

**FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT
LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY**
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Chairman's Report by Alan Taylor

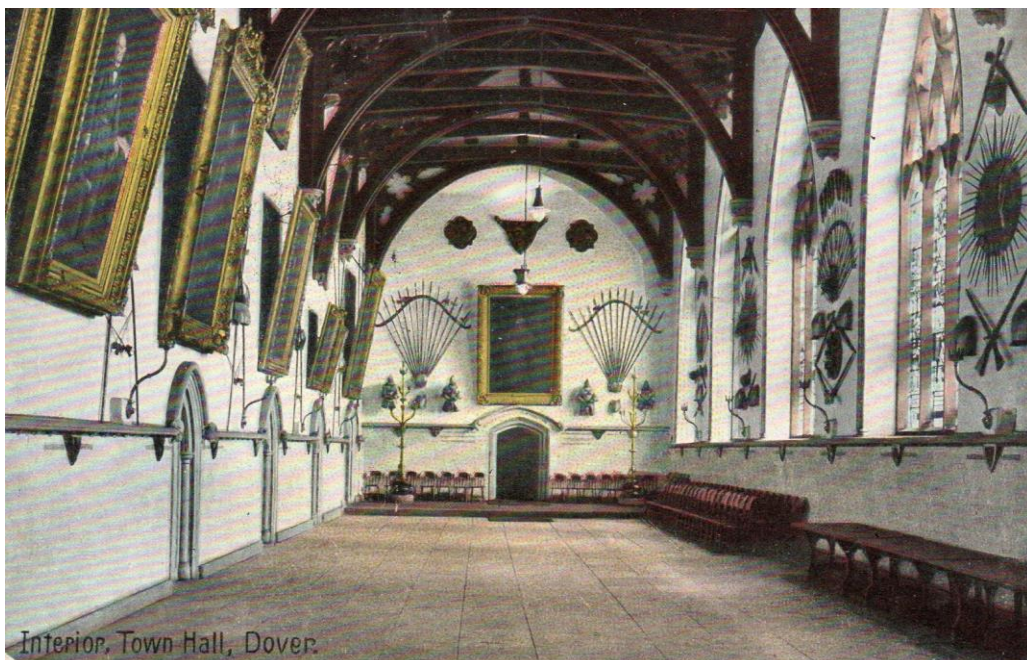
At the June meeting we welcomed guest speaker Martin Crowther who presented his talk entitled, **“Dover's Maison Dieu: Reawakening A Gothic Fantasy”**.

Martin started by saying the Maison Dieu was over 800 years old, but his talk wasn't about the history of it, but about the restoration and conservation of the building and its contents.

Funding was obtained from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Wolfson Foundation, Dover District Council, Dover Town Council and the Dover Society; he went on to say there were three archaeologists on site and six conservers. The work is expected to take two years, finishing next year.

The Maison Dieu (House of God) was founded by Hubert de Burgh in circa 1203. Poor pilgrims were given free bed and board for the night on their way to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. As King John's right-hand man, Hubert de Burgh successfully defended Dover Castle in a siege by the French in 1216 (depicted in a magnificent stained-glass window in the Stone Hall) and defeated them at sea in the Battle of Sandwich the following year.

With the building having scaffolding inside and out during restoration, Martin was able to show us close-up photographs of many of the building's features including gargoyles and ceiling paintings.



Interior, Town Hall, Dover.

Forty-three people attended the meeting, of whom five were visitors.

The Last Maharajah & His Folkestone Connection by Shay Collyer & Vince Williams

At our July meeting one of our Society's members, Shay Collyer, gave a very well researched talk on Duleep Singh and his connection to Folkestone; and through her research, found where his family stayed in Folkestone, which was not, as commonly quoted 21 Clifton Street.

The Maharajah Duleep Singh (1838-1893) was the last Maharajah of the Punjab region of what was then India. He lost his lands and wealth, including the Koh-i-Noor diamond to the British East India Company in 1849, aged only 11. Aged 15 he converted to Christianity and moved to England. He became a good friend of Queen Victoria and lived the life of an English aristocrat, enjoying shooting parties and wild spending and settled in with his family at his lavish Elveden estate in Suffolk.

However Duleep Singh later became disaffected with the British, reverted to Sikhism, and tried, unsuccessfully, to reclaim India from the British. Also, by the mid-1880s Duleep Singh had already met his future second wife, Ada Wetherill, and they had become lovers while in London. After his failed attempt to return to India and subsequent arrest in Aden in 1886, Duleep abandoned his family and moved to Paris where Ada Wetherill joined him.

While he had been away the estranged Maharani and the children stayed at Duleep's London residence: 53 Holland Park, where they were joined by Arthur Oliphant who later took them to Folkestone where he is reported to have a property.

The connection to Folkestone is through Mr Arthur Oliphant, whose father, James Oliphant, had been the Maharajah's equerry at Elveden. Arthur is recorded as staying, with his wife and family, at the Seabrook Hotel, now the Hythe Imperial Hotel, in July 1887; prior to staying at Northumberland House, 14 Marine Crescent, as reported in the Visitor Lists in the local newspapers throughout August and into September 1887. The Maharani and her family had been placed into the care of the Oliphants by Queen Victoria due to the Maharani not being able to properly look after her children.

Although newspapers report that the Maharani Bamba died at her residence in Holland Park, London on 18th September 1887 it is possible that the Maharajah's wife may have died in Folkestone. Biographer Anita Anand mentions that Queen Victoria's physician was sent to Folkestone to tend to Princess Sophia who was suffering with typhoid. The Maharani had fallen into a coma on 17th September. Princess Sophia would recover from typhoid but the Maharani died the following day from acute diabetes, exacerbated by her drinking of alcohol. Unfortunately, it has not been able to prove this with the dates of the physician's visit, and the Maharani's place of death is not mentioned on her gravestone, unlike for the other family members.



