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NEW BLUE BADGE GUIDES TO WELCOME VISITORS TO SOUTH EAST

Fourteen new Blue Badge Guides have qualified to take groups of visitors on tours in Kent, Surrey, and East and West Sussex – the first people in the region to receive the prestigious title in eleven years.

The Duchess of Norfolk, Patron of the South East England Tourist Guides Association, presented the guides with their awards at Rochester Cathedral.

Blue Badge status is awarded by the Institute of Tourist Guides. In addition to sitting written examinations testing their knowledge of the history, geology and economy of the region, candidates on the intensive one-year course are assessed in a series of practical guiding tests.

Visit Kent sponsored the training course in response to industry concerns about a shortage of Blue Badge guides in the area and a growing demand for their services from group travel organisations including cruise ships calling at the Port of Dover.

Dawn Blee, of Gracious Lane, Sevenoaks, was presented with the top Guide of the Year Prize and is now looking forward to launching a new career as a self-employed tour guide.

“I had worked in hospitality management and taken a degree in adult education when my children were young. I was looking for new career ideas when I saw a story about the Blue Badge Guide training in my local newspaper. It seemed to bring everything I enjoy doing together in one job.

“It has been such a rewarding experience and I have learned so much. Finding out about places across the south east really made my understanding of the history and how we have shaped our landscape – and how our landscape has shaped us – come to life.

“I have already guided some tours and I am really looking forward to doing many more.”

Jenny Oulton, Trainer and Programme Director, said: “Achieving a Blue Badge qualification requires a great deal of commitment and, as you can imagine, learning about a whole region is very challenging. The guides are all now members of the South East England Tourist Guides Association.

Sandra Matthews-Marsh, chief executive of Visit Kent, is delighted that all the hard work put in by the guiding students has paid off.

“Having really knowledgeable guides makes a huge difference to a visit. We were very keen to have some top Kent guides available for all our group travel organisers which is a growing market and expected to expand even more next year with the London Games attracting many visitors from overseas.

“The training programme also attracted a great deal of support from our key investors, such as Kings Ferry who supplied coaches, and the destinations and attractions which welcomed the trainee guides for practical exercises.”

The new Blue Badge Guides for the South East are:

Tony Anderson, Tooting Bec – Best Museum Tour Prize

Dawn Blee, Sevenoaks – Guide of the Year Prize

Robert Collins, Canterbury

Jan Davies, Chichester

Frank Dowling, Whitstable

Elizabeth Findlay, Canterbury

Terry Fitchett, Faversham – Best Coach Tour Prize

Maxine Ford, Herne – Best Written Papers Prize

Craig Gershater, Chichester – Best Walking Tour Prize

Susan Hickman, Sittingbourne

Amanda Hutchinson, Tonbridge

Alexandra Maldonado, Canterbury

Sally Martin, Petts Wood

Catherine Pitt, Tunbridge Wells – Best Cathedral Tour Prize