



FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER No. 19 – Summer 2004

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F. Taylor

The April meeting was an illustrated talk on 'Metal finds from a Cinque Port' by Neil Allen. The talk was basically about coins of the realm and other artefacts found in the Romney Marsh area. I thought it was a most interesting and informative talk giving an insight into the most densely populated areas ascertained by the number of finds.

Over the passed six months I have to put our video projector to good use on two occasions outside of our Societies activities. One was in the Sassoon room Folkestone library at 7pm, February 18th 2004. The library was celebrating Kentish films by screening some from South East Film and Video Archive, which is held at the University of Brighton. Frank Gray the Curator came with some of the latest sine film clips which they have transferred onto video which included: 'Edwardian Folkestone', 'Canterbury Tour', 'Round the Town (Folkestone) 1938', 'Hythe Fair', 'A trip to Boulogne', 'Kent Hop Fields' and 'Wartime Folkestone' including the launch of the film Kipps. The most interesting film for me was the 20th Century Fox newsreel documentary-style footage of the 12 May 1941 showing troops patrolling along a boarded up Leas with the bandstand surrounded by sandbags, also the first showing of the adaptation of HG Wells' 'Kipps'. The premiere was held at the Central Cinema in George Lane, with the stars Diana Wynward, Phyllis Calvert and Michael Redgrave, and the managing director of 20th Century Fox and other American film executives all attending. The Mayor, George Gurr, and his wife are seen arriving in their regalia and Mrs Gurr being presented with a bouquet of flowers by a little girl. The newsreel then showed the after-show party, which was held at the Queen's Hotel with the Mayor Gurr giving a speech, during which the air raid siren goes off! However, he acknowledges it with a joke and carries on with his speech. The evening was rounded off with dancing at the Leas Cliff Hall. Sadly, just 17 days later at 2.10 a.m. on 29 May 1941, both George Gurr and his wife were killed at their home in Morehall Avenue by a parachute mine.

The second occasion was on Tuesday evening 13 April at the United Reform Church, Hythe. At lunchtime I had a telephone call from John Cutmore, from the Sandgate Society, who was disparately phoning round trying to find a projector and operator for the evening. He was greatly relieved when I said I was able to oblige. Journalist Reg. Turnill was giving a talk to the Hythe Civic Society about his experiences over 40 years as space correspondent for the BBC, which was backed up with a video. It was a most interesting and informative talk, which I was fortunate to see, as I was available on the night with the required equipment.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to the following new members: Mr R. Goldup, Mr Alec Sharp, Mr Michael Williams and Mr Peter Salmon.

On a very sad note I would like to announce the death of a former member Alan Ashman aged 81 years.

THE HISTORY OF THE METROPOLE HOTEL

Martin Easdown

Situated at the western end of Folkestone's famous Leas Promenade, the Metropole, along with the neighbouring Grand Hotel, stand as imposing sentinels of the town's fashionable past. Both buildings were the products of Folkestone's Victorian rise to the pinnacle of Britain's aristocratic seaside resorts, aided by the imaginings of the local landowner the Earl of Radnor. The Metropole, like many grand seaside hotels, has now been converted to other uses, yet the public are fortunate to be able to still observe its splendour through its current use as an arts and fitness centre.

The building of the Metropole was proposed in September 1893 on a three acre polo field by the Folkestone Metropole Hotel Co. Ltd; a group of eight London businessmen with connections in the hotel business. Mr James Bailey, proprietor of two hotels in South Kensington, led the consortium. A 99 year lease of the land was obtained from Lord Radnor on 10th April 1894 with two provisos. The first was the payment of a ground rent of £15 per annum, rising to £525 on the 7th and each subsequent year, and secondly, the company was to hold a capital of £100,000, of which £20,000 was to be underwritten by "substantial persons". An alcohol licence was granted on 29th August 1894 and a clause was duly inserted in the lease by Lord Radnor that he would ensure another licensed premises would not be allowed within 300 yards of the Metropole for a period of twelve years.

