



Friends, Ramsgatonians, lend me your ears...

FRIDAY SEPT 16th - Oddfellows Hall hosts over 250 Friends of the Tunnels



A capacity crowd, with standing room only, attended the first meeting of the Friends of Ramsgate Tunnels on Friday, September 16th. The meeting was arranged to thank everyone for their valued support. Their votes in the ITV Median competition were instrumental in us winning our funding from the Jubilee People's Millions of the Big Lottery Fund.

Members of the Project Team were on hand to answer questions and a multimedia presentation was given showing the history of the Tunnels from their early beginnings in the 1860's. Our current plans and those for the future were also outlined, as well as a witty description of the selection process when we won our funding.

The Project Team, now buoyed by the support we received on Friday are busying themselves with the next elements of the project. We are currently recording the stories of our senior citizens who remember sheltering in the Tunnels during the war, and using them as a short cut to get around town. We have also

recorded many fond memories of the World Scenic Railway which travelled through the Tunnels from the sands to Hereson Road during the bustling 50's & 60's.

We are also getting ready to appoint specialists to survey the system to assess its condition and to cost the work which needs done to allow the public to enter under today's stringent health and safety regulations. It's a sad reflection the Tunnels, which once saved so many lives have, over time, become considered as a risk to our health and safety. We aim to do whatever is necessary to make them safe again, so residents and visitors alike can once again enjoy the experience of Ramsgate's underground world.

The Project Team has been overwhelmed by the level of support in the community and will be contacting those who have offered to help us. We would like to offer our thanks and appreciation to the Thai Orchid restaurant on West Cliff Arcade and Bartlett & White greengrocers in Kings Street for donating the raffle prizes.

Oral Histories

Can you help us build a unique record of the Tunnels in wartime?

Efforts continue to identify and contact Ramsgatonians who have memories of using the Tunnels during the WWII. So far our register contains details of 35 names, mostly people who are still living locally - though we have been in touch with contacts as far as Yorkshire and even Cyprus.

Our first tranche of money has enabled us to buy a quality digital audio recorder, and already we have been able to put on record the memories of our first five eyewitnesses.

We have decided to extend the Oral Histories by adding a photographic archive as well. Respondents have so far been very generous in lending us their wartime pictures, which we are scanning and adding to our growing library. When the Tunnels are opened to the public, these images will add a very human dimension and a vivid sense of actuality to the voices we hear



telling their story.

Soon we will be running a scheme to train volunteers to become Oral Historians - working with us and with our generous eyewitnesses to build up a unique & valuable permanent historical record.

If you, or anyone you know has memories of the Tunnels in war time, please let us know. Or if you know of someone who would be interested in training as an Oral Historian we'd love to hear from them.

YOUR MONTHLY UPDATE:

What's been happening Peter?



PETER BORROUGH
Project Manager

We won £53,000 from the Jubilee People's Millions Fund of the National Lottery. Not a lot when you consider we have over a mile of 150 year old Victorian railway tunnel which has been closed and had no significant maintenance for 45 years. Add to that miles of mostly unlined narrow tunnels, that were built in a hurry just before the war, and have been abandoned for almost 75 years, with entrances blocked and ventilation facilities abandoned, and you have a massive task just to find out their current condition and what work is necessary to make them suitable for public access in today's risk averse society.

That is the task the Ramsgate Tunnels Group has set themselves. We want to gather all the information necessary to enable a robust business case to be developed for the re-opening of Ramsgate Tunnels as a heritage resource, all weather tourist attraction and iconic venue.

Although the Ramsgate Tunnels Group has a talented team with a wide range of specialist skills at their disposal, augmented by a growing keen and supportive Friends Organisation, it will still be necessary to employ a specialist organisation with recognised qualifications to carry out most of the work. The Tunnels are owned by Thanet District Council whose responsibilities are defined by law. They are accountable and they have to check that only those who are properly qualified and who have carefully worked out procedures are permitted to undertake the work. The Tunnels Group entirely shares the objective, both to ensure compliance with all the complex statutes, regulations and codes of practice which govern this type of work but also to make sure we get the best possible advice available on which to base our business case.

Over the next few weeks we will be sending out Tender Documents for a range of surveys to establish the condition of the network which is accessible from the old railway tunnel portal by Ramsgate Sands. We will also be letting a contract to establish all the laws and regulations with which the operator would have to comply with to operate the system as a publically accessible venue and tourist attraction. It is only when we have the results of all of this work that we can get on with the more interesting work of developing our vision and working out how much we will have to raise to make it a reality.

Do you, or anyone you know have any recollections of the Tunnels during WWII?

We'd like to hear stories of you sheltering in the Tunnels during an Air Raid, or recalling tales of the train line running along the sea-front.





The 'Top Hat' Mayor & the Air Raid shelters

By October 1939 Britain was at war with Germany and with memories of the First World War still weighing heavily on many people's minds Ramsgate was expecting the worst. Experience had shown that Ramsgate's chalk bedrock could be used to good effect to provide shelter from the inevitable and imminent bombing. Officers of the Borough Council also knew this and as early as 1936 had begun to prepare plans for a scheme which "if carried out could provide extensive underground protection on a scale most likely to be adequate and effective in the circumstances".

