



HISTORY MAKERS

HOW MEDWAY'S RICH HERITAGE IS BEING USED TO BUILD A DYNAMIC AND PROSPEROUS FUTURE



It has a long and proud history that makes it a magnet for tourists. Now Medway is harnessing its heritage to forge an exciting new identity

Making history a thing of the

Medway is the largest urban area in the South East outside London with great connections to the capital and Europe, one of the most exciting regeneration zones in the Thames Gateway, four universities, a thriving economy and wide ranging cultural offer. As an area and a council, it now punches above its weight. That is the product of the 18-year transformation that Medway Council has delivered since its creation in 1998.

Medway Council was formed from two districts – Gillingham Borough and Rochester upon Medway City Council, as well as taking responsibilities from Kent County Council. In 1998 the area suffered from under investment, lack of a distinct identity, low aspirations and high unemployment following the closure of the Historic Dockyard in the 1980s. It covered the disparate towns of Strood, Rochester, Gillingham, Chatham and Rainham, as well as a significant rural area. The unitary council had a vision to unite the area, promote its heritage, lead its regeneration and protect its unique environmental assets. This it has done, and the journey continues as there are further ambitious plans for the future.

Council leader Cllr Alan Jarrett says: ‘I think it is fair to say that we are entering an exciting and defining period in Medway. In fact, due to its proximity to London and the addition of a fast train line, Medway is growing significantly and over the coming years we expect it to expand to a population of more than 300,000.

‘I believe Medway’s rich heritage paired with its story of growth and regeneration will firmly put it on the map and help ensure it increases its reputation as a go-to destination.’

Taking its name from the famous river that runs through the north Kent borough, Medway is emerging as an even more desirable place to live, visit, work and learn. And while many parts of the Home Counties can use connectivity to London as a selling point to prospective residents and investors alike, few can marry that with a heritage offer to match Medway.

Each year around four million people visit and many come to experience the area’s rich heritage, whether it be historic Rochester with a stunning cathedral, the finest and tallest Norman Castle in the country and its 13th century high street, Chatham Historic Dockyard, the best preserved dockyard in the world, dating from the age of sail, or

Medway’s many links to Dickens, who drew on the people and places as the inspiration for some of his greatest works.

Medway’s cultural offer continues to be unparalleled and each year the council spends more than £20m on green spaces, heritage, libraries, arts, theatres, leisure, sports and tourism.

Spreading the benefits

Rochester and Chatham’s historic dockyard together form what the council’s Destination Management Plan describes as it two world-class ‘anchors’. They put Medway on the map and are a major reason why the area attracts millions of visitors, generating £300m and supporting 6,000 jobs in the process. It’s a sector on the up and combined with Medway’s growing creative sector it equates to around 15% of the local economy.

These sectors, together with the area’s sporting offer (see page 4, overleaf), are at the heart of the council’s strategy to raise Medway’s profile, draw in investment and establish it as an excellent place to live and work. It’s about creating a virtuous circle that benefits residents, visitors and businesses. Key to its success will be the degree to which the benefits brought by Rochester and Chatham can be spread further afield.

Both have seen the lion’s share of regeneration investment in recent years, the most prominent being Rochester Riverside. The 32 hectare site is being transformed to create a new community including 1,500 homes, a primary school, shops and leisure facilities all well connected to the heart of Rochester and via a new £26m station to the north of the site that is due to open next month.

There’s also Chatham Waters, an ongoing £650m development that is transforming part of the dockyard and bringing homes, business premises, shops, restaurants and creating a ‘waterfront boulevard’ to make the most of the riverside views. Medway University Technical College, which opened on the site in September, is providing specialist training in engineering, construction and design for 14-19 year olds alongside traditional qualifications.

But it’s not all about Rochester and Chatham dockyard. Adjacent Gillingham will benefit from the Chatham Waters investment, it has also seen regeneration in its town centre and the Victory Pier scheme will transform its riverside area with homes, shops, offices and a hotel.

As Alan points out: ‘There’s more to Medway than a

Great expectations for Dickens Country



Many places lay claim to having connections with Charles Dickens but none are stronger than Medway. It is awash with people, places and buildings that inspired his works.

He spent his childhood and later years there and would have been buried there, at Rochester Cathedral, if his wishes hadn’t been ignored. He was deemed

simply too eminent and was subsequently interned at Westminster Abbey. The stature of one of English literature’s greatest writers remains undimmed almost 150 years after his death and thousands visit the UK every year in search of Dickens’ connections.

