

Dover Marine – A Valediction 145

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24 September 1994 had been a grey day, and a grey Channel was gently heaving under a grey sky as I made my way along the elevated approach to Dover's Admiralty Pier. From the footbridge at the entrance to the station the thin strains of 'Tipparary' assailed the ear, as if from a distant place – or time. The great station below me appeared almost deserted, save for a single electric multiple unit and a small gathering at the far end of platform 4. Other songs from the Kaiser's War drifted past, from the time when this station was new and when it served, not as the planned pride and joy of the South Eastern and Chatham Railway's continental service, but as a vital casualty clearing post dealing with the countless wounded from the Western Front. How many more names would have been inscribed in the memorials to that terrible conflict had not the Marine Station replaced the original and entirely inadequate open jetty, and been available just in time to expedite rapid clearance of ambulance trains taking the wounded to the care of hospitals inland. In the mind's eye the deserted station became a scene of urgent action, with ambulance trains in every platform and the platforms themselves crowded with medical attendants and stretcher parties.

I wandered along the platform, past a small collection of sales stands that had anticipated some trade from those who had come to pay their last respects and relive past memories, past the small choir who were now chatting to the be-chained Mayor, past the rows of trolleys that had carried their last luggage 'aux les Paquebots'. The sign had gone, and the great doorway to the quay stood open and unguarded – gone also were the policeman and the immigration officer – so I wandered out onto the quay, deserted, damp and grey on that September afternoon. Deserted now, but how much pomp and circumstance had that quay witnessed in its eighty years? Monarchs, Presidents, state visits, and it was here that the Unknown Warrior and Nurse Cavell were brought, finally returning home in the days following the end of the War to End all Wars. In lighter vein I recalled a recently discovered photograph of that same quay, portraying a youthful *Maid of Kent* loading the mails for Calais. Poor doomed *Maid of Kent*, Denny-built in 1926 and with a stern that seemed to epitomise that age of short skirts and the Charleston, but soon, as a hospital ship, to be blasted into oblivion at Dieppe at the start of the Second War. And then there were all the other 'Channel Packets' that made this quay their home – *Empress*, *Riviera*, *Isle of Thanet*, *Canterbury*, *Invicta* and the Belgians as well, the princes – *Charles*, *Leopold*, *Phillipe*, *Baudouin* – and so on until the last of them, *Princess Paola*, for I can not count the remains of the lovely *Reine Astrid*, her bow and stern cut off by an uncaring Belgian shipyard to form a truncated base for the hydrofoils that replaced the classic fleet, as the last ship to lie at this quay. And now they were gone, and the only visible memory was the name of one – *Invicta* – painted at one of the mooring bollards in anticipation of mooring ropes that will never come.

Across the grey harbour at the Prince of Wales Pier lay a ship of the Grey Funnel Line. HMS *Southampton* was visiting Dover and was lying at the berth that had once played host to trans-Atlantic liners. I remembered my first visit to Dover Harbour, full then of other grey ships at a time when recording such detail was frowned upon, and when my childish drawing of rows of LCTs and MTBs was spirited away at the request of a naval officer! And then there was another vision of more traumatic days, of early June 1940, when the harbour was full of vessels of all types and sizes, and destroyers and paddlers alike were lying three or four abreast at the quay as the troops that they had brought out of Dunkirk made their way to the waiting troop specials in the great station. Sounds drifted into the mind, sounds of steam, and

146 windlasses taking in slack cables, of ship's telegraphs, of shouted orders and of marching feet.

One voice became more insistent.

"Are you waiting for transport, sir?"

The voice of the Sergeant-Major materialised into that of a yellow-coated security man.

"We can't have people walking about on the quayside, sir. It's because of the lorries. They come along here very fast."

We stood in the doorway and chatted.

"What time's *Invicta* due in?" I pulled his leg gently.

"There won't be any more ships in here. They all go in and out on the other side – the Eastern Docks.

Most of the security men were ex-military, apparently, and employed by a private firm who were in turn employed by the Dover Harbour Board. We talked about Dover and the war.

"There's still a notice in our office that says 'Walking Wounded Left: Stretcher Cases Right'.

Now *that* is something that should be better known, and preserved – *That* is part of *History*.

I wandered back into the station, and paused at the South Eastern and Chatham Railway's war memorial from the First World War, and – by means of an additional small plaque – the Southern Railway's memorial from the Second War. The SE&CR listed all 556 of their men by name, but their Southern comrades had to be content with a number – 626 – from a more anonymous age. But what better site could there be for such a memorial? The Brighton men had an engine to remember them, but only her name-plate now remains, away to the north, in the railway museum at York. The South Western men were remembered in the main entrance to the rebuilt Waterloo Station, which now, by a quirk of fate, has become very apposite, for it is the approach to the platforms of the new European Passenger Service. But there could be no better site for such a memorial than that on the pier at Dover – the nearest part of our island to continental Europe, whence so many of those named departed, never to return. My security friend said that the memorial was to be dismantled, and is to be re-erected at the Priory Station! I shudder at such a suggestion, the Memorial is not just a free-standing monument. It is the wall, the building, the setting. It would be small men indeed – men with no soul – who would tear such a gem out of such a setting. Better by far to plan for its future in-situ, and what a future there could be for Dover Marine if there are men of sufficient vision and enthusiasm in the town.

I read again the names of the South Eastern and Chatham men and saluted their memory. I gazed again at the Angel of Peace protecting the soldier and the sailor, and I retraced my steps along the now deserted platform. Gone now were the little choir and the Mayor and the trade stands. Gone was the EMU on its way to London via Chatham, in the wheel tracks of so many boat trains before it. No more 'Golden Arrow, no more 'Night Ferry', no more 'Continental Express – Short Sea Route'. The Channel Packet would henceforth play no part in reaching Europe now that Sir Alastair Morton has realised Sir Edward Watkin's dream. Henceforth a non-stop service could be offered via the tunnel. For the last time I climbed the steps to the footbridge and went out through the gates on to the original pier. Henceforth these gates would be locked and only the pigeons would be able to visit the Angel of Peace. Away to the westward the grey sea still heaved under the grey sky, lightened now by the invisible setting sun. The night shift of fishermen were arriving to take up their posts, sole occupants henceforth of a pier that had seen so much international activity for so long.