

## Friendship

THE friendship and co-operation agreement between Swindon and Torun was signed on May 13, 2003.

The idea came from three members of Swindon's Polish community, Bronek Rejek, Marek Sarnowski, and former mayor Stan Pajak.

Marek, 52, of Old Town, is chairman of the recently formed group TASTE, Swindon and Torun Twinning Enterprise. He first visited Torun in 1971.

He said: "I remembered the effect it had on me when I was 21. When deciding which town to link up with I thought we shouldn't go for some dreary old place but we should go for somewhere that would be intriguing from the first moment.

"Knowing the history of the city I thought we would be extremely lucky if Torun were interested. I thought they would have aspirations to work with a place like Oxford.

"A full twinning would be most welcome. I think there's a great deal of backing for that now, after this trip and the numerous sporting and cultural events and business which have come about from the relationship with Torun so far."

As well as business placements Swindon has also seen the Tales of Torun youth theatre performance at New College and a visit from Kadziolecza, a Torun song and dance group.

Meanwhile Swindonians have taken part in an international ice hockey tournament, a canoe expedition, a music festival and university summer school at the invitation of our new Polish counterparts.

## History

THE Teutonic Knights built their castle next to a small Polish settlement near the river Vistula in 1230. It became an important medieval centre of trade, as well as becoming home to Franciscan and Dominican monks.

In 1264, the new town was founded nearby. They remained separate for two hundred years.

In 1454, many cities rose up against the Teutonic Knights and Torun accepted Polish sovereignty.

When Poland was partitioned in 1793, Torun was annexed by Prussia and became a frontier city, with up to 35,000 soldiers garrisoned there.

In 1919, the city became part of Poland but this was only to last until the German invasion in 1939.

After the Second World War Poland was part of the Eastern Bloc until the collapse of the iron curtain in 1989.

## University

NICOLAUS Copernicus University has more than 35,000 students in Torun and another 5,000 students at Bydgoszcz, about 40km away.

It was founded at the end of the Second World War by professors from eastern Europe's oldest university in Vilnius. Grzegorz Jarzembski, vice rector, believes higher education is the key to the future across Europe.

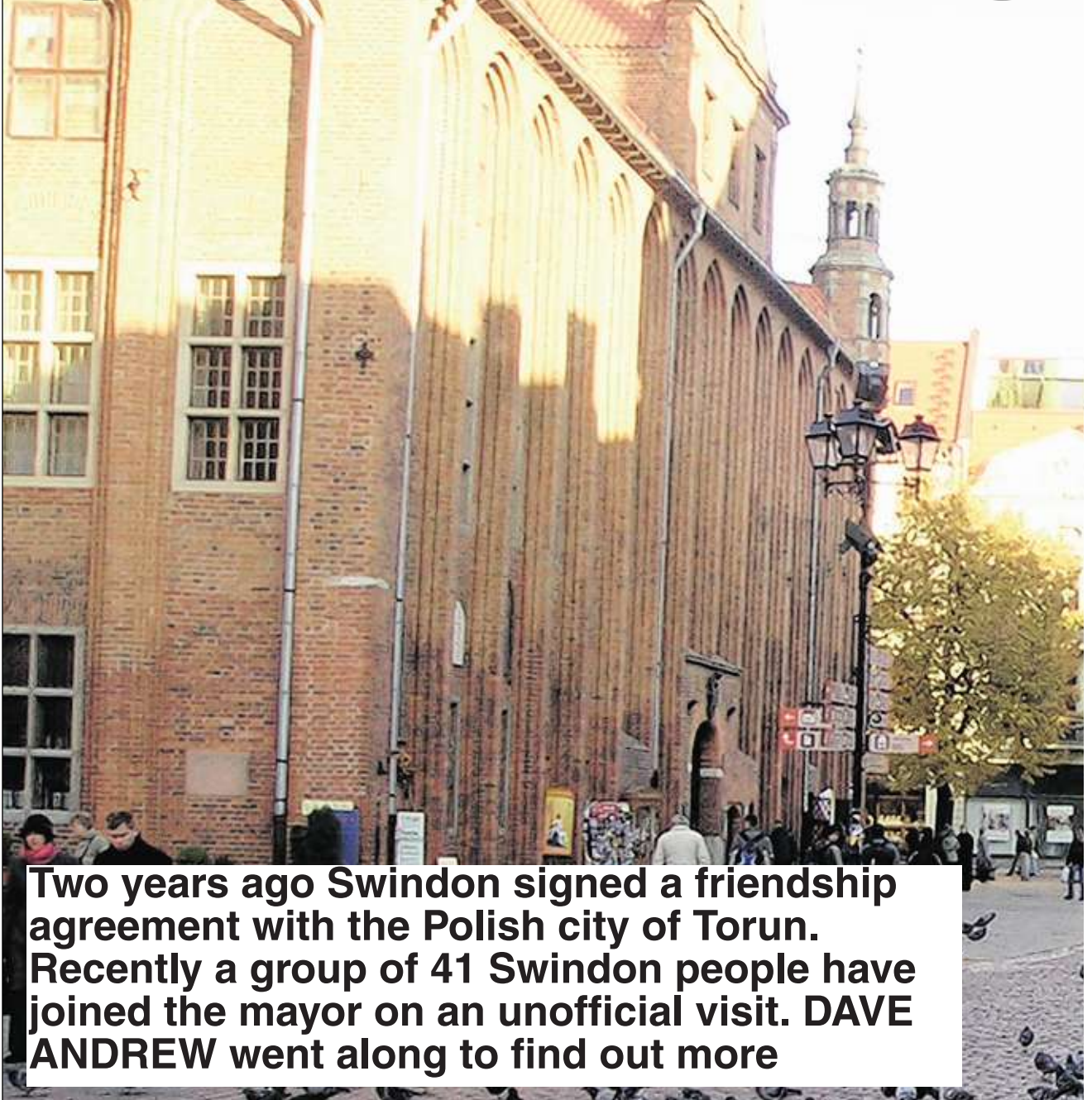
He said: "I cannot imagine the future without well-educated people, and towns and cities will fight for those people. Students will also want to stay in the town where they studied."