He is an integral part of Medway’s cultural offer, with a Dickens Festival held in June attracting more than 60,000 people and the Dickensian Christmas Festival a further 80,000. The Dickens World visitor complex at Chatham Maritime, opened in 2007, draws in many more visitors all year round.

The council and its partners have drawn these many activities together to firmly establish and market Medway as ‘Dickens Country’. The latest development saw the council secure a Heritage Lottery Fund grant to restore Eastgate House, an Elizabethan townhouse where Dickens spent his final years at a Swiss writing chalet in the residence’s gardens.



The future

couple of tourism hotspots. That's the challenge – spreading the benefits of regeneration across the Medway area.'

When the council formed in 1998 the task was set to package Medway as a single population of 270,000 people with excellent links to London, stunning countryside and a multitude of attractions – a massive feat and something that is well on its way to becoming a reality.

Alan explains: 'Medway now has a strong identity but it hasn't always been that way. We have come a long way over 18 years and have worked hard to bring the different communities within Medway together to create one destination that has something on offer for everyone.'

Medway's next chapter

Visitors to the area are welcomed with consistent branding to tell people they are entering Medway and the council is also working with neighbouring authorities to encourage them to follow suit by signposting Medway rather than the individual towns.

It's also about showcasing Medway at every opportunity. The area has changed significantly over the last 20 years, with the presence of higher education playing a major role. Medway has become a central hub for further education and is now home of the Universities at Medway – University of Greenwich, University of Kent and Canterbury Christ Church University are all based on a single campus in Chatham. Her Majesty The Queen officially opened the campus in 2002 and now some 12,000 undergraduates study there. A fourth university, University of the Creative Arts, is located just outside Rochester and not forgetting the Medway campus of MidKent College, the largest further education provision in the county. As a result, an increasing number of students are now setting up businesses in Medway.

The latest addition to Medway's further education landscape is the new University Technical College at Chatham Maritime.

The council and its partners are regulars at prominent events where there is a chance to tell Medway's story, celebrate its successes and highlight its potential.

Richard Hicks, director of regeneration, community and culture, says the feedback from investors has reinforced the council's own view on the best strategy to take.

'With our universities, heritage and cultural offer we are a city in all but name. Being recognised as having that kind of

MEDWAY IN NUMBERS

5 mainline stations with HS1 high-speed trains to London in just 35 minutes

40 minutes to the channel ports at Dover and Ramsgate

1 hour from London's Gatwick and Stansted Airports

13,000 small and medium sized enterprises

4,000,000 visitors every year

800,000 annual visits to Medway Park, the regional centre of sporting excellence in Gillingham

4 universities – Greenwich, Kent, Christ Church (Canterbury) and the University of Creative Arts

50% of Medway is rural and includes sites of special scientific interest such as part of the Hoo Peninsula

scale helps with investment decisions in terms of developers and businesses thinking of locating. If we are seen as a bustling destination of 270,000 people it's a very different concept than looking at the towns individually.'

The area's combination of rich heritage and fast links to London give it a USP.

Richard continues: 'Our strategy in terms of tourism is to attract people in and disperse them around the rest of the tourist attractions – places that might not warrant a visit by themselves. That includes places like the Royal Engineers Museum in Gillingham, the only museum in Kent to receive designation status from the Arts Council due to its national importance. Or Temple Manor, a 13th century house for the Knights Templar at Strood which provided lodgings for members of the Order on their way to and from the Crusades.'

One direct way it's doing that is through the Explore Medway open top bus, which allows passengers to hop on and off as it takes in both famous sights and less well-known places of interest. Launched in 2013, it was used by more than 3,000 passengers in its first year, and continues to

grow in popularity – it's proving to be an effective way to showcase Medway's wider offer.

With one of the largest free event and festival programmes in the country, there's plenty to do. There are more than 30 days of free festivals each year providing an opportunity to engage local people in the arts, celebrate the area's long history and literary connections and draw in visitors from far and wide. Many of these events take place within award winning parks – seven Medway parks have Green Flag status which means the space boasts the highest possible standards, is beautifully maintained and has excellent facilities.

Regeneration can be seen under way across Medway and that's bringing new homes, business accommodation, leisure facilities and better infrastructure.

The council's ambitious 20-year regeneration programme (2006-2026) is dedicated to boosting the area's economic growth, creating sustainable communities, expanding Medway's cultural offer and regaining the use of the river for local people through the setting up of various waterfront projects.

It's all part of the authority's wider strategy to ensure Medway is in a strong position to benefit from the many opportunities that surround it. None more so than Paramount Park, a £3.2bn entertainment resort twice the size of the Olympic Park that's being built on the nearby Swanscombe Peninsula. With 27,000 jobs being created – and huge opportunities for the resort's supply chain – Medway is well placed to offer a home to both staff and businesses.

