

# Heritage Open Days

**The Dover Society - Press Release**

**1800 Years of History Free View**

**Saturday and Sunday 14th and 15th September 2013**

**DEREK LEACH**

Once again The Dover Society is coordinating arrangements in Dover for Heritage Open Days, organised by English Heritage nationally every year. This event celebrates England's fantastic architectural heritage by encouraging free access to buildings that are usually closed to the public or would normally charge an admission fee. Dover has a great wealth of historic buildings, but few are normally open to the public such as Dover Castle and are not free. This year 9 buildings will be open to the public free of charge.

## **1 Dover Town Hall formerly the Maison Dieu:**

Founded by Hubert de Burgh, then Constable of Dover Castle, in 1203, the primary purpose of the Maison Dieu was to provide free board and lodging for pilgrims on their way to the shrine of Thomas a Becket at Canterbury and later to care for the elderly poor and sick of Dover. A chapel was added by Henry III, which was adapted in the 19th century as a court. More buildings were added over the centuries. In 1536 the religious house was suppressed by Henry VIII, becoming the King's property. The buildings became a victualling depot for the navy until 1830 when it was taken over by the Board of Ordnance. Put up for auction in 1834 it was bought by the Dover Corporation. Restoration and adaptation of the Stone Hall and chapel took place between 1852

and 1862. The 19th century stained glass windows in the Stone Hall depict episodes in the history of the town and there are a number of portraits of famous people connected with the town. The Council Chamber was added in 1868 and the adjoining Connaught Hall was opened in 1883.

## **2 Maison Dieu House:**

This fine Jacobean house in Biggin Street is the oldest domestic building in Dover. It was built in 1665 as the Agent Victualler's residence close to the Maison Dieu, which Henry VIII had requisitioned as a store for the Navy Victualling Office following the Dissolution. In 1834 it became the residence of the commander of the Royal Engineers in Dover before becoming a private residence. The Kingsford brewing and milling family and the Mummery family who owned the Stembrook tannery lived here during the 19th century. Bought by the Corporation in 1899, the house became council offices until after the Second World War when it became the public library. Following the move of the library to the Discovery Centre, the premises were purchased and beautifully restored by Dover Town Council for its use. The town's regalia will also be on show.

## **3 St. Edmund's Chapel:**

This tiny cemetery chapel in Priory

Road was consecrated by St Richard of Chichester in 1253 in memory of his friend, St. Edmund, Archbishop of Canterbury 1234-45, and was probably used as a cemetery chapel for the Maison Dieu close by. Hidden for many years by development around it and used as a workshop, it was revealed again following war damage to the surrounding buildings. The chapel was restored and reconsecrated in 1968.

#### **4 Dover College: the remains of St. Martin's Priory:**

Built in the 12th century, it was suppressed in 1535 as part of Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries. The site was then leased for farming and most of the buildings fell into disrepair. Fortunately, the grand Norman refectory was used as a barn and survives today. Dover College opened on the site in 1871 when the refectory and gatehouse were restored and the king's hall became the college chapel. Part of the cloister also survives. The entrance is from Effingham Crescent.

#### **5 Church of St. Mary the Virgin:**

This prominent building in Biggin Street, dating from Saxon times, was built originally by the secular canons of St. Martin Le Grand, but was rebuilt by the Normans. At the Dissolution it was saved from demolition when Henry VIII granted it for use as a parish and civic church. Unfortunately, because of its weak foundations, it was rebuilt in 1843, although its original arches and columns were reinstated. The magnificent tower survived this restoration.

#### **6 Bell Tower of St. Mary the Virgin:**

In the gallery of this Norman tower visitors will see how the bellringers operate and in the clock chamber they will see the clock workings and various

artefacts.

#### **7 Unitarian Church:**

This brick-built octagonal church sitting above York Street was constructed in 1820 and its worship area reflects the shape of the building. The origins of the church go back to 1643 to a local community of Baptists who established a meeting house in 1655, but were persecuted following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. In 1692 Samuel Taverner made part of his house available for worship and part of the garden as a burial ground. Freedom of belief and form of worship as a Unitarian Church was agreed by members in 1916. Following Second World War damage, the chapel reopened in 1952. There will be an art exhibition, music played on the 1855 Holdich pipe organ and refreshments.

#### **8 Grand Shaft Staircase:**

This unique triple staircase was started in 1804 and finished in 1807. It connected the barracks and fortifications on the Western Heights through the 250 foot high cliff to sea level, Snargate Street and the Pier District, enabling troops to move quickly up or down its 140 steps within the cliff plus another 59 into the barrack yard. In 1812 a Mr Leith of Walmer rode a horse up the staircase for a bet. The entrance is in Snargate Street.

#### **9 St. Radigund's Abbey:**

This premonstratensian abbey founded in 1191 was visited by several monarchs. Following its Dissolution in 1538, the great abbey church was demolished and the remaining buildings with its lands were leased to tenant farmers by the monarch. Today the refectory is the farmhouse surrounded by abbey ruins. A gatehouse and a guest house survive.

### Opening times will be:

**1 Town Hall** - Guided tours on Saturday only from 10am to 4pm

**2 Maison Dieu House** - Saturday 10am to 4pm

**3 St. Edmund's Chapel** - Saturday 10am to 4pm

**4 Dover College** - Guided tours only at 11am and 2pm on Saturday and Sunday

**5 St. Mary the Virgin Church** - Saturday 10am to 4pm

**6 Bell Tower of St. Mary the Virgin** - Saturday 1.30pm to 4pm

**7 Unitarian Church** - Saturday and Sunday 10am to 4pm

**8 Grand Shaft Staircase** - Saturday and Sunday 10am to 4pm

**9 St. Radigund's Abbey** - Guided tours

on Sunday 10.30 to noon and 2.30pm to 4pm

### Publicity leaflets

Publicity leaflets are available from the Visitor Information Centre (now located in Dover Museum), Dover Town Council Offices (Maison Dieu House), Dover Town Hall and Dover Library.

To find out about other buildings open in the region

Tel: 020 7539 7921

Website: [www.heritageopendays.org](http://www.heritageopendays.org)

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