



# Goodwill gesture

A FRIENDSHIP born out of the need to lay the pain and suffering of the Second World War to rest celebrates its 50th anniversary this year.

The link between Tunbridge Wells and Wiesbaden in Germany started out as a need for reconciliation and peace after the horrors of war. But it has now flourished into a cherished friendship creating education, arts, business and sporting opportunities.

The association between Tunbridge Wells and Wiesbaden was made official with the signing of a twinning agreement 20 years ago.

It fostered cultural links that now sees schools from both towns work together on projects and enjoy exchange visits, sport teams playing each other and business partnerships being set up.

The cross-Channel friendship is seen as more relevant than ever by community leaders eager to learn from each other by sharing knowledge and expertise.

But they are concerned that many people living in Tunbridge Wells do not even know that they have a twin town in Germany.

The Mayor and Mayoress of Tunbridge Wells visited Wiesbaden recently to strengthen the links and prepare to celebrate the golden anniversary this year.

Cllr Leonard Price and his wife

**Four friends' attempt to move on from the pain of war has blossomed in to half a century of sharing. JON COATES finds out more about our twin town**

Victoria flew out for their first visit to the twin town and were the guests of honour at the grand opening of Wiesbaden's Sternschnuppenmarkt, its traditional Christmas market.

They attended a cabinet meeting at the City Hall, met Wiesbaden Rotary Club members and visited pupils at a grammar school that sends 20 students for work placements in west Kent every year.

## Twins

Another important part of their official visit was to meet members of the Twinning Partnership Organisation and undertake discussions with key people involved in music, theatre, art and businesses, who are keen to see even greater links between the twin towns.

Cllr Price said: "This visit was made to strengthen the deep-rooted and special relationship between Tunbridge Wells and Wiesbaden.

"In the present financial climate Tunbridge Wells must take every opportunity to expand the trade and employment potential that develops from this relationship and to

strengthen yet further the cultural links that exist."

The friendship was started by four former Marines from Tunbridge Wells who were looking to lay the horrors of war to rest. Fred Thornton, Harold Hooker, William Murray and Tom MacAndrew all fought in Germany in 1945 as teenagers.

But it was only in 1959 when a German man came into Mr Thornton's store to return some money after being given too much change the day before that the former commando started to change his attitude towards the nation.

Mr Thornton placed a small advertisement in a German magazine saying English soldiers who had fought in 1945 would like to get in touch with German paratroopers and received a reply from a group in Wiesbaden.

The four former Marines, who were all in their early 30s, visited the spa town lying between the River Rhine and the foothills of the Taunus Mountains the following year.

Professor Michael Holman, chairman of the Tunbridge Wells Twinning and Friendship Association, said:

# lasts for 50 years

"They decided to go out and meet these chaps they had been trying to kill during the war.

"They wanted to build a better world so their children would not have to go through what they had gone through.

"It was about reconciliation and making peace with the enemy, so the association between the town was quickly set up. This was formalised with the signing of the twinning charter 20 years ago."

The retired professor of Slavonic studies from Tunbridge Wells, who speaks Russian, Bulgarian and German, added: "Now it is about cultural links, whether through schools working together and learning from each other, or wine makers working together. It is about moving horizons, with hockey and football teams visiting, and music and arts exchanges."

Wiesbaden is a short drive from the business hub of Frankfurt. With a population of about 270,000 people it has been the capital of the State of Hesse since 1945.

Prof Holman said: "Wiesbaden literally means the Bath in the Meadows. It is a beautiful place and still has hot water coming up through the ground. Some of the homes in its centre are still heated by the hot water.

"We have a lot to learn from them and the way they do things with regards to waste disposal, public transport, organisation, and pride and consciousness in their town.

"Their togetherness in everything they do and desire to project an image

of themselves around the world is impressive. Wiesbaden is twinned with 12 or 13 towns, Tunbridge Wells just with one. At the moment they are setting up a link with a part of Istanbul in Turkey.

"I do not think most people in Tunbridge Wells even know about our twinning link, but it is something we can gain a great deal from.

"Wiesbaden is the centre of the wine making region of Germany and has a big wine festival in August every year. I would like to have a wine festival in Tunbridge Wells as the centre of the industry in Kent."



Picture: PAUL JERRIAT

For the first time Wiesbaden had a stand at the Pantiles Christmas Market last month, selling its famous chocolate and wine.

To mark the 50th anniversary of the friendship T S Brilliant Sea Cadets, from Tunbridge Wells, are raising money so they can perform at Fasching parades in Wiesbaden next month.

The German town's Kulturamt (Cultural Affairs Department) is also keen to have Trinity Theatre Club from Tunbridge Wells present their projected summer 2010 open-air production of Treasure Island at the Wiesbaden open-air theatre festival in July.

