

Dover's 21st Century Three Times Mayor

By Fr Peter Sherred

"Whoever takes on the position of Mayor of Dover usually does about 250-300 engagements in a year, so it's a busy time and I think you know when you are going to be Mayor that it is going to be a full time job... you have to work hard." So said Diane Smallwood upon taking office as the town's leading citizen for the third time in the seven year period between 2001-2008. Working hard in the interests of the town has been a feature of life for this 'triple decker' mayor who has carried out just under 1000 engagements as Mayor alone in her three years of office. She has carried out her civic duties with confidence, dignity and flair but also with considerable fortitude particularly in her third term discharging all her duties despite challenging health issues and refusing to abdicate any of her responsibilities. So who is this lady who continues to serve her town at both Town Council and District Council levels?

Born in Elvington in 1940, a daughter of Alan and Edna Sayer, Diane moved with her parents and sister Angela to Whitfield when she was four years old. She was educated at Waldershare, then Castlemount then at the Ursuline Convent School that used to be located in Salisbury Road and Park Avenue with sports fields in Castle Avenue. After school, aged 18, she attended South Kent College in Folkestone for two years to acquire her secretarial skills which enabled her to start her first

job at the National Coal Board where she worked in the typing pool. Married to her first husband in 1962 she left her job with the NCB when she became pregnant with her first child, Dominic, born in 1964, who lives in Calais currently and works on the Shuttle. Two more children were to follow, Jeanine in 1965 now married to Paul (King) and working as a financial consultant for Standard Life in Nottingham and Melissa in 1971 now married to Stephen (Shillito) also living in Nottingham where she is a nurse practitioner in Accident and Emergency at Queens Medical. Diane is a grandmother to Ava and Oscar, Melissa's children.

Diane met her present husband Brian at Madisons Holiday Camp in St Margaret's in 1978 where she was then employed as a receptionist and where he was playing in the resident band. Brian has been a musician for nearly fifty years and was formerly part of the Rock and Roll Band 'The Blue Jean Boppers'. Previously employed on the ferries Brian was made redundant and at the time of Diane's first Mayoral appointment in 2001 was working in the docks in Dover and acted as her escort when she undertook Mayoral duties. By the time of Diane's third Mayoral year in 2008 Brian had had a heart triple by-pass and suffered from lymphedema in his legs giving him difficulty in standing for long periods of time so he was unable to be her civic

escort at that stage but gave Diane 100% support at home. In more recent times he has given her much love and support particularly over the last two to three years as Diane has battled with ill health herself. They have been together for some 30 years.

Diane worked at Avos for some 15 years as secretary to the Works and Finance Directors but was made redundant in 1999 and then worked as a secretary for the Castle Street firm of solicitors Bradleys and for six years, and at the time of her first election as Mayor in 2001, for the well-known local solicitor and criminal practitioner, Hugh Roberts, based in Folkestone.

It was not until after her children had grown up and left home that Diane entered local politics, an event which was not entirely unexpected as her father, who had been a radio officer on British Rail ferries, had been keenly involved in the Union movement and had stood for the Labour Party himself. All her family are supporters of the Labour Party and Diane says "I walked into the Labour headquarters in Coombe Valley Road because I wanted to find out how things were going in Dover". Well, she certainly found herself thrown into local politics for within two months she was a candidate for the traditionally safe Conservative Castle Ward confronting, among others, the well-known local character John Ullman. She was promptly elected as a Town Councillor and within six years she had reached the top of the town's civic ladder becoming Dover's leading citizen as Mayor for the first time in 2001-2002. Not only did Diane become involved with Town

Council politics but she became an elected member of Dover District Council in 1997 as one representative of Town and Pier Ward following the death of former District Councillor Jackie Hood the wife of veteran Town and Pier Councillor Jim Hood. Boundary changes brought a different seat for Diane as she moved to Tower Hamlets Ward for the District Council but in 2011 she found herself as a successful candidate in St Radigund's Ward for the Town Council and in Priory and Elms Vale Ward for the District Council.

When interviewed by the local press upon her election as Mayor for the first time it was disclosed that while at school she was an enthusiastic athlete and, indeed, was the senior high jump champion of Kent aged 16. She was clearing only a matter of nine inches below the then world champion. At the time her grandfather was the licensee of the Royal Oak at Whitfield where he served for some 30 years and where soldiers from the Old Park Barracks used to drink. They planned to teach her specialist high jump skills of the Western Roll and the Straddle to improve further her high jump techniques. Alas it was not to be as the Suez Crisis of 1956 intervened and denied her the opportunity to train with the military in their gym and she was left wondering what may have been.

One of her first tasks as Mayor, within days of her appointment, was to unveil a portrait of one of her predecessors as Mayor - Michael Russell who was Mayor of Dover in 1755 and Agent Victualler of the Naval Victualling Yard at the Maison Dieu. He lived in Maison Dieu House, now the Town Council's offices, from where Diane

Mayors of the Cinque Ports

and all Dover's current Mayors operate. The portrait had been donated to Dover Museum by a descendant of the 18 century Mayor and is now to be found hanging in Maison Dieu House.

