

Rotary's Successful 'Celebration of Christmas'

Jenny Olpin (with Peter Sherred)

"A wonderful atmospheric evening in the most beautiful of places;" "A brilliant evening full of Christmas joy;" "It was a pleasure to be involved." Just three out of the many comments that followed an event on the evening of 21st December, when the Channel Cluster of Rotary clubs provided a 'Celebration of Christmas' at St Mary-in-Castro, Dover Castle, a unique venue which provided a perfect setting for such an event. Advance notice of the event was reported in the Society Newsletter 108 of November 2023 page 35. The church was full, with Rotarians from the various clubs in the cluster together with members of Inner Wheel clubs and the public, all of whom experienced a brilliant evening full of Christmas joy. Distinguished guests at the event included the Chairman of Dover District Council, Councillor Gordon Cowan and the District Governor (DG) Elect of Rotary District 1120, Brian Dunne.

The organising club behind the event was Dover's Rotary Club of South Foreland which has as one of its members, Society member the Reverend Peter Sherred, an Assistant District Governor (ADG) for Rotary District 1120 South East, responsible for the oversight of the Channel Cluster of Rotary clubs stretching from Sandwich in the east to Romney Marsh in the west. In between Deal, South Foreland, Dover, Folkestone, Folkestone Channel and Hythe Rotary Clubs are members of the cluster. Peter is also the current Honorary Coordinating Chaplain of St Mary-in-Castro (see Society Newsletter 108 page 33) a former garrison church, located in the grounds of Dover Castle managed by English Heritage.

Together with his wife Mary, President of the Inner Wheel Club of Dover, Peter, ably supported by members of the South Foreland club, took a leading role in planning the content of the evening, engaging all the cluster Rotary Clubs as well as the Pharos Chamber Choir from

Dover with organist Stephen Yarrow PHF, who also directed the choir at the event. Stephen is Founder/Director of the Pharos Chamber Choir and a former member of the Rotary Club of Dover.

At the commencement of the evening President of Dover's Rotary Club of South Foreland, John Dunkley, a past District Governor of Rotary District 1120 (DG), welcomed everyone to the unique event and thanked his club members and the ADG for promoting the collaboration of the clubs which form the Rotary cluster, and for being willing to assist in the preparations for the evening.

Everyone present was encouraged to participate in and enjoy the evening programme by being prepared to take part in the singing - which they did with enthusiasm! ADG Peter welcomed everyone on behalf of the Church Council and stressed the aim of enjoying the 'Celebration of Christmas' through a combination of religious and secular readings and songs. Everyone had been provided with a souvenir programme each containing the full content of the evening's intentions. The items would flow seamlessly from beginning to end without interruption or announcement. People were urged not to be reticent about enjoying themselves during the event despite being in a church building!

Passages from scripture telling the nativity story, as well as Christmas Bells by Longfellow and TS Eliot's Journey of the Magi were read by representatives from the eight Rotary clubs participating as well as the President of the Inner Wheel Club of Dover. Some of the livelier traditional carols were sung such as Ding Dong Merrily on High and God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen, as well as O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, We Three Kings of Orient Are, Angels from the Realms of Glory and the beautiful song When a child is born. A rousing

finale included Jingle bells and We Wish You a Merry Christmas.

Interspersed through the programme the Pharos Chamber Choir, directed by Stephen Yarrow, sang songs with a high quality: including The Little Road to Bethlehem by Michael Head, The Coventry Carol and Three Kings from Persian Lands Afar by Peter Cornelius. Within the beautiful church, with darkness outside, these pieces were especially moving.

Everyone joined in a 'Commitment to Fellowship and Service' which emphasised the value of service as Rotary and other clubs, including Inner Wheel Clubs, strive to help others, not only in their local communities, but nationally and internationally. The evening was an excellent example of Rotary clubs working collaboratively to provide an event open to the public as well as for raising money for charity. Those attending were invited, should they choose, to show their appreciation as they left

the church by providing a voluntary donation. All money so donated would be given to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). The audience's appreciation of the evening resulted in donations amounting to an impressive £700 being raised for the RNLI. Members of the Dover RNLI crew were present for the event.

Refreshments were kindly provided in the nearby hall after the event, courtesy of the Church Council. Many people stayed to eat, drink and chat before leaving with a feeling of Christmas good cheer and clutching their souvenir programme. Dover's Rotary Club of South Foreland members had every right to feel satisfied with taking on the daunting task of organising the event. Entertainment, public participation, a good sum raised, and a worthy recipient of the donations were the defining elements of this collaborative event. I was very pleased to attend what was a fine example of what Rotary does best!

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