

Message from the Chairman of Kent County Council



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Thanks to those who have been reading my updates and have been kind about them.

I made a state visit (my little jest) yesterday to the Aspinall Foundation at Port Lympne with Mark Dance, Cabinet Member for Economic Development. As the name suggests, this is a charity that carries on the founder John Aspinall's work in the area of endangered species and they protect vulnerable specimens by removing them to Kent until they are able to be returned to the wild. They have a 600 acre site, employ 500 people, care for many hundreds of animals and are one of the county's most significant leisure destinations. Their £15m turnover is derived from visitors and the high quality accommodation they have available, much of it with amazing views of Romney Marsh, Dungeness, the English Channel and distant France. They have outposts in Africa and the business is principled and highly ethical.

We had a flag-raising event on Merchant Navy Day earlier this month. It's our first time and celebrates those who go to sea to help bring 95% of the UK's imports to our shores. We are now rather less of a maritime nation that we once were. I used to work for a shipping line that, in the 1970's, owned 150 ships, most of them British-built. When I retired from the industry it had six ships, all chartered and foreign-crewed, and now it does not exist. The Merchant Navy kept Britain alive during the two world wars and many died in the process. The raising of the red ensign on the roof of County Hall in response to a bugle call remembered the men who died and the event meant a lot to the veterans who attended. Whether we repeat the event depends on next year's Chairman, but he's ex-Royal Navy and likely to be sympathetic to the idea.

The Countess of Wessex is attending Rochester Cathedral next week. I shall have to stand in line (there are strict rules of precedence) and not speak unless I'm spoken to. I shall probably faint, or the High Sheriff will tie my shoelaces together and I'll fall over.

A member of staff sent me a line about the Edwardian Chairman's Suite and its gaslights, coal fires and wind-up clocks. Apparently her father worked in County Hall in the 1940's, and she asked me if I had seen any ghosts. Well, I hadn't, but I am aware that a Chairman of the Council towards the end of the 1890's disappeared and was never heard of again. There are basements and other subterranean chambers without number below County Hall and sometimes at dusk underneath my office one can hear muffled crashes and a sound similar to that of great chains being dragged across a floor. Then the gaslights flicker and I hurriedly leave.