

THE JANUARY MEETING

Two Speakers - 13th January 2003

THE EASTERN DOCKS CAVES

By Les Holyer

Reported by Derek Leach

WE KNOW THAT DOVER'S CHALK CLIFFS are riddled with caves and tunnels created at different times over hundreds, if not thousands, of years. They have been used to live in, to shelter from bombs and shells, to house wartime hospitals and command centres and, more recently, as a regional seat of government in the event of a nuclear attack.

Two years ago Dover Harbour Board gave Les Holyer, an employee, permission to film some of the White Cliffs' more recent and little known caves. This video was shown with some still photographs to an enthralled audience of 120.

With war threatening in 1939, the Royal Navy began to construct 34 storage caves for ammunition, mines, torpedoes and fuel in the cliffs behind the Eastern Docks. The access tunnels, passageways and storage caverns were dug with hand-held compressor tools and fitted out 24 hours every day, despite the shelling and bombing, until they were completed in 1944.

First we were shown the works associated with the massive oil storage reservoirs. The original aim was to provide enough fuel to supply the Home Fleet for ten days. Behind two innocent looking entrances at the foot of the cliffs are access tunnels 10 feet wide and eight feet high leading to

eleven flights of stairs with 165 steps up to the storage level. Here, in the hollowed out caverns are five storage reservoirs made of concrete three feet thick and 32 feet wide, 600 feet long and 40 feet deep. When full they could hold 4,155,741 gallons of oil. A simple float in the oil connected to an external gauge indicated the contents at all times. An 800 feet long pipe tunnel with 18 inch pipes connected the reservoirs to the Eastern Arm to receive the oil from tankers and supply the Royal Navy vessels.

There was separate access to the petrol tank caves. The access tunnels are only three feet wide and seven feet high. Larger tunnels were dug specially to allow the eight metal petrol tanks thirty feet long by nine feet round to be installed in the three chambers. The passage connecting these chambers is 146 feet long and 96,000 gallons of petrol could be stored.

Finished in 1944 this complex was used before the end of the War and was not emptied of fuel until 1968.

In 1991 the Ministry of Defence handed the complex to Dover Harbour Board. Various suggestions for its future use have been made including wine storage, mushroom farming, sand/ballast storage and even a multistorey car park. Perhaps it is best left as a reminder to future generations of the lengths Britain was prepared to go in order to defend this country.

Unfortunately, situated in the high security area of the Eastern Docks and being so hazardous, there is no prospect of it being opened to the public.