



## **IHBC South East Branch Newsletter – December 2011**

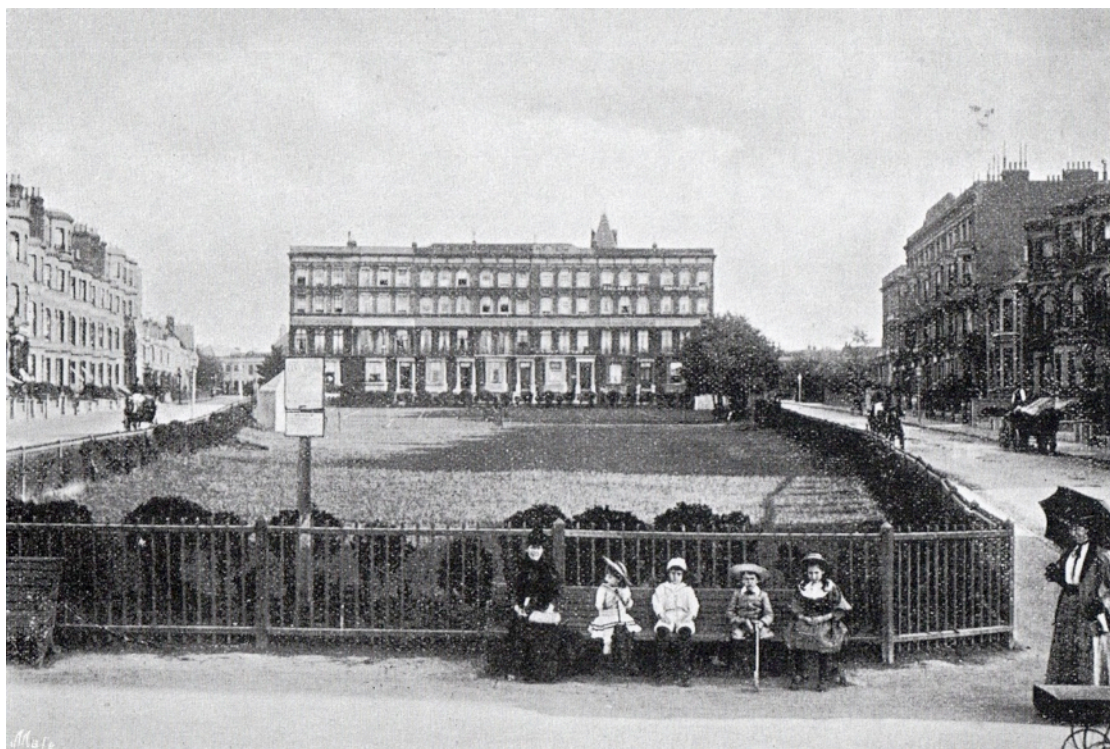
### **Day School & A.G.M. – 29<sup>th</sup> September**

The 2011 South east branch Day School, “Turnering a Corner – Regeneration in austere times” took place on a glorious late summer day. The weather certainly allowed delegates to really enjoy the day and the Turner Contemporary’s location right on the north coast of Kent.

The day started with a welcome and brief introduction to the gallery. We were reminded that the gallery’s success was down to years of support for contemporary art in Margate. And the first incarnation of the gallery was as a temporary installation in the former Marks & Spencer’s in the High Street. The gallery was seen as just one of the ways to revive the seaside town and help it to continue to attract visitors. The current exhibition is based on the experience of youth. These experiences were described through various media, as you would expect, as the last hundred years or so have been characterised by the use and manipulation of technologies by young people to communicate and create a strong group association.

Nick Dermott, Heritage Advisor for Thanet District Council (T.D.C.), stepped in for Madeline Homer, Community Services Manager for T.D.C., to welcome us to Margate and give an overview of the current pressures Margate faces. Sam Thomas, Regeneration Manager for T.D.C., showed a short film that highlighted these pressures and gave them some historic context. He described the well known fall in popularity of British seaside holidays with the arrival of cheap foreign holidays in the sun. The

approach of the civic institutions in the sixties, seventies and eighties didn't help the town by turning their back on the town's heritage and supporting dreams of ring roads, dual carriageways and concrete. This attitude changed in the early nineties and regeneration schemes have been undertaken since then looking at different aspects of the historic environment and the town's fortunes in general. A chronic problem has been Margate's inability to compete with larger shopping centres in Canterbury and the Westwood Cross shopping centre. Westwood Cross was opened in 2005 and according to Land Securities, the owner, Westwood Cross is "the new Town Centre for the Thanet region". In order to counter this outpouring of shoppers, Mary Portas has visited Margate with a view to assist the town in winning back high street anchor businesses.



