

scaling the scaffolding

The Town Hall Renovations

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On a clammy Friday in late July, when yet more criticism of the lengthy nature of the Town Hall renovations had appeared in the 'Dover Express,' over a dozen Society members met in the cool Stone Hall for a tour of the work. Immediately we began to revise our ideas of the time scale involved as the Council's architect Nigel Bambridge described a project to arrest the decay of the whole building. This would eventually take 10 years to complete and would cost as much as £10 million. The contractors, Szerelmey (U.K.) Ltd., may be unfamiliar to us in Dover but they have restored many national buildings.

THE HIGH STREET FACADE

Feeling slightly self-conscious in our hard hats we went outside and climbed a series of ladders through the scaffolding which we had been accustomed to walk beneath for the last 18 months or more. Soon we were high above the tea-time traffic and level with the Zeebrugge Bell on the balcony. Ron Goldsmith, Clerk of Works for the contract which is now in its second phase and costing about £950,000, shewed us how the stone window mullions were being completely renewed. The roundels of the balcony and the crockets – orna-mental projections beyond the coping stone of the roof apex – have also been replaced. Much stone had been turned once already and now had deteriorated beyond repair. Unless laid

in the correct alignment as it was originally bedded in the quarry, rain and ice soon penetrate the stonework and it begins to break up. There were at least eleven different types of stone formerly used, including limestone which causes a chemical corrosive reaction when placed alongside other types such as Portland. Each original stone had been numbered, measured and photographed – a survey which took many weeks to complete. The new stone, Stokes Ground, comes from a quarry near Bristol and although workable, should be hard enough to withstand Dover's saline conditions for at least another century. Much preparation takes place at the quarry, but we were reminded of the craftsmanship required on the site by

Dave Seear, the stonemason who accompanied us.

At close quarters we admired the quality of the knapped flints which are among the finest in the country. We also observed that much of the pointing between the flints had been incorrectly renewed many years ago and stood proud. This fault must be rectified to prevent water from penetrating behind the four-inch-thick flints. Once again, good craftsmanship is essential. Modern epoxy resin repairs carry no more than a 10-year guarantee. The total thickness of the walls is about 18 inches with a filling of rubble between the outer flints and the inner brickwork.

THE CONNAUGHT HALL

Inside Connaught Hall we could see from the balcony how the west windows had been stripped down, re-leaded and the glass cleaned. Fortunately Goddard & Gibbs, to whom the work was entrusted, had needed to replace very little glass. The lead framework had become malleable, partly due to acid rain, but mainly because of the heat from inside the building when events were held. This movement enabled the wind to enter and to break down the original cement, now replaced with a formula containing linseed oil to retain flexibility. In addition new bronze parallel supporting bars have been used instead of iron.

THE TOWN HALL ROOF

How many of us had guessed the existence of the narrow spiral staircase, inside a tower, which leads to the roof? From a wide valley between slate slopes Ron described the first phase of the project, now completed at a cost of approximately £300,000. Fortunately the

roof timbers had been sound, requiring only treatment against woodworm. Thick Welsh slates had been secured to the slatting with copper nails. The lead on which we were standing was of 8lbs a square foot quality and had replaced the original. All the chimney stacks are new. Shrapnel was found in the dovecot-like ventilators surmounting the ridge. These louvred structures, like other ironwork, have been painted the characteristic blue which was favoured in Victorian times before black became fashionable.

THE MAYOR'S PARLOUR

Inside again, we crossed the Connaught Hall where we could contrast the renovated windows with those on the Ladywell side, not yet tackled. Looking forward to interior changes, we wondered whether modern taste would approve the restoration of the deep red ochre walls designed by William Burges. In the Mayor's Parlour there was more speculation. Who had commissioned the mystery door, not illustrated on the still extant site plans but of undoubted Burges style? Sadly the designs for the walls and ceilings had been lost and could only be revealed by painstaking removal of subsequent paint layers. We were told that the former pictures of The Muses on canvas had been removed in 1911. Christine Waterman, Curator of Dover Museum, described how an expert from the Victoria & Albert Museum had been amazed to hear that the valuable circular table and distinctive rounded chairs, now shabby brown, had been in recent regular use. We heard that the original overall effect would probably have seemed garish to our eyes. To restore the chairs with bright red morocco would cost £700 a piece for the upholstery alone.

10 THE COUNCIL CHAMBER

In the Council Chamber, partly blocked off because of the removal of the windows at the Biggin Hall end., we saw for ourselves the crumbling wall plaster, its crumbling caused by rain penetration. It was interesting to speculate on the method used to light the Sun gas burner high up under the roof. The warm air rising drew cooler air from ducts behind wood-panelled projections on the wall, thus ventilating the room when crowded. As we considered the future of the painted plaster panels on the vaulted ceiling we realised the dilemma facing future planners. To restore the interior decor of the Victorian sections of the Town Hall could provide another tourist attraction. William Burges was a local man and apparently his work at Cardiff Castle has been renovated to good effect. Nevertheless, his designs might seem strange nowadays and provoke criticism of unjustified expense.

THE SOUTH ELEVATION of the COUNCIL CHAMBER and the STONE HALL

Outside again, we viewed the Council Chamber from ground level. Six tons of concrete have been used to embed the base of the scaffolding which supports the rolled steel joists while the end wall and the windows are being renovated. The principle is that of a flying buttress. Here we observed the urgent necessity for the third phase of the scheme – the obvious erosion of the side elevation of the Stone Hall, estimated cost £1.65 million.

We had a most interesting and informative tour of the work in hand. We should like to thank those who were involved in the arrangements and who accompanied us: Councillor Kit Smith who initiated the visit, Richard Pollard, the project architect, Roger Madge, Director of Tourism and Councillor Sheila Whisker, Chair of the D.D.C. Tourism Committee.