Medway has bid unsuccessfully for city status in the past. But the extensive consultation and learning that came out of those bids, says chief executive Neil Davies, has proved to be a valuable 'placemaking tool' and given its vision for Medway greater coherence and clarity.

'We are perfectly placed, we have superb transport links, towns with unique identities, we are an ambitious local authority and know that Medway has so much growth potential,' he says. 'We have exciting regeneration plans along six to seven miles of riverside and want to attract the best development – great design, great quality buildings.'

'We are growing Medway but in a way that makes the most of its greatest assets – culture, heritage, sport and leisure – to create a unique place to live, work, visit and study.'

Using the 2012 Olympics as a catalyst, Medway Council raised its game on championing sport and is now a beacon for nurturing more active lifestyles

Securing the legacy



There has been much debate about the London 2012 Olympics and whether it is delivering a lasting legacy around participation in sports.

Media negativity around the issue went into overdrive this summer when Sport England released figures showing a sharp decline in the number of people taking part in activities at least once a week.

If commentators had visited Medway they would have found that legacy alive and kicking. The council was so annoyed by headlines like 'Olympic legacy ends in lethargy' that Richard Hicks, director of regeneration, community and culture, visited Sport England's chief executive to put the record straight.

En Route to Rio, the council's sporting legacy strategy for 2013-16 that's been driven forward and championed by deputy leader Cllr Howard Doe, outlines how Medway is continuing to build on the momentum created by London 2012 as we approach the 2016 Olympics. Medway Festival of Sport, launched in 2010, now features 50 events across 70 days and involves more than 12,000 people with the aim of promoting healthy lifestyles and getting people involved in a wide variety of physical activities. Through mass participation events like The Big Splash and the Medway Mile (see box), local people of all ages are being inspired to take up sports.

But to understand why Medway has succeeded you need to go back to the period running up to 2012. Like many parts of the country, particularly those close to London, Medway was primed to play its part in the big event itself, for example by hosting pre-Games training camps. It was able to do that by investing £11m of Government grant and council funds into a leisure centre in Gillingham to create Medway Park, a hub of

GETTING PEOPLE ACTIVE EN MASSE

Medway Mile – first held in 2007 with 500 runners and walkers taking to the one-mile course around Rochester it has grown into a mini-festival with 3,000 people now taking part

The Big Splash – a weekend long event including pool parties for families and 'the big swim challenge', a combined effort to see how far local swimmers can collectively cover in two days. This year they managed 71 miles

The Big Ride – launched at the Medway Festival of Sport in 2014, the 5km ride along closed roads is the centrepiece of a day of activities including children's sprint races, BMX displays, an off-road treasure trail ride for families and coaching sessions

sporting excellence with world-class facilities.

As Howard puts it, it's the facility 'around which we have wrapped our sporting legacy.' He adds: 'We tried to get everybody excited about the 2012 Games. When the Games commenced the grumble was there's no legacy programme afterwards. We challenged that – we have got it in En Route to Rio.'

Council leader Alan Jarrett believes the approach taken to Medway Park in the years before and after 2012 have been crucial.

'The aim was to make the most of any spin off opportunities from the Olympics itself, he says. 'All of the razzmatazz was around what we can do for the Olympics. We said that while that's fine, you have got to remember it's the main sports centre for Medway. It's got to be for people here and not just transient elite athletes.'

Medway Park has hosted a multitude of major events, from the Modern Pentathlon World Cup to the British Transplant Games, offering inspiration to local people and raising the area's profile. The council's legacy programme,

On Your Marks, uses a wide range of projects to encourage residents to use the centre and other facilities across Medway. Community clubs and hubs take activities out to easy to access places like parish halls while the Families On Your Marks initiative offers free drop-in days at Medway Park for those with children aged six to 11. There are mums' clubs, activities for over 60s, tailored sessions for 16-25 year olds and a huge focus on disability sports, including the annual Disability Youth Games. Strood Leisure Centre recently saw a £2m refurbishment and a further £2.5m is being invested in improved cycle routes across Medway.

Many of the activities are on offer for little or no fee with swimming available free of charge to under 16s and over 60s – a bold move for a local authority during an era of cutbacks. But Howard says it's because Medway is playing the long game: 'We can save money in the long run if it encourages people to live healthier lifestyles and it brings wellbeing benefits as well. That in turn can relieve pressure on social care and the NHS and lead to higher employment.'