

Dorothy Bushell Plaque Inauguration

Reported by Alan Lee

At 11am on Monday 19th May a small group of people met to unveil the latest Dover Society plaque. Affixed to the house wall of no. 45 Wyndham Road, it commemorates the life of Dover's first woman mayor.

Our Chairman Jenny Olpin commenced the proceedings with introductions and a welcome to all. She then handed over to our President Derek Leach who gave the following address to the gathering:

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are here to celebrate the life of Dorothy Bushell, the first woman to be mayor of Dover in 1960/61, leaving the door open for several more female mayors since – one of them here today.

In 2004 I was told there was a very interesting elderly lady in a care home in Whitfield. This turned out to be Dorothy, aged 95, but still very much with it. Throughout her life she wrote pieces, which were sometimes published, taken from events in her own life. She also wrote in notebooks about some periods of her life, particularly a diary of her mayoral year, and wrote innumerable poems,

usually triggered by some happening in her life.

What follows is a brief summary of the memoir I produced of her very full and pretty tough life – a mixture of my recorded interviews with her and some of her written work, much of it retaining her own words. Sadly, only a couple of months after completing the memoir, Dorothy died on 11th July 2004.

Dorothy Peal was born on 28th October 1908 at 45 Wyndham Road, Tower Hamlets. Dad was a coal porter in the docks. It was a happy family, but life was a struggle, Dorothy being one of twelve children. She attended Tower Hamlets Methodist Chapel and the Girl Guide troop. In 1913 Dorothy started school at St. Bartholomew's in Tower Street.

She had memories of World War One, spending nights in a cave on Chapel Hill where horses were stabled. In her own words Dorothy told me this summary of her life":

"During World War One I was sent to get fish and chips for father's supper. On my return I took a plate from the cupboard, put the supper on it and then put it in the oven to



Dorothy Bushell, Mayor



Wyndham Rd Dover Society Members

keep warm. It was then I noticed that the wallpaper was different to ours! Quickly, I retrieved the supper from the oven, rewrapped it in the newspaper and rushed out, leaving a greasy plate on the table! I must have misjudged our house, walking in the snowy road with my head down. I never told anybody!"

"1919 lost its sparkle for us children when, two days before Christmas, mother left her handbag on the tram when she went Christmas shopping with her club money saved throughout the year. There was no chance of replacing it. So, I gathered a group of friends together and went carol singing and gave the money, £1.8s.6d., to mother."

"She made me leave school when I was thirteen. My teachers thought it was a great mistake, but mother wanted me to give a hand at home with all the washing and so on. However, I soon found a paid childminding job, from 9am till 1pm, six mornings a week, for 1s 6d plus my dinner. I gave it all to mum."

"I won a prize for writing when I was ten and was a prolific writer. The first thing I did when I could afford it was to buy a typewriter and then did some freelance writing. Some of it was published in *The Lady* magazine and *This England* and one or two articles appeared in local papers. I was paid £6 for some. I've written poetry all my life. After leaving school I just couldn't stop writing."

"Dorothy's love of writing poetry extended to the light-hearted. She wrote many limericks and won prizes for them in competitions. Here is just one:

*There was a young lady of Joppa
Who came a society cropper,
With a gentleman friend
She went to Ostend
And the rest of the story's improper."*

"The day they brought Nurse Cavell back, in 1919, the school was taken to the seafront to watch the coffin come ashore and be put on a gun carriage. From that moment I wanted to be a nurse but, with my background, I had as much chance as flying to the moon. However, I got a job as a cleaner in a London hospital and spotted an advert in the *Nursing Mirror*. At that time nurses had to buy their first uniform, which made it impossible for me to start, but I discovered that if you went for fever or mental nursing the uniform was provided. So, I applied, passed the tests and was accepted. My writing was good and there was nothing wrong with my tongue! I had no boyfriends – I had a one-track mind, nursing. I trained for three years as a mental nurse.

