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Roger De Haan

Seaside saga

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On April 28 last year Folkestone was shaken to its foundations. At 8am, an earthquake measuring 4.2 on the Richter scale struck just off the coast, cutting power to thousands of homes, leaking gas into the streets, evacuating hundreds and closing schools. Only one woman was injured, but if you walk round the town today, the scars are still visible. Cracks jag down walls. Broken tiles are stacked up in gardens. When you look at a row of houses it's hard to immediately identify what's wrong. Then you realise: none of them have a chimney. It's like looking at a line of people who have only one ear.

Retired RAF officer David Simpson, a Folkestone resident for more than 40 years, gives me a tour of the town. First stop is the "Gaza Strip", the none-too-affectionate nickname for an area of cobbled streets round the harbour, all boarded-up chip shops and cheapo nightspots. We stop for coffee in the Metropole, one of the hulking white-stuccoed hotels on the clifftop, now mostly turned into apartments. The next day I visit Folkestone Harbour railway station: an evocative tip since the ferries left town in 1994. "Folkestone is going to the dogs," sighs Simpson as the gulls mew overhead. And that earthquake can't have helped? "Oh, well, yes. I suppose so."

For though major seismic activity might upset most towns, Folkestone is well accustomed to being a hostage to outside forces. Seventy miles from London, 20 from France, surrounded by chalk downland, it minded its own business as a minor Kentish fishing village until the advent of the railways, when Victorian businessmen built the ferry link to Boulogne and entrepreneurs slapped grand hotels along the prom. During the second world war it became the main embarkation point to Europe but, as the troops piled in, the town emptied. “The locals heard the Germans had reached the Channel,” says Dr Lesley Harding, of the Folkestone People’s History Centre, “and they literally got up from the breakfast table and went. There was terrible looting.”

Enter Sidney De Haan. A pastry chef from east London, he’d moved to the coast to take over a hotel. But in 1951 he was stuck: for six months each year the 12-bedroom Rhodesia lay empty, bricks whipped by salty gales, lounge like a tomb. Bankruptcy beckoned. The only people who could take off-season breaks, he realised, were those who could least afford to do so. So he parachuted them in, setting up the Old People’s Travel Bureau and bussing down hundreds of Yorkshire pensioners for £6.50 a week full board.

Fast forward half a century and Sidney’s son, Roger, was also stuck. Not for money: he’d just sold Saga – as the Bureau, which had diversified into insurance, radio and cruises had been renamed – for £1.35bn; but stuck in a premature retirement funk, twiddling his thumbs in a town that seemed similarly in the doldrums. For even Saga’s presence in the town, employing over 2,000, couldn’t rouse Folkestone from its spreading inertia. The one redevelopment plan on the cards, courtesy of large-scale landlord Jimmy Godden, was a scheme that included a casino, cinema and bowling alley on the concrete seafront. It wasn’t terribly popular. So Roger decided to take action and do his own bit of bussing in. Not pensioners this time (Folkestone is no longer short of them), but artists. De Haan’s regeneration project is ambitious beyond East Kent’s wildest dreams. Norman Foster has drafted the designs; there will be a glam marina, a performing arts wing of the Canterbury Christ Church University, 1,000 new homes, space-age travelators linking cliff and harbour, an ice rink and a final bill of about £800m.

And at the heart of De Haan's plan is the Creative Quarter: a resident community of painters, sculptors, writers and musicians; the Gaza Strip will become a pedestrianised paradise peopled by cutting-edge talent freed up financially by the peppercorn rents. De Haan has set up a charitable trust to renovate properties and retain them on 125-year leases to guard against artists being priced out post-**gentrification** – twice as likely once a high-speed rail link to London opens in 2009 which should slash journey times to under an hour. And in June this year the other company in De Haan's regeneration scheme, the Creative Foundation, will host the first ever Folkestone Triennial, with contributions from 32 international talents, including Tracey Emin, who's producing bronze baby clothes ("like a mitten or a sock") in tribute to the town's legendary teen pregnancy rates.

But can arts-led regeneration really succeed? Is it possible artificially to engineer a creative movement? And how much effect can it really have on the environment around? Even De Haan's mild-mannered right-hand man Nick Ewbank, someone who has worked in art centres in Exeter and London, concedes the plan is something of a punt. "It's an experiment in how far you can push the boundaries of the arts in affecting socio- and economic regeneration. I think it will work. But you never know."

Others are more sceptical. "Nobody goes to Gateshead to see the 'Angel of the North'," says David Lee, editor of modern arts magazine Jackal. "It's just something you glance at on the way. Visitors simply aren't drawn by modern art, and locals will only get the most infinitesimal benefit. It's all bluster to get lottery funding." Some Folkestonians, too, fear their town may become a honeypot for regeneration professionals. I meet up with ex-mayor Janet Andrews, a long-time resident of Folkestone's less wealthy east end.

Formerly on the catering staff at Saga, she won't hear a word against De Haan but will say plenty, mostly unprintable, about the people she believes surround him.

Perhaps it's unrealistic to expect the town to be anything but resistant to change. "For a start," says local history enthusiast Brian McBride, "these ideas, and the people suggesting them, are alien. Second, we've learnt that these changes are often transient, and that what's promised isn't always delivered. After the newcomers have left, the locals are left to sort out the mess."

