

The Battle of the Bypass

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It was June 1969 when the telephone rang. It was John Clithero, secretary of the New Dover Group. My help was needed with a major problem about to start on the west side of Dover. A new dual carriageway, the York Street Bypass, was pending and this might expose something of historical interest. He brought the plans along to my Reculver excavation.

How right he was. The new wide road was planned to cut some 13 feet deep into the hillside and it was clear that such a major operation was bound to reveal good archaeology in such a historic town. Some Bypass! It knocked down 100 houses, four pubs, two schools and a large cemetery.

I cancelled our major excavation planned for Reculver in 1970. After raising some essential funds from the Dept. of Environment, Pilgrim Trust and a small amount from Dover Corporation, I took our whole team, tools, equipment and machinery to Dover in June.

Our timing was good, and we started on four sites on the line of the intended Bypass, just ahead of demolitions. Next, we had to work out our basic research objectives. The key one was a "missing" late-Roman fort of the Saxon Shore. Whilst never seen it was listed in the *Notitia Dignitatum* (late fourth century) and, in 1929, my old friend Sir Mortimer Wheeler



Roman Fort Work in Progress

had suggested a possible outline centred on the Market Square. This idea had been struck from the archaeological record 40 years later by an unwise academic. The doyen of world archaeology was thus "given a sentence of dismissal" (as he later lectured). My own enquiries some years earlier had been to a Mr. Warner, the then curator of Dover Museum. Uninterested in his career prospects or salary scales, he was always genuine and helpful.

Needing a rapid start, we took out large areas of concrete, debris and rubbish on all four sites. On all four, important Roman deposits appeared and, with our team of fifty, progress was excellent. This attracted much local interest. One day a still-youthful figure appeared and declared that he worked for the *Dover Express* and that his name was Terry Sutton. He was happy to give our project good coverage and remained a firm friend for the next 50 years!

Within two days the south wall of the non-existent Roman fort appeared and also a complex of earlier Roman buildings over a very wide area. In the fourth week, I was able to identify these as part of a totally unknown Roman naval fort, of the *Classis Britannica*. Clearly Dover had been a major naval and army base for three centuries and this explained, for the first time, why Dover had the only two Roman lighthouses in Roman Britain. At the end of eight weeks the discoveries and artefacts were legion, and the fears of the New Dover Group were fully justified. But what now?

The proposed large-scale demolitions advanced slowly and by June 1971 we were able to return and continue on more sites only just available. This included a massive new site close to where *The Cause is Altered*

public house, still just survived. Again, this produced substantial numbers of Roman military buildings, mostly surviving to a remarkable extent including barracks, granaries with roads, drains and water pipes. However, the pending destruction of such major archaeology for the bypass was becoming a real problem.

Suddenly, the road contractors arrived and showed less than helpful interest. They cleared another major area south of Queen Street which, again, was clearly bristling with more upstanding Roman buildings. There was no alternative but to seize the area, fence it off and continue with frantic non-stop excavation. Then the confrontation started and at one time I was effectively attacked by two engineers and three contractors, all in ugly mood. They demanded four of our unfinished sites and I had to firmly challenge them and seek support elsewhere. However, the immediate and deliberate damage to a major Roman bastion was the last straw and we arranged for a TV crew to televise the damage and to expose the overall disastrous situation. This was now war!

The cause was not improved when the then Mayor, fearing that any delay might cause extra cost to the council, declared (whilst on a conducted tour by me) that the public would prefer to see our discoveries on paper rather than the real thing. This was torpedoed by his wife who declared, "This is wonderful, it's just like Pompeii." At least the ladies in Dover understood our case and the *Cause was NOT Altered*. – I remarked would he prefer to see Stonehenge on a piece of paper and see the real thing destroyed?

So, our ten-point Action Plan swung into action. This was developed on many rescue sites elsewhere, most notably on the Roman Forum site in central London in 1968-9, where we had to take on four sets of contractors working a 24-hour shift. We

stayed there for 120 days, rather longer than the nine days we were offered!

At Dover this meant long nights in the telephone box in the Market Square, drumming up support at local, county and national level. My old friend Sir Mortimer Wheeler joined in, and I dragged the Chief Inspector of Ancient monuments out of bed on a Sunday (whoops). Then I got Peter Rees, then M.P. for Dover, to the site. As a result the engineers reluctantly agreed that the road could be raised by just 18 inches! With Roman walls standing six feet high this was hopeless, or a "ludicrous compromise," as one slightly anonymous archaeologist declared in *The Times*.

So, we then surveyed the bypass and found that with a modest change in levels in the adjacent Queen Street the critical central area of the bypass could be raised six feet. Happily, the Minister of Transport agreed and everything was saved at the last minute. It had taken a non-stop 140 days of work, and our large team had dwindled to just four in the final days of a very cold November. To speed up the process we also had to work at night by the light of car headlights in the last two weeks – but the road was raised, two major Roman forts had been saved, and this was a victory for the Nation. We called it the Battle of the Bypass! A considerable bonus was the discovery, at the same time, of the first room of the Roman Painted House in nearby Market Street (see Newsletter No. 111, November 2024, page 34). The following year we had to save that too from being an underground carpark. The mayor wisely kept quiet that time, though I did suggest that I might give his wife a grand tour.



Letter from the British Academy