

Day Trip to ZEEBRUGGE AND BRUGGE

1st September 2001

reported by Merril Lilley

THE COACH WHICH LEFT Pencester Road, Dover, at 6.30am on Saturday, 1st September carried 45 passengers, made up of about half Dover Society members and half who had booked through Dover Town Council, including the Mayor, Diane Smallwood, and the Town Clerk, Robert Bailey.

Travelling on Le Shuttle we made good time with only one complaint from passengers. The toilets at our end of the train were closed because they had not been cleaned. Apparently this operation is only performed at the Calais end of the line! Those in need walked the 17 carriages to the other end of the train.

We chatted or dozed through the flat French countryside into Belgium and arrived, slightly late, at our rendezvous in Zeebrugge, where we were greeted by our guide for the morning, Jean Pierre Van le Plancke, Secretary of the local society, Feestcomité de Brugge.

Our first experience was to view an array of gigantic dinosaurs at this year's annual Sand Festival on the beach at Zeebrugge. Visitors follow enormous footprints around the extensive display of sand sculptures. As well as actual dinosaurs, the sculptures include the 'King

of Rock, Elvissaurus' and the 'Queen of Pop, Madonnadont', while above them all towers a T-Rex dinosaur around 14 metres tall, (the height of a 7-storey building). Visitors wander at will around the paths, through the giant sculptures and children have an opportunity to try their hand at making their own creations in huge sand pits designed just for them.



Sand sculptures at Zeebrugge

Children can make their own sculptures





The T-Rex dinosaur

Joan answers questions



The sand used for the sculptures is not beach sand but river sand, brought from the River Maas, because it is much firmer and more suitable for the purpose.

We basked in the welcome sunshine and sipped Belgian coffee before we were summoned to the coach for our tour of the town. This proved to be a fascinating glimpse of Zeebrugge, which we had not expected. First we visited the port, where the terminal has been extended. It is very busy with freight ferries to the UK and a cruise terminal, where Renaissance 7 was in port. Our guide said that much of our route lay over reclaimed land. Where we were driving had once been the sea. It was quite eerie to be told that. 'Here was the site of the Zeebrugge Raid... here was the Mole, (with a small part still

remaining!)... here the place where the Vindictive was moored!... here the canal where the block ships were sunk!' All this is now part of a modern port. We passed a naval base, a maritime museum, then stopped on the quayside of the new marina for a free coffee at a small bar there.

Back to the coach for more information on the small town (the population is only 4000). Our guide was Mario, also a member of the Feestcomité, who, with his wife and daughter, lived in Zeebrugge and worked in the bank there. We passed the Fisherman's Cross, a memorial to fishermen lost at sea, and the rose garden with a memorial to those lost in the Zeebrugge Raid. We paused for a great view of Blankenberge, the beach and the sea with ships and ferries leaving the port; past the old, listed Palace Hotel, now apartments; past the brand new station, only 100 yards from the beach, a great

boon for visitors to the Sand Festival and a great pride of the town; and finally set off for Brugge, just 16 kilometres away.

On arrival we were met by Adrian, who was the President of the Feestcomité de Brugge. Adrian and Mario acted as a guides in the afternoon. But first on the agenda was lunch at the floating restaurant of the 'Hotel de Barge'. This, inevitably, took some time for our party of 45 Dovorians. The Mayor of Dover made a speech, as did Adrian, our host, cementing the friendship between the two societies. Mario, who had his teenage daughter with him, sat on our table so we valiantly practised our French.

After lunch we had a choice of joining Adrian and Mario for a two hour guided walk or making our own way. We



were to return to the coach by 6pm. As we were assured we could join the walk for part of the way, we did just that, staying with the guides for an hour or so and then striking off to look at the shops in the city centre. The day was very warm with temperatures near the eighties and it was pleasant to sit in the town square, sipping a lager and watching the world go by. There was not sufficient time to visit museums or take a canal trip, of course, but time enough to get a flavour of this beautiful old city.

Our coach made good time to Sandgatte but on arrival there we found delays and queues to get through the tunnel. Eventually, we arrived in Dover two hours later than our scheduled time, the only unfortunate happening to mar what was, otherwise, a fantastic day.

Joan has excelled herself this summer in organising a series of very successful trips. She is to be congratulated.



The main square