MEETING

Reawakening the Maison Dieu

A talk by **Martin Crowther**

Reported by **Derek Leach**

Our speaker Martin Crowther is Public Engagement Officer for the Maison Dieu Refurbishment Project and was making a welcome return visit to update us as the project nears completion.

An impressive and colourful number of recent images, coupled with Martin's enthusiastic explanations, gave a fantastic picture of the work in progress and some of its many complexities. With the repair of the roof and flintstone walls completed, the exterior scaffolding has been removed at long last and the clock reinstated after repair and conservation. The recreation of William Burges's 1883 decoration scheme in the Connaught Hall and Mayor's Parlour and other rooms is absolutely stunning. The new main entrance with its glass doors into the new reception area is impressive, which also gives a clear view into the Connaught Hall above; the new lift gives much better access into both the Stone Hall and Connaught Hall for those who cannot manage the stairs. The walls of the Stone Hall have been repainted, the incredible stained-glass windows cleaned, the many paintings cleaned, and the armour cleaned and conserved by the

Royal Armouries. The very fragile military colours, dating from Napoleonic times, have been successfully conserved, but are too fragile to be hung as before so they will be on display in a special showcase. Both halls have new lighting. There is also a new kitchen and servery.

No major work has been possible in the former Court Room and Council Chamber, but a café/bar is planned for the former Visitor Information Centre and some of the old prison cells.

Once the main contractor hands back the building to Dover District Council (DDC) by the end of February, work will start fitting out – kitchen, furniture, paintings, display cases etc. By the end of April, it is hoped to have held some trial events with formal opening planned for the autumn.

One of the big changes in the use of the building will be free public access six days of the week when there are no commercial



Connaught Hall



Council Chamber

bookings. This will enable local people and visitors to the town to 'drop in' and wander round making use of the nine audio visual packages, show cases and interpretations in the various rooms. There will also be prebooked group tours with volunteer guides. A 'Friends of the Maison Dieu' group is being formed to help organise and assist at events.

The project required an activity programme for five years to involve the public and for the last three years Martin Crowther has masterminded an incredible and varied range of events, most of which have had to be held whilst the building was unavailable or with limited access. The Maison Dieu has been promoted and has participated in many town events, which have involved people of all ages including many schools and pupils. This will continue into 2026.

The Dover Society first raised its concerns with DDC (the owner) and Dover Town Council (DTC) (former owner) about the state of the Town Hall in 2010 with a great need to make the building waterproof and some tender loving care internally. But instead of this rather modest ambition, it was decided that a major project was needed to conserve the building and to give it a sustainable future. A Development Group was formed of three partners: DDC, DTC and The Society. As a first step, The Society agreed to make the public and visitors more aware of the building's 800 years of history by organising guided tours every Wednesday, staffed by Society/Dover Greeter volunteers; these continued until Covid lockdown. In the meantime, specialist consultants were appointed in 2014 to manage the project. It took some time to prepare a major grant application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund, but was eventually successful, although the scope

of the project and cost had to be reduced. The grant from the Lottery Fund toward the £10 million budget required match-funding with the majority from DDC plus contributions from DTC and £10,000 raised by The Society.

Having been closely involved in the project since 2010, representing The Society, I have been greatly impressed with the quality, skills, determination and commitment of the many responsible for what will be a fantastic outcome to a very complex project: the DDC team, the specialist consultants, the conservators of the Burges' decorative design, the 1883 furniture, oil paintings, stained glass windows – I could go on. Not to be forgotten is all the unseen work, such as the new heating system, rewiring, asbestos removal etc. It has been a privilege to work with all of them. Soon, you will have the opportunity not only to admire and appreciate their efforts, but to attend events of your choice in glorious surroundings.



Richard III