

Dover: Depressed, Down and Out, or What?

—Peter Sherred—

Dover was recently described or named as Sh*tville in a report in *The New Statesman*. So said Mary Kenny in an article produced for the magazine *The Oldie* (March 2025 issue), her article carrying the headline "Dover's lost its soul". Comparing and contrasting Dover and its coastal neighbour Deal, she reported Dover is among the most deprived places in England, being number 94 in the total list of 326. It contains the highest number of people on sick benefits, with 18.7% of the working age population being 'economically inactive', which is often a sign of depression, low motivation, addiction problems and of falling victim to the vibe of general decay. She found walking around Dover town a dispiriting experience as people look poor, sad and down-at-heel, but a redeeming feature is St James's which has a *Marks and Spencer* store! The article is a description of abject dingyness in a town where a Turkish business owner and resident confided in her that Dover has "too many people on benefits". What has happened to Britain's Protestant work ethic seems to be the ultimate question uppermost in this resident's mind.

Meantime Deal is described by Mary Kenny as a veritable nirvana on earth – with several 'high-end' restaurants, gastropubs and 26 cafes. House prices are, it appears, soaring



Amenity Area - The Curve

and rentals are expensive. Mary Kenny admits to an affection for Dover, but then why wouldn't anyone who has an intimate knowledge and experience of the town?

The economic climate has created many challenges, especially for the retail sector which may very well have impacted on the frontages in the town, but then Dover has always suffered from a somewhat over-extended main street stretching from the Market Square to Buckland Bridge - too long, realistically, for a vibrant shopping centre, although London Road maintains quite a number of busy retail units providing a rich variety of opportunities for a shopping experience.

But does Dover's strength surely lie not in its geography or its rich and impressive history but in its greatest asset –the hard working, friendly and welcoming people who, by and large, have a considerable pride in their town? And why shouldn't they have such pride because, among other assets, Dover boasts arguably the most attractive seafront in the country and it remains the busiest contemporary lead port of the Confederation of the Cinque Ports? In Pencester Gardens and Connaught Park it boasts of two large areas of open green space for the recreational benefit of the residents of Dover - not forgetting Kearsney Abbey and Russell Gardens at River. On the educational front Dover offers two grammar schools – both the girls' and the boys' grammar schools - as well as Dover College in the town centre. It also has the Duke of York's Royal Military School on its outskirts (the site of the recent installation of the new Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports).

In its Town Centre Dover has a commanding structure in the impressive Grade 1 Town

Hall building or the Maison Dieu, newly reopened after a multi-million-pound restoration and which contains a unique collection of military colours and artefacts, including arms and armour from the Royal Armouries. It also contains a fine collection of oil paintings, including those of former Lord Wardens of the Confederation of the Cinque Ports. The restoration project included restoring the work of Victorian neo-Gothic architects Ambrose Poynter and William Burges and the Town Hall will provide amenity spaces for many activities for the people of Dover in a building that will reflect the beauty of the Victorian era in works to its internal structure. Aided by Lottery grant money, the restoration of the Town Hall, with parts dating from the thirteenth century, is testament to the scale of investment in the town on just one project for the benefit of the future of the town.

But that is not the only positive sign of confidence in the town for, ongoing at the present time near the underpass to the seafront, is a substantial development site being prepared to receive an educational campus and business centre known as the Dover Beacon redevelopment site in Bench Street. This is another multi-million-pound project which demonstrates confidence in a town that has by no means lost its soul. Further, Dover Harbour Board has completed a development of the western side of the seafront including the creation of a large open amenity space on the shore side of what is known as 'The Curve'. Infilling of dock areas is currently under way to provide facilities to ease issues relating to travel abroad.

In short Dover currently is receiving massive financial investment of a sort that would not normally be attracted by towns affected by general decay or which have lost their souls. There is an appetite for life in the town and for transformation for its future and the possibilities for its residents. Decisions by

Central Government in recent years, controlled by both major parties, particularly in the promotion of the Channel Tunnel project, have had adverse impacts on the town but, as with challenges during wartime, Dover (and its residents) has not been defeated and the level of current investment activity is testament to an intention of not permitting the town to fall into depression but rather offers an insight into the character of a town preparing for the future in a time of transition. Dover boasts two Rotary Clubs – the Rotary Club of South Foreland and the Rotary Club of Dover. Both engage in many aspects of the town's life and members of both are often to be seen collecting for worthy causes and not just at Christmastime. It is on occasions such as these that the generosity of spirit of the people of Dover is shown to its fullest advantage. Its people are the town's greatest asset!

A new parliamentary representative is in place who needs to establish a track record of representing the interests of the town over and above party allegiances, so that at every level of representation there is a demonstrable positivity for the town currently and for the future. Sh*tville, Dover is not! It remains a vibrant forward-looking town with an optimistic future - provided those elected to represent the town do precisely that and not put other interests ahead of the well-being of the town. Sorry, Mary Kenny, but Dover has not lost its soul!

It is quite simply a place to be proud of and the wearing of a Dover badge would show that pride.

