

First Impressions of Dover—in 1957

We came to Dover because my husband had obtained a post here. The summer had been very hot and sunshine continued in the autumn. We knew something of the town, having lived in Deal for a short time before the War, but the family had only glimpsed it from a train. After living in a village in the Medway valley for 18 years, it was a great change - would it be a continuous seaside holiday? The bare downland, dramatic cliffs, the narrow streets, the traffic, trains, boats, and above all, the sea - ever colourful and changing - were most exciting. We enjoyed the wind and invigorating air, so much recommended in Victorian times. One of the family had bronchial asthma, but not a single attack occurred after our move.

Most war-damaged buildings were repaired or demolished. The site of the Gateway was flat with a huge crane and pile drivers at work. Part of Townwall Street was still a narrow lane with various shops in use. That strange building the Dover Stage was just completed and prompting much discussion. Some elegant Victorian terraces climbed from Maison Dieu Road to Victoria Park, looking smart with new paint. The east and west sides of the Market Square were nearly rebuilt. The Front was neat, with bright flower beds, and the little steam train, preceded by its man with a red flag, puffed gently along. There was always something interesting to watch - the ferries, large and small yachts and, with no swimming bath, much sea swimming stimulated by a renewed interest in Channel Swimming.

One could picture Dover as the important military place it had been. Barracks, officers' quarters, married quarters, a hospital, a church - some damaged and nearly all empty - dominated the skyline, especially on the Western Heights. The Castle was still partly manned and kept spruce by the Army. As one wandered round the precincts, it was fun to come face to face with a marching "squad", and to peep into the various workshops tucked into the walls, used by army craftsmen for repairs.

Nearby Connaught Park, with its beautiful views, was immaculately kept with sloping lawns, a large pond with goldfish, brilliant carpet bedding including the 'topiary' models of the Teedy Bears' Picnic - rather far from the town centre, but well worth the climb or a bus ride.

We had difficulty in finding a house, and as we had rented before, we had little money to buy one. There was a lull in private building. Some new council houses had been built, and a number of "prefabs" were still in use, but the Housing Department indignantly refused to help us, even temporarily, as we had 'chosen' to come to Dover. However, there was a number of older houses which had had multiple occupation immediately after the War, and were now on the market, in poor condition. Having no car we had to consider bus services, which were good on the main roads - and fares which were quite low (2½p - 1d) from the Trough to the Post Office). Eventually we found a Victorian terrace house and obtained a mortgage. It needed much improvement but we had more space than ever before and it was within walking distance of the town centre and some schools.

At that time schools, old or new, were very crowded with the "bulge" and in need of improvements, extensions and general modernisation. Some were borrowing rooms in other buildings or using cloakrooms and corridors for classes. Several new schools were planned but none were being built. There were few private schools.

An official told us that Dover was widely known for its many small shops

and we were amazed by the number and diversity in that street-of-many-names and in the residential areas. All the well-known grocery chains had a branch there. There were butchers and bakers galore, each with his own special line - a large Woolworths, still expanding, about 20 chemists, 5 largish furnisiers, china shops, excellent ironmongers and electricians, 4 good drapers, Hattons being the largest (anything unobtainable there could be done without). There were Coop branches, selling nearly everything, all over the town and its suburbs. In fact one did not need to go elsewhere to buy any necessity. Dover was perhaps short of teashops but had a large number of public houses, many of which have now vanished.

York Street and the Lanes were shabby but still in use. The Western Docks, the Marine Station and the Pier District were undergoing changes but were very busy, though local families were moving to the Aycliff Estate. The huge gasworks were fully in use and Dover was very "gas-minded".

The town as a whole looked clean and the streets were swept regularly. Public gardens were kept trim and bright. There were enough well-kept "conveniences", most with an attendant, and every scrap of metal on their doors was polished till it glittered. There was a lot of traffic, especially army vehicles and car transporters; it kept moving and there was much less parking than today. The flocks of roof-nesting seagulls spoiled the tidy picture but supplied a regular topic for the local press. On a wet day a downpour always caused cascades from shop roofs on to pavements and puddles everywhere - a problem still not solved.

We missed some country things - there were few large trees before the River area but the chalkland flowers were a joy - many vetches, valerian, vipers bugloss, scabious and lots of "Alecs". There was much to be explored on the beach and shells, fossils, flints and seaweeds to be collected. No wonder geology was a popular subject in schools!

To newcomers there seemed to be plenty of leisure activities - 4 cinemas, several recreation grounds, miniature golf courses, cricket and football pitches and active organisations such as Scouts, Guides, church clubs and very good dramatic and music societies. There were many evening classes with low fees. Churches of most denominations were active: a number have gone now.

Dover was - and still is - a family-based town. And the real Dovorians? Polite, yes, but very wary of newcomers.

E.M. Littlehales

'WALK AROUND DOVER' As a result of my request in Newsletter no 3 the following errors have come to light:

p.6 St Edmund of Abingdon died in 1240 at Soisy and was buried in Pontigny.
It was St Richard of Chichester who died in the Maison Dieu in 1253.

p.23 'The Field of the Cloth of Gold' should be 'The Field of Cloth of Gold'!

p.20 Capt. Webb is the first man known to have swum the Channel; it is possible that one or more Napoleonic prisoners took this route home.

'WALK AROUND DOVER' is £1.85 at local bookshops etc. P.R.M.K.