

THE DOVER SOCIETY

Summary of Mr. Peter Johnson's Remarks
made at the Inaugural Meeting of the Dover Society
on 25th April 1988 when proposing the resolution
"That the Dover Society be Instituted
and adopt the Civic Trust constitution"

Thanking the Headmaster of Dover College for making the Menzies Hall available for the meeting, Mr. Johnson reminded those present that the College lay within the precincts of the ancient Priory of St. Martin, one of the great monastic establishments of the 12th century, some of the buildings of which were still in use by the college. The Menzies Hall itself had previously been a Wesley Methodist Church and had contained a plain but distinguished pulpit, now at Shepherdswell, from which John Wesley himself had preached. These were, he said, parts of Dover's history and one of the objectives of the proposed Dover Society was to help to seek out, preserve and publicise the historic features of the town.

"If, like Wesley, I were here to preach a sermon I would take for my text the words of St. Paul when he explained that he came from Tarsus: 'I am a citizen of no mean city'. That is how I believe we should all be feeling about Dover at the present time.

"Many people in Dover have felt a growing concern about what is going to happen to the town in the future. That concern stems to some extent from events during 1987 and the sometimes bitter conflict between the people and the district council, mostly about the selling off of public open spaces. But the issues are far wider than that.

"It is this concern that has brought together a body of people who have felt strongly the need to care for the town, for its people and for its future.

"Let me at this stage say what we are not.

We are not a protest group
We are not party political in any shape or form
We are not demonstrators and, I hope, we are not cranks.

"What are we then? I can only say what we aim to be, namely a body of people concerned about the future of Dover, informed, experienced in a wide range of skills and activities, responsible in our actions and constructive in our criticism.

"We hope also to be influential. This will depend on the breadth of support we can win from the people of Dover and on the input those people can in turn provide from their knowledge, experience and wisdom.

"We hope to work with the district council and not against it. I think the majority support the council's plans for making Dover a mecca for tourists but there is some thought that those plans are too narrow and lacking in vision, too heavily influenced by outside commercial advice and lacking in in-depth knowledge of Dover. They ignore little things, relatively insignificant themselves but an essential part of our history and our environment.

"As an example I would remind the meeting that yesterday was St. George's Day and the 70th Anniversary of the Capture of the Mole at Zeebrugge, one of the most historic and heroic naval engagements of all time. The bell from the mole hangs on the balcony at Dover Town Hall and yesterday at noon the Town Mayor rang eight bells and buglers from the Royal Marines at Deal sounded the Last Post and Reveille. The Charter Trustees, representatives of the Services and Youth Organisations and of the Royal Society of St. George were present and there followed a moving service in St. James' Cemetery where many of those who lost their lives at Zeebrugge on St. George's Day 1918 are buried.

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"How many visitors to Dover, and indeed Dovorians themselves, know of the bell and its history engraved on the stone tablets set into the front wall of the Town Hall, dirty with age and neglected?"

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"This is just one small example of the little bits of history to be found in the town. The Dover Society as we see it would look at every aspect of the town and, among other things, ferret out the smaller matters and perhaps initiate action/bring them to the fore.

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"The Society would also wish to make informed and constructive contributions to major development and pursue a quest for quality. Civic quality stems from good design, good taste and attention to detail.

"The resolution which I put to this meeting tonight is that the Dover Society be instituted, that it be included in the national register of Local Amenity Societies sponsored by the Civic Trust and that the model constitution prepared by the Civic Trust be adopted."

Mr. Johnson went on to explain the role and influence of the Civic Trust which was founded in 1957 and now has about 1,000 registered amenity societies.

He concluded: "I believe that Dover has a great future. I am one of those who does not believe that the Channel Tunnel will have as disastrous an effect on Dover as some have forecast. On the contrary I believe the port will continue to flourish in handling both freight and passengers. It is right, however, that we should be looking to the future by making the town itself a tourist centre. Dover is unique in the breadth of its history extending from Roman times to the present day and there is no reason why it should not become a 'must' for tourists comparable with Canterbury, York and Bath.

"I am not a Dovorian by birth, only by 35 years of adoption, but I regard myself as a citizen of no mean city. If I may borrow a phrase of today from the Dover Express 'I'm backing Dover' and I invite you to join me by launching the Dover Society."

Footnote: I think it appropriate to record here that although I proposed the resolution at the inaugural meeting I did not make the first moves in bringing together the group of people who formed the original steering committee. The initiative was taken by Miss Philomena Kennedy, the editor of this newsletter, and we are indebted to her for her concern for Dover, her enterprise and her powers of persuasion.

P.J.