The university is the biggest employer in the city.

Mr Jarzembski said: "There are further economic benefits. Because 35,000 students are going to restaurants and renting flats, I think 10,000 people earn a living from the university indirectly."

When told about the controversy over plans for the University of Bath in Swindon to develop near Coate Water, he said: "I understand the environment is very important but my feeling is that a city that thinks seriously about the future needs a university."

# OUR PALS



**Two years ago Swindon signed a friendship agreement with the Polish city of Torun. Recently a group of 41 Swindon people have joined the mayor on an unofficial visit. DAVE ANDREW went along to find out more**

IT WAS as if I had been transported into the depths of history.

On my right stood a ruined castle and on my left I could see the spires of three massive Gothic churches.

Just a short walk away lay the ancient square complete with magnificent town hall. And they were just the jewels in the crown of the beautiful walled medieval city of Torun.

It lies beside the Vistula, Poland's most important and longest river, where the Teutonic Knights built their castle in the 13th century.

Two hundred years later the locals rose up against the knights and sacked the castle... although strangely, they left the toilet block standing.

Walking the streets of Torun means following in the footsteps of the astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, who grew up here and went on to change forever the way we see our role in the universe, when he discovered that the earth revolves around the sun and is not the centre of the universe.

The town's history is everywhere and it pays to keep one's head up to spot the little statues and gargoyles on the buildings.

The Church of the Virgin Mary has 600-year-old frescoes, which were discovered after the Second World War. They had been whitewashed during the Reformation.

On the outside of the church you can still see a cannonball embedded in the wall. It has been there since the Swedish-Polish wars of the 17th century.

The town made a big impression on the group of visitors from Swindon.

Violet Avenell, 38, a schoolteacher from Old Town, said: "I've never been to Poland before and I'm glad I came. It's very picturesque. It's a walled medieval city and we don't have anything like that at home."

Torun is famous in Poland for three things. The university, Copernicus, and the manufacture of gingerbread.

But the most striking feature of the city is its magnificent medieval centre, which is now a Unesco world heritage site.

Unlike many cities in Poland, its centre survived the Second World War relatively intact.

History has moved fast since 1989 when democracy came to Eastern Europe. In April, Poland joined the European Union and citizens gained the right to work in Britain.

Many from Torun have taken that opportunity. Unemployment in Torun is 12 per cent, but when you include the surrounding area the rate is 28 per cent.

The group had the chance to meet the town's president. Michal Zaleski, 53, is a giant of a man who would not look out of place in the second row of a rugby scrum. In Poland, the president of a town is very much the boss, though anybody can go and see him, on a Tuesday morning, to put their point across.

Mr Zaleski thinks the benefits of the friendship agreement will cut both ways, and the Polish city can benefit from our knowledge and experience.

He said: "Swindon has developed

dynamically and we want to develop dynamically too."

But something is worrying him. He is in two minds about the number of young people leaving the town.

He said: "Lots of Torun people are going to England and sometimes I feel it is a problem, but hopefully it will stabilise."

He is especially worried about the number of nurses and bus drivers leaving.

Apparently one day recently 30 bus drivers resigned en masse after being seduced by a British recruitment agency. They were quickly replaced but nurses would take longer to train.

The city's vice-president, Zbigniew Fiderewicz, has visited Swindon and is very enthusiastic about the link.

He said: "At this stage it's all about getting to know each other."

He is a great salesman for Torun and was keen to point out the breadth of cultural activity in the city.

He said: "Each month we have at least one festival."

The group from Swindon managed to take in two festivals during their short stay.

A blues festival proved very popular with the visitors, but when the performers took their bows at the end of a rather obscure and arty puppet theatre performance there were several rows of perplexed British faces in the audience.

Janusz Domanski, 53, of Lawns, was in Torun for the first time in 24 years. While watching Chelsea play Newcastle in a medieval cellar bar, he spoke of the changes he had seen in the town.

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