

1767 – 1992

Time & Tide Wait For No Man

George Hammond plc

Nigel Watson

Reviewed by Jack Woolford

I was pleased to receive a courtesy copy of this book from David Ryeland, a benefactor of the Dover Society and a stalwart colleague in the 1970s "Save our Seafront" campaign [which sought (in vain) to save Dover from the noise and pollution of the relocated hoverport]. I was also a little embarrassed, for business histories tend, as might reasonably be expected, to be embarrassing paeans of self-praise.

When in the first paragraph the author says that there is no evidence to support the date of 'Hammond's origin, but none to refute it, my professional historically hackles were consequently raised, only subsequently to be more than disarmed. Nigel Watson has skilfully interwoven local and national economic and military/naval history and has constructed a narrative which is as much an economic history of Dover as of Hammond's, and an excellent revision course on the local, national and international factors which have shaped Dover over more than two centuries. It is fascinating to be reminded, in chronological order, of the haven rivalry of Dover and Deal and of their competitive activities in peacetime smuggling and wartime privateering; of the chances and challenges of geographical and tidal conditions and the success or failure of attempts to overcome them; of the transitions from war to peace and their perverse effects on prosperity; and of the changes from sail to steam, from sailing to flying, from sailing to hovercrafting/jetfoiling and from sailing to Channel Tunnelling, all of them decisive in changing Dover's detailed rôles.

It is even more instructive, for me at any rate, to be informed on the details of shipping agency both in peace and in war: the organisation, financing, insurance, warehousing and delivery of shipping supplies and cargoes (including passengers, coal along the seafront railway or by aerial ropeway from Tilmanstone, fruit and fish, pitprops, petrol and pens ...); the salvage of shipwrecks and seamen; the arcana of consulship; and the mysteries of stevedoring.

Most of all it is instructive, not to say inspiring, to have revealed the inside story of how the Hammonds of Deal and the Lathams of Dover originated and coalesced, rose and fell, were rescued and revived and ultimately survived by development from a paternalistic family firm into a successfully diversified plc. Although there is not much information or comment upon industrial relations, failures and shortcomings of management are as visible as modest self-appraisal and the colourful characters, notably of Jim Ryeland (including his civic roles as councillor and JP) and his sons, are vividly portrayed. Reading between the lines is a special delight.

The book is handsomely designed, printed and bound and beautifully illustrated, with old prints, pictures and documents as well as colour photographs. It is expensive at £27.50 and cannot become a best-seller because the print-run is designedly small. Library copies are, however, available and Hammonds might well be approached in case of difficulty.