I had not had a Christmas at home for several years. At the Burlington Hotel I met my future husband, Edmund. I didn't know then, but he was a hereditary Freeman of Dover, tall, dark and handsome. We courted for quite a while and married in 1935. For the first six weeks of our marriage Edmund and I had to go and live with my mother to nurse my stepfather until he died. Our own house was right at the top of the steepest hill in Dover, Hardwicke Road, but we were very happy there. After two or three years the house at 1 Churchill Road became vacant. We had had enough of the steep hill and moved.

I had started training for midwifery, but when war broke out, I went to work at Buckland Hospital as a nurse in the operating theatre. We all had to be absolutely sterile and had to have a bath beforehand. I was there from September 1939 until 1942, including dealing with the Dunkirk wounded. Everything that the surgeons touched and used, I had to take away. Doctor Gertrude Toland was one of the main surgeons there and she was my own doctor as well." The Dover Society recognised Dr Toland's contribution to the Dover community and her war service at Buckland with a blue plaque at her Five Ways surgery.

"Father-in-law was bombed out and had to stay with us. In fact, he lived with us for twelve and a half years. My mother had a tumour on the brain, and I nursed her until she died. Not only that, but I also had two of the family's young wives in my house to deliver their babies.

Edmund was always politically minded. I was his unpaid secretary, but I never thought of getting on the council myself, until I thought, if it's good enough for him, it's good enough for me! I became a Labour councillor on Dover Borough Council in 1945 when I was elected in St. Bart's Ward to fill the vacancy created by Edmund becoming an alderman. I remained a town councillor for sixteen years and a county councillor for three years from 1952. The first meeting I went to as mayor outside the borough was an all-male gathering of councillors, except for me. 'What is she doing here?' somebody said. 'She's the Mayor of Dover,' was the reply. 'My God, what are we coming to?' I couldn't let that rest! I hit back. I was formally addressed as 'Mr Mayor' but the host at another event did not know how to address the husband of a female mayor, so Edmund whispered, 'Call me Madam.' At the end of my mayoral year in May 1961 the council recorded its appreciation for the outstanding services rendered by Alderman Mrs Dorothy Bushell in the office of Mayor. I did not fight the local elections as I had Edmund's father to look after, and I was very tired. I was still a county councillor, school governor and, as mayor, automatically a JP. That was the end of my public life, except for being mayoress when Edmund was mayor in 1965."

"Edmund died in 1965 whilst he was mayor. I got over my grief by doing something for somebody else, spending six months in Yugoslavia nursing injured children from an earthquake. All children cry in the same language. We had a good marriage, although it was unfulfilled as far as children were

concerned. I have been widowed for nearly 40 years and could have remarried a few times!"

"I shall finish this summary with an extract from Dorothy's diary as Mayor of Dover, May 1960 to May 1961, and one of her poems": 'Could I, ordinary Mrs Bushell, the very first woman Mayor of Dover in almost 900 years of recorded history, measure up to the standard set by my predecessors? Of all the things I hope to achieve this year, one is to leave the office of mayor with the dignity I hoped to acquire when accepting it and to have made it possible for other women to be so honoured!

Dorothy's poem on becoming mayor, entitled *My Prayer*":

When first I occupied the Mayoral chair
My fluttering heart sent up a fervent
prayer:

O give me wisdom to conduct aright
The business of this town, O Lord tonight.
Let not my calling of the paras. stray,
Nor let dissension in the chamber sway
My sworn impartial judgement, Lord I
pray.

May I remember all the standing orders,
Nor metaphorically lean too much upon
the Town Clerk's shoulders.

Give me patience and the tact as needed
With dignity to press the business when
impeded

By councillors, both new and
uninstructed.

This first time, let it be, Lord, well
conducted.

"I hope that this tribute has given you a flavour of this talented, compassionate, hardworking conscientious woman with a cheeky sense of humour who gave so much of herself to others – Dorothy Bushell, first woman Mayor of Dover."