Prince Edward, taken by local photographer Lambert & Weston.

After the Maharani's death, the youngest son Prince Edward and his sisters Princesses Bamba, Catherine, and Sophia were kept the care of, and stayed with, Arthur Oliphant and his wife and children initially at 14 Marine Crescent, Folkestone, during 1887 and 1888. (Mentions of the Oliphant family in the Visitor Lists do stop after mid-September 1887, but in December 1888, the Folkestone Express reported the sale of the contents of 14 Marine Crescent.) It is possible that Lina Schaefer, the lifelong companion of Princess Catherine may also have been introduced to the family in Folkestone as well.

The Mararajah's eldest son, Prince Victor, also stayed in the West Cliff Hotel in December 1887 and January 1888 when visiting Folkestone. Also a local bakery bragged that Prince Victor liked his cakes in 1891!

Duleep Singh would eventually marry Ada Wetherill on 28th April 1889 in Paris and later return to England where he stayed in Folkestone for two months at 6 Clifton Gardens from early August 1890. Here he brought his old and his new family together for the first time. The connection with our town ends in October 1890, as the Folkestone Express newspaper, on Saturday 4th, reported that The Maharajah, Duleep Singh had returned to London from Folkestone.

Shay talked further about Duleep Singh and his family's life after they moved away from Folkestone. Duleep was a gambler, drinker and in time would die in Paris in 1893, deeply in debt. And Shay also covered the lives of the Maharajah and Maharani's children.

Thirty-six people attended the meeting six of whom were visitors.



Duleep Singh at Queen Victoria's Osborne House residence on the Isle of Wight

Chairman's Report (continued) by Alan Taylor

At the August meeting we welcomed guest speaker Robert Beale who presented his talk entitled **Westenhanger Airfield**.

Robert said his talk would be about Westenhanger Castle, Westenhanger Airfield and Lympne Airfield. He then said Otterpool Park Arena Leisure stated in 2012 that the closure was temporary. However, in 2016 it was revealed that plans drawn up by Folkestone & Hythe District Council included the racecourse area for building houses in a development known as Otterpool Garden Town. By December 2017 much of the racecourse infrastructure had fallen into disrepair and there was no prospect of any resumption of racing at the venue. A planning application for 8500 homes was submitted to the Council in February 2019, with a plan for a phased development over 30 years. Plans for the Otterpool garden town were approved in April 2023.

Robert then spoke about the history of the Westenhanger estate dating back to 1035 when it was owned by King Canute. The 14th century building can still be seen next to the main grandstand.

He said the racecourse was established in 1898. The first meeting took place over two days on 30th and 31st March 1898.

However, the racecourse was first used for aviation when a 3-day flying meeting was held in September 1910. Robert gave us brief histories of the early aviators of the age and spoke of the flying meeting at Westenhanger and gave us a description of the flights, and Mr G.A. Barnes' notable crash.

Between 1940 and 1941 the racecourse was used as a decoy airfield with dummy aircraft placed to look like an active airfield. On 23rd April 1944, 660 Squadron, an army cooperation squadron of the Royal Air Force, arrived at what was then known as RAF Westenhanger, after the nearby village. The squadron based in a tented camp was equipped with Auster Mark IV single-engined liaison aircraft and used the racecourse to practise operations with local army units. On 12 July 1944 the squadron of 12 Austers escorted by a Super Marine Walrus rescue flying boat left Westenhanger for France. The airfield was then restored back to use as a racecourse.

Forty-six people attended the meeting, eleven of whom were visitors.

Important Notice from our Treasurer & Secretary

All members will be shortly receiving an email or letter about changes to membership subscriptions.

It has always been the case that the annual membership runs from the start of October when we have our AGM until the end of September, and it's that time of year again, when Treasurer Terry will be reminding us all of the fact that our membership fee is due on October 1st. The ways that you can renew your membership will be in the communication from Treasurer Terry, but it may be that members will need to change the dates of their standing orders or bank transfers to help us.

Unfortunately, we have been overtaken by the rising costs of living and have had to increase subscriptions, for the first time in more than twenty years, to £15 per member, p.a. The costs of hiring speakers and hiring the hall have both increased and we have relied on the fact that we have had several successful publications in the past that have raised funds for the society, which we have used to subsidise membership fees. Sadly this can only continue for a limited time and we do want to be able to publish more history books to capture our town's untold history and to put on more exhibitions.

So the committee has decided to simplify membership fees by just having the one membership fee per person (rather than complicating things with joint, U18 & other membership discounts); and to help our Treasurer, rather than members paying their subscriptions at various times throughout the year (usually on the anniversary of them joining). All membership fees will be payable on 1st October and be £15 per person. These changes will also help us with our Data Protection responsibilities to our members.

We still feel that our annual membership delivers great value for money for what we are able to provide in our membership. We have seen new members join and welcomed visitors that help subsidise us further, due to the excellent work Mark does with our publicity leaflets and online publicity. We have now recovered from the lull of the COVID years and are looking forward to being able to grow and deliver even more talks and events, so do come along to the AGM (& talk) in October to find out more. We thank you all you your continued support.

Other Notices

We would like to welcome new members: Julian Daggett, Stephen Friend, Juliette Moon & Michael Stainer.

On a rather sad note member Alex Edwards has passed away aged 92 years

Subscriptions are going up to £15 per member and are due on 1st October.

For the forthcoming year, we do have some vacancies on the committee, so if you would like to stand or nominate somebody could you please let me know.