Dalby Square, Margate

Louise Dandy, Conservation Areas Appraisal Officer for T.D.C. and Eddie Booth gave the next talk. as Eddie Booth and Chezél Bird of The Conservation Studio have been working with Louise to carry out a characterisation of the late Victorian & Edwardian area known as Cliftonville. This area grew as a direct result of the popularity of Margate

as a holiday destination in this era. Many of the buildings were built as guest houses and hotels with rows of housing in side roads to accommodate those employed in the service industries. Eddie described the area as a hotspot for free thinking at the time with relaxed attitudes to communal bathing in contrast to the segregated and uptight bathing down the hill in the Old Town. Eddie made it clear from his repeated references to this contrast that he would have been an Edwardian hedonist given the chance. We visited Cliftonville as part of the afternoon tours and to consider the refurbishment work been undertaken on several properties. We got a very good idea of the present situation especially in Dalby Square, a fine public space open at the north end with unobstructed views of the sea. The properties that surround the square are mostly in use as bedsits and occupied by a very transient population.



Various methods have been used to convince landlords to rectify this situation and help to facilitate a more stable population that would start to take interest in the area they live. These have varied from grants for conversion work and a stricter policy on charging council tax for each unit in the premises. As some buildings are arranged into twelve bedsits this

can be very persuasive. The reports put together as a result of this characterisation work are being used as the catalyst to designate as conservation areas the areas around Dalby Square which at the moment is the only protected area in Cliftonville.

Philip Jackson, of Daedalus Environmental, talked about the work to increase the energy efficiency of one of these Edwardian former guest houses in Dalby Square. This project is being used as an opportunity to test the ways historic buildings can be altered to increase their green credentials whilst retaining their character. To finish the first session Grant Burton, Regeneration Project Manager for T.D.C. explained the problems they are facing to conserve and bring back into use the Dreamland site. The cinema is listed grade II\* and the scenic railway recently upgraded to II\*. In its heyday Dreamland was an exciting attraction but in recent years with the rest of Margate, has fallen on hard times. An interesting point that Grant made concerned the condition of the iron frame within the iconic 1920s sea front building. The frame had corroded quite drastically and blown the brickwork in some places enough to get hands through the gaps. However this is only in areas that are particularly exposed to the salty sea air. In more protected places the frame has fared well.

After a short break we heard from three speakers who are not directly involved with built heritage conservation but understand and appreciate the benefits our work has to the social and economic well being of a place. Sophie Jeffrey, Project Officer for Margate Arts, Creativity, Heritage, spoke about the relationship between the arts and the environment that supports, enthuses and acts as a catalyst for creativity. The organisation is working with artists and businesses to support the historic core of Margate by creating a positive and complementary area to the Turner Contemporary the other side of the road. Art Hewitt, general manager of the Theatre Royal, talked about the importance of the building in historic terms but more importantly for him the importance of the building as providing a relevant space for entertainment and culture, especially in an area of the country where the theatre is not often considered as the first option for an evening out. As we would all agree if a build becomes

redundant then it is in danger of accelerated decay. Art spoke of the necessity of supporting contemporary theatre rather than purely using the theatre as a working museum and putting on traditional works. Finally, Liam Nabb, a successful local businessman, spoke about the importance of joined up thinking and working between local societies and preservation societies. He spoke of the benefits of forming a collaborative group made up of the individual groups that work to conserve local heritage. This makes seeking funding and looking at medium and long term futures for the town more efficient. In this way lessons can be learnt by more groups to avoid needless work and unnecessary drains on resources, individual skills can be shared and applications for financial assistance can be scheduled to avoid competition between local assets.

After a brief A.G.M. we enjoyed a very pleasant lunch on the veranda over looking the sea. The afternoon tours started with a very informative and entertaining look at the Old Town led by Nick Dermott. The area Nick described as it existed only a few years ago was barely recognisable today. There was a very high occupancy rate and many of the buildings had benefitted from repair and conservation grants. Many of the shops were used as galleries, cafés and restaurants. Although a sense that this wasn't just a gentrification of the area remained. Many practical businesses remained such as a hardware shop and a laundrette. Surprisingly a fine timber framed farmhouse survives just behind the narrow streets of the Old Town and seems a little lost surrounded by three storey Victorian terraces and modern infill residential buildings. But this helped to remind us of the relatively recent change that has affected coastal settlements with the birth of a holiday industry and greater travel opportunities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Nick finished in the square outside the town hall where Louise and Eddie walked us up to Cliftonville. We had an opportunity to discuss the future of Dalby Square with some residents but unfortunately there didn't seem to be a future as far as they were concerned. There is a distinct feeling of many communities existing side by side with little interest in forming relationships, in fact conscious antagonism from some sides. However this is beginning to change as more settled residents start to appreciate the benefits conservation area status would bring and how community groups can improve the built environment in order to improve the relationships between different groups.