Continual false dawns have meant the townspeople are increasingly nostalgic, unmoved by modern gloss and promises. Retired bookseller Nick Spurrier says: "They don't want to go forward. They somehow think they can go back to the days when Folkestone was a fantastic seaside resort."

Modern art certainly isn't high on their agenda. A former teacher recently moved to the town from East Anglia told me she'd felt shocked by her neighbours' indifference to the intrinsic beauty of their dilapidated Victorian flat. "It's different here. They see art as snobby and elitist, nothing to do with their lives whatsoever." Though the wealthier west end of town has a middle-class core, they're still sceptical of modern art. Simpson and I stop to admire a statue of an enormous hare, or, possibly, rabbit. "It looks like a joke," he says. Geographically, Folkestone may be within spitting distance of the capital. Culturally, admits Nick Ewbank, "it's a million miles away and if I had a main worry, it would be for the potential for 'them and us' tensions."

That seems spot on, but if there's one man who can pull it off, it's De Haan. He has integrity on his side, for a start. No one questions his intentions. His early ambitions to enter the church suggest a deep-rooted faith.

He's a decent man, the father of eight children, and is pleasingly uncomfortable in the limelight. But the ace up his sleeve is that he's been doing this sort of thing for years. Discreet diplomacy is the key to Saga's success: if they hadn't catered for everyone, their customer base would simply have died off.

Now he intends to apply corporate logic to a civic environment. For while some might hanker after Folkestone's heyday as a middle-class resort, a return to that is simply unfeasible. And what used to be the town's biggest draw, the sea, has become its greatest problem.

The harbour no longer works properly and the shingle spit is impossible to launch even a dinghy from. "So the Channel", says Peter Bettley, the Creative Foundation's press officer, "has just become a big brick wall that halves your catchment area. The trick is to see how the sea could help it become a whole different sort of place, a good place to live." De Haan agrees: "The town needs rebranding. It simply hasn't reinvented itself."

The collapse of its tourist industry is evidently fundamental – in one Folkestone ward unemployment tops 10 per cent. But despite cheap property, new businesses have also been reluctant to move in, perceiving the local workforce as suffering from a skills shortage. And it's true that poor schools and no nearby university have led to a brain drain.

Work has already begun to combat this: last September the doors opened on the new Folkestone Academy, a 1,400- pupil secondary school on the site of an ailing comprehensive, again designed by Norman Foster, with a £2m leg-up from De Haan. It makes tough demands on its pupils: the day lasts from 8am to 5pm, and in the first month 100 of them were suspended for unacceptable language or behaviour. It hit the headlines last year when two teachers were suspended after a classroom prank involving a boy being tied up went wrong. But, despite this teething trouble, it's hard to imagine the academy will be allowed to fail.

While Folkestone may score highly on the deprivation charts in percentage terms, its small population (about 50,000) means it can't compete for funding with larger cities. What's intriguing here is that although the locals feel disenfranchised, they've remained relatively passive about it. "Our problem, especially in the east end of town," says Janet Andrews, "is that we haven't got enough self-belief. My mantra is: nobody's better than me, everybody's my equal." That she still feels the need to repeat it, a year after ending her tenure as mayor, is revealing.

And while the residents are a product of this environment, so too is the council. There's a sense that the local authority, Shepway District Council, has found it easier to close public facilities than tackle any problems. For example, Folkestone's fine Roman remains were unearthed in the 1920s only to be abruptly bricked-up 30 years later. The rather tired town museum is due not to be revamped but downgraded, a move that may well lead to its closure. A default defeatism seems to pervade.

It is possible to be even more cynical about this. Paul Rennie runs an upmarket design shop on Tontine Street, commuting into London four days a week to teach at Central St Martins. Although he is an admirer of De Haan and his plans, he believes it may be in the council's interests to plead poverty. "They would be massively inconvenienced if Folkestone became more uniformly middle class. Out would go their funding opportunities and in would come a much a more vocal and mobilised constituency."

Rennie sees De Haan's wallet as presenting a very rare opportunity. "It's *Passport to Pimlico* territory. We could have a really interesting cultural, economic and educational environment free of local government interference. And it might be that the council would be only too delighted to hand it over."

Stephen Ladyman, Labour MP for nearby Thanet South, agrees – at least in part. "It's acceptable for an individual to gamble with their own money, but not with the public purse. And here you've got a guy with a billion pounds sloshing round in the bank who wants to spend it on the town. Margate and Hastings would kill for someone like De Haan."

As you travel round east Kent, it is evident that, while odd pockets of Folkestone could benefit from some tarting up, compared with many of its neighbours – Margate, Ramsgate, Hastings, Herne Bay, Cliftonville – the town is a beacon of moneyed prosperity. But then those places in the greatest need are not always those that get regenerated.

“Folkestone will be transformed,” says Rennie, “but it will be transformed by the railway. Roger De Haan ...is a good man and a good landlord but Folkestone will realise its potential anyway. It only needs a little push; in fact, it’s going to get the most enormous kick.”

The inaugural Folkestone Triennial exhibition opens on June 14 2008.

www.folkestonetriennial.org.uk

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