

Dover Harbour

Our January meeting took the form of a talk on the history of Dover Harbour, from about 54 BC to 1911. It was based mainly on a remarkable and fascinating series of slides that had been compiled by W. Taylor Allen and Ray Warner, and was given by the Vice-Chairman John Gerrard, with the authority and enthusiasm characteristic of him.

We were first shown maps which defined the wide estuary of the River Dour, in Roman times, and then successively how the river gradually altered its course, splitting into two streams, while over the centuries the growing shingle bank steadily pushed the sea away from the old town. For the pre-photographic era we are dependent for the most part on artists' imaginative impressions to capture such events as Henry VIII's departure for the Field of Cloth of Gold. When we reached the early 19th century Turner's print of the harbour with the spiky triangle of Shakespeare Cliff from an unusual viewpoint would have been apposite. The slides, from photographs taken in the middle and at the end of the Victorian period, were obviously the most impressive. These often proved surprisingly detailed, but above all captured the sense of occasion, the idea of something of profound importance going forward, so expressive of the Victorian attitude to public works. And how gravely and responsively the men (we saw very few women) gazed at the camera - the engineers and their managers with their whiskers and long frock-coats and tall stove-pipe hats looking somehow larger than their descendants. How markedly, too, does the vast number of labourers and artisans contribute to the sense of urgency and bustle. We have great public works today, but half a dozen men and a number of earth movers and tractors do not make the same effect on our imaginations.

Some striking images remain in the mind. There was an evocative black and sinister picture of the German liner *Deutschland* after she had collided with a break-water, which brought to mind her ill-fated predecessor which foundered at the mouth of the Thames in 1875 and celebrated for ever in Gerrard Manley Hopkins' poem "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*". Another picture which was arrestingly effective was that of the cliff at Langdon Bay. How they towered over the tiny people walking on the beach! The Eastern Docks now lie at their feet, and Jubilee Way comes down and sweeps its broad and fine arc from ^{where} there was a green valley and a chalky outface, like Fan Bay today.

One is reminded of Matthew Arnold's lines from "Dover Beach";

...the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

The Eastern Dock is a very fine engineering achievement but it is hard not to regret that loss of unspoilt coastline.



Hugh Bax

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East Cliff 1850, looking east