Much debate took place in Committee with regard to the shelter scheme and on 2nd June 1938 the Borough Engineer put his final plans for the Deep Shelter Tunnel System before the Council. In the debate that followed many were against the scheme as they felt there were better ways to spend the Town's money. The scheme was discussed at length and it was agreed to defer the plan rather than dismiss it. Following Germany's occupation of Austria in 1938 the scheme was again brought before the Borough Council and this time it was agreed to submit it to Government for approval and funding.

Perhaps not unsurprisingly the scheme was rejected. Government policy with regard to air raid shelters was clear and was summarised as: "The construction on any extensive scale of shelters which would be proof against direct hits by bombs is impracticable. Such protection could be obtained only by means of concrete structures of great thickness or correspondingly costly works of equivalent strength, and apart from any other considerations the cost would be prohibitive. The government cannot therefore undertake to provide money towards the construction of public bomb-proof shelters. On the other hand, effective protection against ballast and splinters from bombs can be obtained at comparatively small cost, and it will be for occupiers of premises to provide this for themselves and their households, and where necessary for their workers and customers. Specific advice on this subject will be made generally available."

A second application was made to Government during the 1938 Munich Crisis when Germany threatened to go to war with Czechoslovakia, but again the scheme was rejected. Borough Engineer Dick Brimmell had no option but to commence work on officially approved measures to provide sandbagged trenches covered by concrete roofing on open spaces around the town.

Mayor A.B.C. Kempe starts work at the Harbour



Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain return from talks with Adolf Hitler after having agreed terms that he famously stated would bring "peace in our time". History recalls that this was not to be the case but thankfully the hastily erected shelters weren't immediately needed.

Peace in our time

In February of 1939, as Hitler's intentions with regard to Czechoslovakia became clearer, a third application for approval to build the air-raid tunnel system was submitted to the Lord Privy Seal and correspondence was taking place but matters were moving slowly. The Borough's Air Raid Precautions Committee agreed to leave a further approach to the Member of Parliament in the hands of the Mayor with a view to hastening an appointment. The Mayor at the time was Alderman A.B.C. Kempe, Ramsgate's very own "Top Hat Mayor". Alderman Kempe was a flamboyant character, a quality which no doubt helped his successful intervention. The Member of Parliament Captain H.H. Balfour arranged another interview with the Home Office. Captain Balfour also persuaded the Lord Privy Seal Sir John Anderson to agree in principle with the proposals.

On the 20th March 1939 a letter was received from the Air Raid Precautions Department of the Home Office conveying the decision of the Lord Privy Seal as follows:

- That the Corporation may proceed at once with the improvement of access to the Railway Tunnel and caves as proposed in the Air Raid Precautions Scheme and the construction of sections designated BA, BB and BC (the main system) of the new tunnel scheme.
- That the sections CF and CD (extensions from Ellington Road to the Refuse Destructor in Princes Road and to Southwood Sports Ground in Princes Avenue) of the new tunnel scheme are regarded as questionable and as calling for further examination,
- That the sections KJ and M (Whitehall and Dumpton Housing Estates) are to be definitely deprecated.

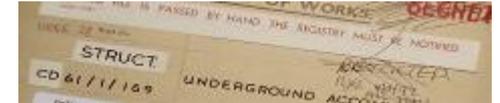
Thanks to the determined efforts by the Borough Council and contrary to Government policy Ramsgate was to have its own underground city which was to become the most extensive underground public shelter system in the country, if not the world.

Teaching the Tunnels

When enlisting as Friends of Ramsgate Tunnels some of our supporters told us they were teachers or from a teaching background. Following a positive response to a request from the Group, work is about to start on creating a Teaching Resource Pack that will enable teachers locally and nationally to teach World War II History using Ramsgate's heritage and of course it's famous tunnels.

The National Curriculum requires pupils to look at history in a variety of ways and it's hoped we can produce a resource that will enable Ramsgate's heritage to fulfil some of these requirements.

History on the move



Most of Ramsgate Borough Council papers are currently stored at East Kent Archives at Dover. These archives are about to close and be transferred to a new facility being built in Maidstone. Whilst the all new Kent History and Library Centre will no doubt be a great improvement but is not due to open until spring 2012. The Dover facility will close on the 14th of November 2011.

This gives us a problem in that we need to urgently carry out research into the tunnels before closure at Dover. We have compiled a list of references from the online catalogue which need to be checked and will no doubt lead to further research.

If you can spare any time to undertake some research please contact us as a matter of urgency. Access to the Archive Centre is free but you will need to register for a reader's ticket. All that's required for this is a passport size photo and proof of I.D. A driving licence or utility bill is ideal for this. The reader's ticket will give you access to most archives in Kent.

Please contact philspain@ramsgatetunnels.org

Survey Update

One of the key issues for the tunnel project is how to mitigate risks involved in taking people underground. Perhaps the main risk is that of fire which has to be clearly understood and managed. For this purpose the Group have engaged the services of the Building Research Establishment to undertake a study of current legislation and to investigate other underground facilities to establish a benchmark for our project.

The Building Research Establishment is a former UK government establishment which is now an independent and impartial, research-based consultancy, testing and training organisation. Any profits derived from its activities are fed back into further research, training and development within the building industry via the BRE Trust.



The Ramsgate Tunnels Project is supported by



Ramsgate Town Council