

Development of the Port of Dover

1950-1990

Members of this society are indeed fortunate in being able to call upon the expertise of so many of its members in a variety of fields. This was amply demonstrated in the Dover Harbour Board Social Club on 21st January when John Gerrard talked to a crowded audience on "The Development of the Port from 1950 to 1990".

Such a topic inevitably contains a great number of statistics, at which word this writer usually trembles and runs for the door; but it is a measure of John's skill as a speaker that he produced a rivetting talk with facts and figures well mixed with his customary humour.

In 1952 there were 88,000 cars, 1 million passengers and no freight at all; in 1989 2.2 million cars, 15.5 million passengers, 1.2 million lorries and 10.5 million tonnes of cargo - a string of figures which spring to life when John pointed out that last year's lorries would stretch nose to tail from Dover to Melbourne, Australia.

1989

Photo by courtesy of the Dover Harbour Board



His slides reminded us of so much of the port's recent history — the old Number 1 and 2 berths, now demolished, were only built in 1953; the old coal staithes which loaded coal from the railway which ran directly from the collieries are also gone, together with the pits themselves. The "Merry Dolphin", which the majority of the audience would remember well, was a very civilised restaurant in the 1950s. He also pointed out that Dover's traffic total for 1967 would be dealt with in a single summer weekend today, an indication of the efficiency and capacity which we now take for granted in a port which handles more per square metre than Rotterdam. We also learnt that Nos. 2 and 3 berths are the biggest roll on - roll off berths in the world.

The constant demolition, reclamation and expansion of the docks has proceeded with a rapidity which is hard to grasp and must have been incredibly difficult to plan, let alone ensure the smooth working of a port in a constant state of transition. The Hovercraft, only brought into service in 1969, are to be superseded this summer by the new, much quieter, wave-piercing catamarans if their propensity for causing seasickness in the passengers can be sorted out.

A ferry can now be discharged in 10 minutes by means of the new bridge system and lorry drivers who used to wait four hours for document checking can now leave in as little as five minutes, thanks to computers. Because of this technological revolution pressures on land areas have been reduced so further reclamation of the harbour is not envisaged.

John put in a plea for a more attractive approach to the Eastern Docks and showed a slide of the flower beds of the recent past. However, this is no longer the responsibility of the Harbour Board but of the Department of Transport.

There is no doubt that the Port responded magnificently to the dizzying rise of road traffic in the last forty years. Anyone comparing the treatment of air travellers, resigned to long delays and cattle truck conditions, with the minimal dock-side

waiting and spacious modern ferries of our cross Channel passengers, will be confident that Dover can rise to the challenge of the 1990s. And that certainly includes the Channel Tunnel!



The Eastern Docks
circa 1955-60