Mr James D'Oyley of Lynette Avenue, London was engaged as architect and he designed the building in the then fashionable style of red brick with terracotta surround, clad around fire and sound proof steel floors. However, his original plans had to be amended by Thomas W. Cutter of Queens Square, London before Folkestone Corporation approved them in August 1895. Work then began immediately on erecting the hotel under the supervision of contractors Messrs. Jennings & Co. of London. However, as the building was nearing completion, the Folkestone Metropole Hotel Co. Ltd sold the lease to Gordon Hotels Ltd for £118, 887 on 14th April 1897.

Three months later, on 1st July 1897, the Metropole was opened to the public and was declared "second only to the Brighton Metropole (also owned by Gordon Hotels, and to which the Folkestone Metropole had close links) in the boldness of its conception, outside of London itself." And the Metropole was indeed a building of which Folkestone could be most proud. The hotel had a frontage onto the Leas of 350 feet and was four storeys high with a central cupola and lantern at the top. As well as 200 bedrooms, its wealthy patrons were provided with a central hall, two dining rooms, a ballroom, library and smoking, writing and drawing rooms; all luxuriously finished with oak, gold lacquer and gilt, marble or velvet. Electricity was provided from its own plant (one of the first large buildings in the country to have this facility) and a passenger and luggage lift connected all floors. Down in the basement was a large kitchen with scullery and two wine cellars, plus accommodation rooms for the staff. The rear garden was laid out with lawns, flower beds and herbaceous borders set around a bandstand.

Under the management of Mr Reeves, the Metropole proved to be an immediate hit with Folkestone's moneyed guests and also with the senior army officers based at the nearby Shorncliffe army camp. The ballroom quickly became the focal point of the hotel with its grand galas and orchestral concerts, usually performed by German, Austrian or Italian bands, who also played in the lounge or dining room during dinner. The bandstand at the rear of the hotel proved not to be so popular however and there were numerous complaints from guests over the noise. Eventually it was given to Folkestone Corporation, who relocated it onto the Leas at the front of the hotel in 1902.

The early success of the hotel led to the building in 1900 of an extension to the rear of the west wing, which was christened Metropole Court and housed self-contained apartments. The restaurant also acquired a good name for itself and was open to non-residents. Prices in 1901 were - breakfast (8-11 a.m.) 3/6d; luncheon (1-2.30 p.m.) 4s; dinner (7-8.30 p.m.) 6s.

Sadly the first five years of the Metropole proved to be its best as from 1902 a series of events began to undermine its popularity. During 1902-3, there was unfortunate dispute with both Lord Radnor and Folkestone Corporation over barriers erected by Gordon Hotels on the western and eastern approach roads to the hotel and the Leas (which they had made up and claimed belonged to them). The court case brought by Radnor found in the hotel's favour, but then the Corporation entered the fray by serving notice to Gordon Hotels to remove the barriers on the eastern side. When the hotel failed to comply the Corporation simply knocked them down. The dispute rumbled on and on Christmas Eve 1902 Radnor raised the stakes by erecting a 350-yard long fence in front of the hotel, barring access to the Leas and leading to a bitter triumvirate of Gordon Hotels, the Radnor Estate and Folkestone Corporation. The quarrel reached the Chancery Division of the High Court on 27th February 1903, which saw Radnor win the day as it was declared the Leas were the private property of his and the public were allowed to use it on licence, never as a right. Attempts by the Mayor of Folkestone to mediate failed and the saga took another twist on 11th April 1903 when two men were charged with cutting through the fence; one of them having left a false moustache behind at the scene! Both were acquitted, and the fence was mended, but following an agreement between the Metropole and the Corporation, the barriers across the access roads were removed on the morning of 21st May 1903 and the fence across the Leas quickly followed during the afternoon.

