

## The Ramsgate Society – Marsh Civic Society 2013

The Ramsgate Society is based in the seaside town of Ramsgate in Kent and has been caring for its architectural heritage since 1964. For initiating and driving a highly successful project to save and restore 14 Edwardian seaside shelters which were in a dilapidated state and in danger of being lost, they have won a coveted Marsh award.



We have been speaking to Ken Reid, from Ramsgate Civic Society and project manager for the restoration of the shelters, to find out a bit more about the society and how it went about its most recent achievement.

What makes Ramsgate special, apart from it being one of the Cinque Ports and having Laura Sandys, Chair of APPG, as its MP, is that it is a very special and undervalued town. It is the 9<sup>th</sup> most deprived ward in Kent out of 283 places (2010 figures) but has so much potential to become the best seaside resort in the country!

Royalty, rich, famous, and ordinary folk used to promenade on the Ramsgate seafront in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and they have left a legacy of beautifully crafted architecture, dating back to Georgian times. When entering the town through a tree lined avenue, one passes “The Grange” a Grade I listed building, built and occupied by A.W.N.Pugin (1812 – 1852). After just a few more corners, the sea comes into view and the magnificent and unique Ramsgate Royal Harbour is laid out below the cliff’s edge. The town nestles around the harbour in a south facing bay which rivals Cannes on a sunny day.

The Ramsgate Society was set up in 1964 in response to concerns that much of the town’s valuable heritage was under threat. The first campaign was saving Townley House, followed by Glynn’s Clock, Queens Court and a series of other prominent historic places. For the Millennium, the society produced a millennium book which documents much of the town’s historical interest. Currently, with the society’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary approaching and a general move towards localism, the society is increasingly becoming involved in the future direction of overall town planning.

The project which led to the restoration of the shelters began in a simple way – as these things do! We found out that the council owned the shelters, but they had been leased in bulk to a profit making quango. As there was no profit in shelters, they were neglected over many years. The Edwardian promenade shelters were rotting on the seafront with no commercial means to support their restoration. The Local Authority covering the whole of Thanet had numerous calls on its limited finances and could only suggest demolition as a means to resolve the problem with the shelters. The Ramsgate Society could not let this happen and on deeper discussion with the Conservation Department of the Council, the Society was offered a 90% Townscape Heritage Initiative grant if they took over the maintenance of the shelters. The THI grant was a joint initiative between Thanet District Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund. It took 18 months to negotiate the changeover of the lease to the Ramsgate Society, which was achieved with only one week to spare on the grant application deadline. We were granted a 24 year lease on all 14 huts.



We were very fortunate in that joint members of the society, Richard and Janet Mason, have a website with old postcards of Ramsgate displayed. When we were searching for details of the shelters to restore them authentically, we came across one particular postcard which was much clearer than the rest and it was able provided detailed information on the original design. We agreed with the Masons that this postcard would be used as our main image for the restoration.

The society then employed an architect to supervise the restoration and proceeded to obtain tenders for the works. The lowest tender, plus architects fees, plus VAT equalled £507,000 so the society had to raise 10% which was £50,700.

This was a first for the Ramsgate Society and a first for “localism”. We found there were no precedents in the form of lease clauses and insurance policies to cover the situations we were facing. There were long negotiations with the council and a resolve not to give up on the project was necessary. There came a point in the project before everything was resolved, where to admit defeat would have had worse repercussions than to say “we go ahead whatever”!

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At first the Ramsgate Society thought that raising 10% of the project cost would be the most difficult, but in fact it was raised in just 1 year. The society formed a small fund raising sub-committee and had some preliminary mentoring by Funding Buddies. We researched various options for funding, the most successful turned out to be offering a sponsorship plaque on a shelter if £3,600 was donated. Generous charities and foundations, the County Council, the local town council, local residents associations all took up the challenge and came up with sponsorship.

The project was professionally managed by our architect, in close collaboration with our project team. The lowest tender was accepted and a pilot scheme of one large and one small shelter was commenced. Many problems were ironed out on the pilot scheme and we felt confident to proceed with the remaining 12 shelters. This work commenced and within a few months, the main contractor went into liquidation. Fortunately, we managed to hold on to an imminent interim payment and the contract was re-negotiated with the ironwork sub-contractor, whose work amounted to almost 70% of the overall. We completed the work successfully with the newly appointed main contractor.

The first shelter was opened in April 2011 by Polly Evans of BBC Look East, who had expressed a love of Ramsgate on TV. Also present was our local MP Laura Sandys, who has been very supportive of the project throughout and helped smooth progress at times of uncertainty.



I think it's fair to say that all were suitably impressed by the finished result. There had been some scepticism throughout town before the project commenced as to whether it would ever be carried out, but following its completion the project has given hope to many individuals and organisations in the town that things can be made to happen for Ramsgate, which previously had been a matter of despair.

The project is now complete and everyone has heralded it as a triumph for the society and the town. The downside is that there is at least 12 years of maintenance to be organised to keep these shelters in good order for the period of the lease. Not everyone appreciates nice surroundings and we have received some vandalism on the shelters. The vandalism consisted of some 11-12 year old children throwing stones at the glass in the shelters. We had originally specified laminated glass similar to car windscreens which are everywhere in the public domain and rarely get smashed. There must be something about static buildings which attracts vandalism, unlike cars. The children were spotted whilst carrying out the act and recognised, so the police paid them a call and they admitted the offence. Being under age they we just cautioned and we hope that will be the end of the problem.

“We can fix the shelters, but we cannot fix society”.

Occasional graffiti can also be a problem but this is mostly with felt tipped pens and we have the correct solvents and sand paper to remove it quickly. If it disappears as soon as it is written the perpetrators get discouraged and move on. The CCTV installation at present is only an occasional visit by mobile camera, but if problems persist we would consider asking adjoining building owners to allow use of simple monitoring equipment from their premises. However, now the glass smashing incident has been resolved, I do not think there will be further major problems. We have advertised the incidents in the community and the majority of locals appreciate the considerable effort which has been put into the shelters renovation, they therefore help to monitor them for The Ramsgate Society.

This work has definitely put The Ramsgate Society on the map. It received a commendation from the Angel Awards, as well as the Marsh Christian Award. The Society continues to fight for Ramsgate and is finding that it is being consulted as a matter of course on any matters which may require input about conservation in the town.

The society's membership stays at around the 600 mark, as we lose older members and others move away. But they are being replaced with a new breed of member who is much more aware of the role which The Ramsgate Society can play in making the town a better place to live. We will continue this type of work and given a sustained effort, we feel that the fortunes of Ramsgate will be turned around and with the new high speed link to London (opened 2009) it will become a destination and residence of choice by discerning Londoners looking for open air living.