

The Changing Face of Dover's Market Square

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The shape and design of Dover's Market Square has changed once again, as it has so many times over the centuries. I wonder what those who were merry-making in the Square 800 years ago, around the St Martin's cross, would think of today's water-spray additions.

The Square, or the Market Place as it was once called, has always been the hub of the Dover community in good times and bad times. When Dover celebrated national victories it was to the Square the people headed. When times were bad it was in the Square where the unemployed demonstrated their anger.

But the history of the Square goes back much further, to the time when (it is believed) the river Dour flowed through the Square to the sea. To the era when Roman shallow-bottomed ships berthed in and around the Square on the banks of which they built their villas, bath houses and fortifications.

It was here where in 1066 the conquering Norman troops burnt down the town and its ancient churches, only to be ordered by their leader William to build the magnificent replacement of St Martin-le-Grand, the ruins of which remain.

The years on rolled until, at one stage, parts of the Market Place became St Martin's churchyard and it was around, or near, the tombs that the annual St Martin's Fair was held. It was at this annual gathering when labourers from the town and surrounding countryside arrived to hire their labour to an employer for the months ahead. The Market Square became Dover's early Labour Exchange!

This annual St Martin's Day of celebration for local people was legally established by royal grant around 1160 by Henry II. Originally it was a religious festival but as time went by general merry-making took over with people dancing around the central cross provided in honour of St Martin (Dover's patron saint). The condition of the cross gradually deteriorated and documents indicate it was destroyed during the War of the Roses.

When in 1540, during Henry VIII's dissolution of monasteries, the huge church of St Martin-le Grand was dismantled, Dover Corporation, not slow to act, moved in and without any real authority claimed possession of the whole area which then grew into the Market Place and now the Market Square. Around 1605 Dover councillors decided to build a new Guildhall in the Square, replacing their existing meeting place then situated in King Street (just off the Market Square).

A few yards from the new Guildhall was Dover's place of punishment for those who broke the law. For many years here were the stocks, pillory, cage and whipping posts. The site of these instruments of punishment is now marked by a blue plaque provided by The Dover Society.

Old documents tell of the punishment handed out to the wrong doers. Cut purse Richard Shoveler was nailed to the pillory by his ear, given a knife and told he could go free once he had cut off his own ear. A poor old lady was in the stocks for cooking meat on a religious abstinence day. A younger woman was tied to the back of a cart and whipped out of town for alleged sexual activities!