A DEPARTURE FOR DOVER

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Photography
Courtesy of artists



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"I'm Looking Out For You" Charles Holland Architects ©Tomas Fabian

This summer has seen the launch of a new Dover arts festival. *You can reach the world from Dover 2023* is the first event of its kind in the town, a four-month-long showcase of art, music, architecture, talks, walks and happenings. The festival has been conceived and curated by Dover Arts Development (DAD), an artist-led organisation responsible for a remarkable output of cultural projects in the town since it was set up in 2008.

We all know that Dover has an incredible history. Its castle and white cliffs are recognised the world over as an arrival point to England and the UK. The town hosts sites of huge archaeological importance such as the Roman Painted House and it contains numerous architectural gems from the medieval Maison Dieu to the seaside regency pomp of Waterloo Crescent.

The ferries that continually ply their way in and out of the eastern docks and the lorries that drive on and off in long snaking lines offer another kind of spectacle and a contemporary sense that Dover is profoundly connected to the rest of the world. Dover is a gateway, a place of arrivals and departures celebrated in literature, film and music. But it is also a place where people live, work and make culture and this can sometimes be forgotten.

Contemporary Dover can feel a little beleaguered, the poster child of lorry parks and the national psychodrama of Brexit. Politicians use it as an opportunity to mouth tough-sounding soundbites about small boat arrivals. And it has some undeniable problems. The docks and lorries dominate the town, cutting it off from the seafront. The high street features empty shop fronts and the town contains some of the poorest wards in the country.

It is important to counteract some of these narratives whilst recognising the challenges the town faces. What's different about *You can reach the world from Dover* is that it has been developed by artists who have chosen to live and work in the town and the focus has been on showcasing what's happening there already. It is not a "normal" arts festival either. Performances take place in spaces and buildings that are normally kept under lock and key. Exhibitions are sited not in neutral gallery spaces but in places pregnant with meaning and relevance to the town. A programme of walks ranges across Dover and its surrounding landscape, exploring its forgotten edges, its rich geology and its history of political radicalism.

One of the festival's larger commissions is *I'm Looking Out For You*, a temporary lighthouse on Dover's seafront designed by my own practice, Charles Holland Architects. Located at Clocktower Square on the harbour, the structure offers a symbolic and literal meeting point for the festival's events. Constructed from scaffolding and printed fabric it also lights up at night to become a highly visible beacon. It is a deliberate gesture of care towards visitors to Dover wherever they come from.

Musicians Richard Bundy and Anna Phoebe have contributed a series of intimate musical performances. Taking place in the Grand Shaft (a 19th-century triple spiral staircase that once linked the harbour to the army barracks on the Western Heights above), St Edmund's (a tiny medieval chapel) and the Maison Dieu, Anna and Richard's intense and moving compositions are part of *Dover Unlocked*, an exploration of the town through music and film.

At the Citadel – a former Napoleonic military fort – DAD co-founder Joanna Jones has put on *Shocked into Presence*, an exhibition charting forty years of her remarkable and beautiful paintings. The Citadel has previously served as a detention ▶

centre for both juveniles and refugees, and the exhibition – curated by artist Nicolas Deshayes – occupies the former canteen, an ordinary space within a site haunted by past trauma.

Artist Simon Bill has contributed a series of murals across the town that draw on neuro-science and optical theory to make work that is full of visual movement and dynamic effect. And Joseph Black has realised a vast mural on the side of the Rhino and Bulls building facing Market Square, a tribute to the late Dover-based artist Mike Tedder.

Visitors and residents of Dover have also been invited to take part in various workshops and "happenings", a programme of interactive art events occurring throughout the town. Gabor Stark has traversed Dover armed with his moveable sculpture *Voltaire's Rake*, a paean to the author of *Candide* and his exhortation to cultivate our gardens and our relationships with each other.

Alma Tischlerwood invited participants to write messages on paper boats that were set sail on Dover harbour and Andrew Cross has curated a series of screenings of films about the town and its port. And Louise Webb has worked with Dover smART project and their community of young carers and older people to put on *Dover Draws*, an exhibition of collages and paintings.

Every Sunday throughout the festival has seen a walk exploring some aspect of the town and its surrounding landscape. These have ranged from Jamie Partridge's early morning exploration of the butterflies and birds on the Kent Downs, Mel Wrigley digging down into the geology of the white cliffs that once joined England to France, and Simon Bill hacking through bramble-strewn paths in search of overlooked 20th-century archaeology. Iona Dubieniec has taught us about the ecology of the River Dour and Danny Bee has explored the political history of the town from the agricultural riots of the 19th century to the miner's strike of the 1980s.

At Dover Museum, Nicolas Deshayes has also curated a series of delicate watercolours of Dover and its surrounding landscape painted by Sophie von Hellerman during the lockdown of 2020. Outside the museum, Market Square has been transformed into a catwalk for local residents wearing clothes made themselves. Nearby, on Castle Street, another fashion-based event popped up in the form of a series of huge portraits of residents wearing white suits designed by tailoring company Pokit. The portraits were taken by Tomas Poblete who has been busy documenting the festival throughout the summer.

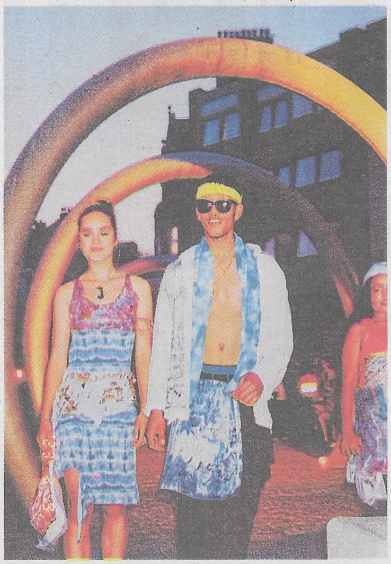
All of these works and activities draw on the vibrancy of contemporary Dover. They also form connections, reaching beyond the town to communicate with the wider world. Dover sits at the juncture of the North Downs and the English Channel, the centre point of a planned Unesco geopark uniting the underlying geology of England and France. Fittingly, the festival has been funded by the Kent Downs AONB and the North Downs Way National Trail – two organisations dedicated to the preservation and enjoyment of the landscape that surrounds the town – as well as Arts Council England. *You can reach the world from Dover 2023* is about Dover, but it is also about Dover's place in the world. That place is both exotic and everyday, near and far, real and imaginary, on the edge and at the centre. Below the chalk of the white cliffs is a place that offers rich soil for artists of many persuasions who have put down roots in the town and become a genuine part of its community. Ultimately, this has been their festival.



▲ Simon Bill's Optical Illusion mural



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▲ The Dover catwalk in Market Square

▶ Gabor Stark and his work, Voltaire's Rake