The year 1903 also saw the opening on the 12th September of the Metropole's near neighbour and competitor the Grand Hotel (originally the Grand Mansions). The two hotels soon clashed over the Grand's application for an alcohol licence that was vigorously opposed by the Metropole, which sited the terms of the lease granted by the Radnor Estate that another licence would not be granted within 300 yards of the hotel for 12 years. Gordon Hotels duly won the day and the Grand was refused its licence, but its quick popularity with Folkestone's rich patrons, including King Edward VII, led it to soon outstrip the Metropole in terms of visitor numbers.

Yet, during that golden age for fashionable resorts before the First World War, the Metropole received its fair share of princes, maharajahs, counts, majors, lords and earls. They usually brought along their own maids and

footmen, but otherwise were attended to by the hotel's pageboys, porters and lift attendants in their navy blue outfits lined with yellow piping. Sir Edward Sassoon and his son Philip, successively MP's for the Hythe and Folkestone constituency, often brought guests to the Metropole, while organisations such as the East Kent Hunt and Folkestone Chamber of Commerce held great dinners there. In November 1905 the hotel held the Mayor's Banquet, where 130 guests were received, and again in 1909 when over 200 attended. The Metropole could boast its own bakery, along with an extensive wine and beer cellar, and its own motor bus to transport guests to and from Folkestone Central station. The Metropole Lift Company provided another form of transport (although the hotel had no financial interest in it) on 31st March 1904 with the opening of the Metropole Lift from opposite the hotel to the Lower Sandgate Road.

On 31st July 1914 extension work at the front of the hotel was carried out by Messrs. W. Woodward & Son, which saw the opening of a new palm court along with enlarged coffee and dining rooms. Sadly just five days later Britain entered the First World War and in October 1914 the Metropole was requisitioned as a hospital for wounded Belgian soldiers. However by the 7th November 1914 they had been moved elsewhere and the hotel was reopened to receive guests, although the restrictions of the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) closed all hotels by 8 p.m. For the next few years the Metropole became popular with gatherings of senior army officers, especially Canadians based at Shorncliffe Camp, but in 1917 it was commandeered once again, this time as a drafting depot for WAAC's off to France. Around 600 were in the building at any one time and their organised entertainments proved to be very popular, especially the Saturday night dances to which boyfriends were invited.

Following the war's end on 11th November 1918, the Metropole was evacuated and in July 1919 was reopened as a hotel, although all the rooms were not in use until Christmas 1919. A new dance floor was laid in the palm court and an American Bar (for men only) was installed in the smoking room. However it quickly became apparent that visitor numbers were down on those before the war as many of Folkestone's wealthier guests abandoned the town for more exotic climates. A further blow was the resignation on 1st December 1921 after eighteen years service of J. Amans, the manager. The decision was taken to close the Metropole during the uneconomic winter months, in contrast to its main competitors – the Grand, Burlington, Royal Pavilion and Majestic – who remained open and no doubt benefited from the decision.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the Metropole Ballroom became the main focus of the hotel with its popular (and profitable) conferences and dinner dances. On 2nd September 1926 members of the England and Australian cricket teams dined there following a match at the Folkestone Cricket Festival, while on 13th July 1927 HRH Prince Henry was guest of honour of the Mayor of Folkestone at the official luncheon at the Metropole following the opening of the Leas Cliff Hall.

Notwithstanding the Metropole was losing money and was usually opened only between May/June to September. This shortness of season led to a loss to the other hotels of a regular clientele base that liked to visit Folkestone during the quieter off-peak months. In 1928 Gordon Hotels offered the Metropole for sale to the Corporation, who, although happy to use the hotel for official functions, spurned the chance to own it.

During the Second World War, the Metropole was commandeered by the War Department in October 1939 and in early 1940 it was converted by the R.A.M.C. into No. 49 Field Dressing Station, complete with wards, examination rooms and operating theatre. On the two occasions during the war the staff and patients of the Royal Victoria Hospital were evacuated to the Metropole. Firstly in 1941 when fumes from a consignment of fuel for the boilers penetrated the building, and again in September 1944 when the front of the hospital was hit by a German shell and Metropole became the temporary outpatients department. Towards the end of the war the hotel became an assembly depot for repatriated prisoners of war from New Zealand.

