

Tunnel Times

Ramsgate Tunnels Heritage Group

Issue 1

NEWSLETTER

August 2011

RAMSGATE HAS TUNNEL VISION

Many of our new Friends may not know much about the Ramsgate Tunnels Heritage Group (RTHG) plans to use part of the town's famous 3½ miles of wartime tunnels. The group was set up in early 2011 with a vision to reopen the network of tunnels as an all weather heritage attraction dedicated to the rich history of the town.

The group is lead by the Mayor of Ramsgate Councillor David Green who is supported by a team of local volunteers with occupations and expertise including Civil Engineering, Professional Historian, Specialists in Museum and Heritage Attractions, Conservation and Preservation Management, Media Consultancy, Town District and County Councillors, Public Relations, Photography, Local Business, Acting, Writing, Civil Service, Underground Archaeology, Fire, Police and Ambulance Services.

Phase one of the project is to carry out surveys to establish the true condition of the tunnels and investigate the safety aspects required to reopen them to the public. The culmination of this research will be a feasibility study which will investigate the next phase of creating a heritage attraction and venue as a lasting memorial to this important and unique part of the town's history. Depending on the results of the surveys it's hoped that limited public access will be available soon after the completion of phase one.

At the same time research will be carried out into the history of the design construction and use of the tunnels before during and after World War II.

There's Light at the End of the Tunnel

Early in 2011 the group made an application for funding to the Jubilee People's Millions lottery fund to kick start the project. The People's Millions work with ITV to present projects from each television area and invite viewers to vote for the project of their choice. RTHG organised a local campaign which created a tremendous amount of interest. The people of Ramsgate united in their support and have won a £53,000 grant to kick-start the project.

At the time of writing, funds have yet to be received from the Jubilee People's Millions but we're assured they will arrive in due course. Discussions have already taken place with regard to the all important condition surveys of the tunnels and as soon as funds become available these surveys and other aspects of the project will commence.

A.B.C. Kempe

The Top Hat Mayor recalls his approach to government which led to the construction of Ramsgate's tunnels. From his book *Midst Bands and Bombs* . . .

When I became Mayor I was determined to persevere with the scheme, so I enlisted the services of our member, Capt. H. H. Balfour, who arranged another interview for us at the Home Office. He also got Sir John Anderson to agree in principle with our proposals.

Margate, in the meantime had evolved a scheme, so they accompanied us. I headed the deputation and we had with us our Borough Surveyor, Mr. R. D. Brimmell, the Town Clerk, the Chief Constable and Alderman Huddleston.

We sat around the usual type of Government conference table ; the chairman looked austere and ready for the fray. He turned to me, " Well, Mr. Mayor," he said, " What fresh news can you tell us about this project." My reply was " We have come up here to-day meaning business !"

He sat upright in his chair and seemed a bit

ruffled. However I carried on and for fifteen minutes I placed the case before him. Alderman Huddleston backed me up, followed by our Borough Surveyor, whose plans were wonderful ; his arguments in favour were good and helped a lot.

I had one sharp tussle with the chairman when he appeared to be putting obstacles in the way, but generally I thought we had put up a good show.

FRIENDS ARE INVITED

The group will be holding a social evening for Friends of Ramsgate Tunnels on Friday 16th Sept. when we can meet in an informal atmosphere and discuss plans for the future. It will also be an ideal opportunity for you to get to know some of the people behind the project and exchange ideas.

The event will take place at the Oddfellows Hall in High Street, Ramsgate. We'll contact you again when details have been finalised.

R.D. Brimmell B.Sc.,A.M.I.C.E

"Dick" Brimmell was the Borough Engineer who masterminded the design and construction of the Tunnels. As the second war to be fought in a generation loomed ever closer Brimmell began work on designing the tunnels as early as 1936. He was also ahead of the game in the 1950's during the height of the Cold War when he drew up little known plans to reopen the existing deep shelter system and construct a further 2½ miles of tunnels under the Newington Housing Estate.

As part of our research and as a matter of courtesy we would like to make contact with his family. Can you help trace any family members?



Did You Live in the Tunnels?

Did you or any of your relatives live in the tunnels during World War II? If so, the group would like to hear from you.

An important part of the tunnel project is to record oral histories of those who used the tunnels during the war years to bring alive the experience of being bombed, shelled and living below ground. Once recorded these memories will be catalogued and archived for the benefit of future generations and may be used in audio presentations within the proposed heritage attraction. If you have memories or know of anyone who has please contact us using the details below.

Do You Have Photos?

During the war period a camera would have been a luxury item and with constant bombing and shelling, taking a souvenir photo probably wasn't the greatest of priorities. The end result of this is that there are very few pictures of life in the tunnels.

The group are searching for pictures and stories to help provide accurate reconstructions of the tunnels as they were. If you can help with photos the group would love to hear from you.

Can You Help With Research?

Work will start shortly on researching the history of the tunnels. RTHG are looking for people with experience in research and archiving to help with training community volunteers to assist with the project. Familiarity with local archives and catalogues will be an advantage.

The Railway Tunnel section was opened in 1864 by the Kent Coast Railway but initially it appears there are few documents available relating to its construction. The chalk tunnels were constructed in 1939 using direct labour from the Borough of Ramsgate and Francois Cementation Co. Ltd. as contractors.

Records are known to exist in various repositories including The National Archives and various centres across Kent. Museums and newspaper archives across the country are also a good source for background research. Reports on the tunnels can even be found online in American newspapers of the war period.

Contact the Group

If you would like to contact the group please email in the first instance to:

admin@ramsgatetunnels.org

www.ramsgatetunnels.org

Ramsgate Tunnels Heritage Group is supported by