Despite the economic and social problems that exist, Margate is a good example of how successful the historic environment can be as a catalyst for successful change and improvement. This is not due purely to money being thrown at the place year on year. Instead the success is due to a combination of active volunteers and interested individuals from the local community working together with the support of knowledgeable and

experienced professionals with a commitment to improving the town and using available funds intelligently. This work has had a real impact.

### **Timber cleaning seminar – 2<sup>nd</sup> November**

The decision to invite Dave Robinson of Sandpiper Restoration to lead a seminar on the cleaning of historic timber was taken as we thought the opportunity to consider and discuss the principle and details of timber cleaning would be well received. Many members have probably been asked if timber cleaning can be carried out and it is important that decisions are taken based on a good level of knowledge and understanding of the principle and techniques including the benefits and the pitfalls.

The well attended event was run a little differently than normal. Dave was keen to talk to the group around the tables rather than sat in front of him. This proved to be a good idea as rather than lecturing us and answering questions after, Dave had to contend with questions from the start. This meant that Dave had to jump about a bit in explaining techniques and approaches to his work but it also showed how committed he was to understanding a building and its history before embarking on any blasting work. It also showed how happy he was to answer, perhaps not antagonistic questioning but certainly earnest and sceptical questioning.

Dave has been involved with sandblasting work to historic buildings since he was a boy. His father started the company by accident but realised immediately that he would need a good understanding of historic buildings and historic timber in particular if he was going to continue carrying out this work. This enthusiasm for historic buildings was passed on to Dave throughout his apprenticeship. Dave showed us various types of sand and examples of timber before and after cleaning. However he was quick to explain that delicate cleaning is more about feel and distance from the piece of timber that it is about particle size and blast pressure; although these are important. When asked about passing on his knowledge and experience Dave thought it probably would not happen as the attention to detail and conscientious working methods do not come easily to those

who normally pick up a sand blast nozzle. And it was not enough to write down which grade of sand and which pressure should be used in which situation. We were shown photographs of cleaned timbers where taper burns, apotropaic marks and even historic beam painting had been uncovered after blasting. Dave suggested that in some delicate cases the use of chemicals and hand sanding would have damaged these examples of material culture.

This illustrates the crux of the argument. At what point do you decide which of any layer of material on historic timbers are more significant than another? Do you allow the cleaning of historic timbers in the hope of finding carpenters' or apotropaic marks and therefore further the appreciation and understanding of a building? Or do you consider that they may or may not be there and only allow the top layers of paint to be removed to reveal more historic paint? Or do you accept that the black paint on the beams is part of the story of the building and leave it rather than risk damaging any material including the timber below?

I came away with the distinct feeling that Dave was not promoting the idea of sandblasting as the answer to cleaning timbers. I accepted that Dave is a craftsman whose principle tool is a sand blast nozzle. This is not the case for many people carrying out this work. An interest in history is not enough. This was probably best illustrated by the examples Dave gave of work he will not carry out. This includes cleaning modern paint as the composition does not allow the blasting to be precise and gentle enough. Older paint cracks and falls away, modern paint has a rubbery character that bounces the particles back. This means a higher pressure or a closer distance between the nozzle and the timber is required, reducing control which raises the chance of irreparable damage greatly. The removal of tar based products is also something that cannot be undertaken without severe damage to timbers. In these circumstances there is no way to remove the material without negative consequences and it must be accepted as unfortunate. The use of sandblasting to clean timbers is a controversial one but in certain circumstances may well benefit the building and our understanding of it as a heritage asset. With all works to a historic building the tradesman and craftsman must be judged on their



knowledge, experience and ability. In this trade there are too few people who understand and work with a conservation philosophy and perhaps this is the problem rather than the sandblasting technique itself?

### **Membership seminar – 22<sup>nd</sup> November**

Beverley Mogford gave a very comprehensive and perceptive talk to a group working towards full membership of the Institute. She explained the process, introduced the new application form and explained the important points to consider when applying for full membership and why these things are important. Beverley illustrated these points with examples of how to show each of the competencies have been met. As this was the first seminar of this type the branch has run we were keen that it would be a real help to prospective members. The feedback was very positive and many thought much more enthusiastic about applying.

### **2012**

The branch committee is already working on organising future events. We are always looking for ideas so if you have any please do let one of us know. If you would like help with attaining full membership a number of us are happy to talk to you about it and run through applications before you submit them. Please do contact one of us individually or through the branch email address. The Institute is continuing the work on governance review and further information will be available as the process moves forward. There is no right or wrong time to get involved and share your views. So please do contact a committee member or send your comments direct to the national office. Merry Christmas and see you next year.

Seán Rix  
South East Branch Chair