Her second year as Mayor 2002-2003 followed on from a successful first year in the post and in this she held the prestigious post of Speaker of the Confederation of the Cinque Ports and Two Antient Towns and Members Corporate discharging both roles with dignity and confidence. Diane was handed the role of Speaker by the Mayor of Hythe in a ceremony in the Stone Hall of Dover Town Hall after a service at St Mary's Church to give thanks for the life of the late Lord Warden, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, at which the outgoing Chaplain to the Lord Warden, the Right Reverend 'Dick' Third, preached. Diane's second Mayoral term coincided with Her Majesty the Queen's Golden Jubilee and Diane led the procession of Cinque Port Mayors through the town in a ceremony in September of 2002 commemorating Speaker's Day. The procession was led by the band of The Duke of York's Royal Military School and the occasion was one of ceremony, pomp

and pageantry. It was one of the proudest days of Diane's life – "it is such a privilege to be Speaker... there are only two in the country. The other is the Speaker of the House of Commons. I think it is very important we observe and honour our

traditions" she said at the time. Diane, in fact, paid a visit to the House of Commons and met the then Speaker, Michael Martin, who gave her a tour of his quarters in the Palace of Westminster and entertained her to tea.

Her third year as Mayor was a triumph for her personally for in addition to carrying out her Mayoral duties she found herself battling ill health which commenced in February 2008 just three months before she took over the Mayor's position once again. In the lead-up to her appointment she experienced acute fatigue, being hardly able to walk and the weekend before Mayor making she was taken to A & E in Canterbury where she underwent numerous tests and had to receive four blood transfusions only being discharged from hospital on the Monday before the Tuesday Mayor making. Despite increasing fatigue necessitating her retirement to bed on occasions she carried out all her Mayoral duties during her term of office. Later examinations revealed a cancerous tumour. In the spirit of the quote she made at the beginning of her year, reported earlier in this article, Diane worked very hard as Dover's leading representative despite her health

challenge. She fulfilled all her many engagements including some quite special or unusual ones. October for instance saw her in Calais as part of the 160th anniversary celebrations for the Calais lighthouse at the French port and leading a foot parade with participants carrying torches representing both the work of the lighthouse and the London Olympics in 2012 after which, in her desire to cement co-operation between the two ports, she attended talks in respect of the Bleriot centenary in 2009 and hosted a return visit by the Calais Mayor the following month at the annual Remembrance Day commemorations in Dover. "In my inauguration speech at mayor making I stressed my desire for co-operative working... our co-operation is advancing well with Calais and not just on a social or twinning level". In March 2009 she was present in Margate for the Blessing of the Water Service with the Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateria and the Bishop of Dover and in the same month welcomed parties of Brownies, Rainbows, Beavers, Cubs and Scouts to the Town Council Offices to explain the workings of the Town Council. April saw her presiding at the memorial event in Dover for the Zeebrugge Raid in 1918 including the ringing of the Zeebrugge Bell at noon at the Maison Dieu which ceremony was attended by Belgian dignitaries. Diane returned the compliment by attending the Belgian memorial for the event in Zeebrugge itself. Mayday sunrise saw Diane on the seafront with Kent Invicta Morris dancers not merely as a spectator but participating complete with Mayoral chain!

Following her third year her health

deteriorated rapidly and by the end of September 2009 she was informed she was carrying a big aggressive tumour and her weight loss had taken her to 10 stone. She underwent a very long operation for the removal of the tumour followed by chemotherapy which brought with it potent side effects but Diane made great strides in recovery only to be advised following an in depth scan that the cancer had gone to her liver on both lobes with four spots. She was required to be hospitalised in London for a resection of her liver and in another significant operation four sections of her liver and her gall bladder were removed in November 2010. By early 2011 her blood count had risen and she was feeling very much better enabling her to enter the elections in May in which she was doubly successful.

Needless to record Diane carries with her many memories of her three terms as Mayor. Among the more memorable highlights were meeting the Queen Mother at Walmer Castle at Her Majesty's annual social for the Confederation of the Cinque Ports and subsequently attending Her Majesty's funeral in London. Among politicians she met were Margaret Thatcher and Edwina Currie at an event at Leeds Castle but most important were all the ordinary members of the public she encountered in the performance of her Mayoral duties whether it was at senior citizens' clubs, schools, societies or when opening shops. The 100th anniversary of the Duke of York's Royal Military School and being in charge of the Town Council were particular highlights as was meeting 87 year old M. Roger Gallant from Belgium when he paid one of his frequent visits to

Dover that he has undertaken over 75 years and who she showed round the Town Council offices and showed him the Civic regalia. Speakership of the Confederation of the Cinque Ports was a signal honour for Diane who enjoyed the Confederation events during each of the three years she was Mayor, on one occasion sitting with eleven other Mayors on a floating pontoon as it made its way along the Royal Military Canal in Hythe on the occasion of the Hythe Venetian Fete.

When first elected a press report under the heading 'We meet the glamorous new Mayor

of Dover' commented "Diane Smallwood is unusually glamorous for a mayor, she is tall blonde and sports shiny pink lip gloss... it makes a refreshing change". Looking back in addition to the press observations it can be recorded that she

was a hard working dignified and immensely courageous first citizen easily recognised by one other prominent distinguishing feature - her colourful glasses!

In a world where perhaps the 'ayes' often have it in Diane's case it was a question of the specs and the person behind them have had it - three times and didn't she do well?!



Diane Smallwood - First Term as Mayor

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COWGATE CEMETERY

Jeremy Cope

I think we are close to the stage when an annual report is all that is required. We are on top of the maintenance, mowing and care work in a way that we have never been before - thanks to our volunteers and to those who have donated funds that enabled us to acquire the professional standard of equipment that is required.

However one snag - the District Council, ultimately responsible for the cemetery and whose work we do without charge, withdrew the free parking permits allowing us that facility on our working days. It's the CUTS, you understand, although they cost the Council nothing. My latest information is that we shall be receiving permits, much to my relief. Our volunteers should be valued by the community and parking permits are one such expression of this.

We are organising a bean feast for volunteers and their partners/pals. This promises to be a jolly occasion much in line with our working parties. By the way newcomers are always welcome. Would anyone interested please phone me on 01304 211348.