

The Maison Dieu Reawakens

Derek Leach

The weekend of 10th/11th May saw the iconic Grade 1 listed Maison Dieu reopen to over 2000 members of the public, having been closed since 2021 to allow the £10 million ambitious and complex restoration work to be carried out. The Dover Society first raised its concerns about the condition of the building in 2010, convening a meeting with Dover District Council and Dover Town Council. It was agreed that a major scheme was needed and in the meantime The Dover Society would organise guided tours to make visitors and the local community more aware of the building and its incredible 800 years of history. The project really got going in 2014 with DDC, DTC and The Dover Society becoming project partners. Specialist consultants were appointed and the scheme devised over the next couple of years. A major grant application was submitted to the National Heritage Lottery Fund, which was eventually successful, but required substantial match-funding. The Dover Society pledged £10,000, which was spent on a model of the Stone Hall now on display in the Hall.

Other funders that must be thanked are DDC, DTC and The Wolfson Foundation.

Between 2021 and 2025 the Maison Dieu was transformed from a somewhat leaky, crumbling and inaccessible building to a sparkling events and heritage venue, fit for the 21st century.

A huge team was involved, including architects, designers, project managers, building specialists, conservators and volunteers. First, the lead roof and drainpipes were replaced to make the building watertight. Next the building was stripped out. Important medieval features were discovered beneath crumbling plaster. A forest of scaffolding sprang up both internally and externally, providing platforms for high-level work. The scaffolding allowed access to some magnificent grotesques! Over a thousand people took part in hard-hat and high-level tours to see restoration work in progress.

New plumbing, heating, electrical, lighting, sound and fire detection systems were installed, not forgetting kitchens, toilets and WIFI. Asbestos was removed. An accessible High Street entrance was created to welcome



Connaught Hall, Maison Dieu



Stone Hall Model



Maison Dieu, Dover



Stone Hall, Maison Dieu Dover

visitors, including a new lift. Skilled craftspeople conserved over 100 historic doors, re-laid Victorian floor tiles and repaired the Connaught Hall dance floor and stage. Damaged stonework was repointed and replaced. The Victorian bracket clock ('the frying pan') was carefully lowered for repair and the weathervane restored.

A studio was built in the Stone Hall to conserve the building's historic furniture, oil paintings and regimental colours. Over 5,000 people visited 'conservation in action' events including local schoolchildren. Others became skilled conservation volunteers. The colourful stained-glass, including Edward Poynter's Dover history windows, were carefully cleaned and conserved. Over 100,000 recyclable cotton buds were used to remove surface dirt.

Then, in what for many was the real highlight, the decorative scheme of Victorian architect William Burges was reinstated. To the rhythmic tapping of stencil brushes, the gilded designs of dragons, birds, flowers and foliage advanced across the Connaught Hall, Mayor's Parlour and other spaces in a magical transformation.

Over 100,000 people took part in an ambitious community engagement programme inspired by the building and its collections. The work was recorded by a team of young

photographers learning skills and techniques from experts.

Finally, the Maison Dieu was made ready for its reawakening. Historic paintings, arms, armour and civic regalia were redisplayed. To explain the different phases and stories of the building nine interactive touch screen displays, films and audio displays have been added. Now, with all the hurdles overcome, including delay due to covid and substantial increases in costs, the building is ready for the next phase in its history and to take its place as one of Kent's most exciting new events and heritage venues.

The Dover Society can be proud of the part it has played in this project, and I have been privileged to be so involved since 2010 as the Society's representative on the Core Management Team, witnessing the enthusiasm and expertise of so many professionals. Our involvement will continue with several members acting as volunteer guides (called Ambassadors) and as Friends of the Maison Dieu group.

The Maison Dieu is now open free of charge to the public seven days of the week for self-guided tours. Prebooked guided tours are also available.

Photographs courtesy of Nastia Photography/ Maison Dieu.