The last troops left in late 1946 and workmen moved in to renovate the building, although it was decided to leave a large part of the east wing unoccupied, reducing the hotel's capacity to 150 rooms. The kitchen was moved up to the ground floor and the basement was converted into a garage. Reopening took place in 1947, with the first two years on a full yearly basis, and the ballroom soon regained its former popularity as a dance venue.

In 1951 the Metropole, along with the Leas Cliff Hall, featured in the film 'Lady Godiva Rides Again' about an amateur beauty contest starring Dennis Price, Pauline Stroud and Diana Dors. Some of the hotel staff managed to obtain a small part in the film by welcoming the beauty queens on the steps of the hotel.

A year later it was announced that two brothers named Joseph had acquired the hotel for £43,000. Among their proposals was to reinstate a full yearly opening, but the deal fell through when they failed to complete the sale by the fixed date, much to the consternation of Gordon Hotels who were now very keen to sell the building. They closed the Metropole for the season on 30th September 1952 and it was to remain shut for the next 2½ years as they decided what to do with the building. It was eventually reopened on 30th April 1955, but the end was clearly nigh and in January 1959 it was announced Mrs Isobel Watkins, who lived in Metropole Court, had acquired the freehold of the land from the Lord Radnor's Folkestone Estate. The hotel itself remained for the time being in the hands of Gordon Hotels and was reopened for the season on 25th March 1959. Notwithstanding it proved to be the

Metropole's last as a hotel for on 16th October 1959 Mrs Watkins purchased the building for £51,000 and announced it would be converted into flats. It was then quickly sold on to a property company, Glanmoor Management Company Limited led by Major Gerald Glover, a well-known financier, solicitor and racehorse owner. The derelict east wing was refurbished and the 150 bedrooms of the old hotel were converted into 39 flats, those on the first floor being particularly luxurious. In addition central heating was installed throughout the building and a heated swimming pool was added. The total cost of the work was £75,000.

The building was christened the 'New Metropole' and in addition to the flats took on a new lease of life as a leisure complex. A new restaurant and lounge bar was opened on 1st October 1961 and a month later on 27th September 1961 the New Metropole Arts Centre was opened in the former palm court area. The Glanmoor Club and a health centre, both with access to the heated pool plus Folkestone's first sauna, were added the following year.

Kent County Council took over the running of the arts centre in 1970, the same year a fire ripped across the top of the building that took five hours to get under control. There had been a previous fire in a flat in July 1961 and the building was further hit a chimney fire in April 1978 and a blaze in the bar and dance hall in April 1984.

In January 1986 local businessmen Jimmy Godden acquired the Metropole for £1m from Ammassmade Ltd (owners since 1983). He converted the Mikado Room into a bar in 1987, but an application to erect a terrace of five houses on land at the rear of the building was turned down in 2002.

The arts centre housed the Kent Literature Festival from 1983, but in 1997 faced closure as financial support was being withdrawn by the Regional Arts Board, South East Arts. Happily Roger de Haan, founder of the locally based Saga group, stepped in to generously sponsor the centre and in 1998 became its Chairman. Under his guidance, and that of director Nick Ewbank (who took over from the long-serving Ann Fearey in February 2001), the now renamed Metropole Galleries were completely refurbished at a cost of £160,000. The main gallery was totally transformed and three new galleries were opened up. In addition, the Glanmoor Room (the former gentlemen's club) became the music and recital room, the Mikado Bar a gallery for the large exhibition and the Jasper Room was converted into a café gallery. The reopening took place on 7th September 2001 and the first exhibition featured the work of the late acclaimed filmmaker and artist Derek Jarman, who lived for the last eight years of his life in a fisherman's cottage at Dungeness. The Galleries are committed to exhibiting a wide and varying range of arts; one of the most eye-catching of recent times was Sophie Ryder's bronze of three 15 feet 'Dancing Hares' placed at the front of the building in 2002. The old health club has also undergone transformation, into the popular Hunters Fitness Centre with its gym, aerobic studio, sauna, steam room, whirlpool and café bar.

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